

Ontological Reconciliation: A Dialectical Approach to Generating Unity in Difference

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DECLARATION

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ABSTRACT

The formal process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is fraught with tensions, ambiguities and mutual misunderstandings. Overall, this paper argues that these problems are primarily due to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people having divergent views concerning the ultimate aim of reconciliation; with the former generally promoting Indigenous autonomy and the latter generally expecting Indigenous assimilation. Also, the non-Indigenous notion of ‘white’ superiority is identified as the foremost cause in thwarting both the reconciliation process, and the ability for Indigenous people to have their reconciliatory needs acknowledged and met. Drawing on Hegelian philosophy, the idea of fostering a dialectical or ontological approach to reconciliation is proposed as a counter-measure to these problems. The theory of ontological reconciliation is expounded upon in context of three interrelated motifs – unity in difference, knowing the self, and knowing the Other – and each is also juxtaposed against key problems inherent to the ‘white’ dominated formal reconciliation process. Practical examples of what ontological reconciliation looks like are provided, first by comparing the notion with Langton’s three categories of intersubjectivity, and then by examining three cross-cultural projects in Australia. The demonstrated effectiveness of these projects in reconciling differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews, and in contending with serious problems in Indigenous communities, supports the proposal of adopting an ontological approach to reconciliation on a national scale. Finally, in the spirit of ontological reconciliation, this paper also proposes that the teaching of English and an Indigenous language be introduced into the curriculum of all schools for all students, as a nation-wide strategy for bridging the gap of miscommunication and misunderstanding that prevails between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews.

CONTENTS

Copyright Acknowledgement	1
Abstract	2
Acknowledgements	4

CHAPTER ONE

Australia's Formal Reconciliation Process: Overview And Critique

The Reconciliation Process: A Potted History	5
Reconciliation: Conundrums of Definition and Perception	9
<i>Reconciliation as Assimilation: The Prevailing Non-Indigenous View</i>	10
<i>Reconciliation as Autonomy: The Prevailing Indigenous View</i>	14
Never the Twain Shall Meet	18

CHAPTER TWO

Ontological Reconciliation: A Dialectical Approach

Creating Common Ground: The Reconciliation and Dialectic Nexus	24
Ontological Reconciliation: Unity in Difference	28
Ontological Reconciliation: Knowing the Self	33
<i>Reconciling the Manichean Allegory</i>	36
Ontological Reconciliation: Knowing the Other	38
Fostering the Meeting of the Twain	42

CHAPTER 3

Ontological Reconciliation: What Does It Look Like?

Ontological Reconciliation: A Domain of Intersubjectivity	45
Case 1: The Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council	48
Case 2: Petrol-Sniffing and Yolgnu Youth	52
Case 3: <i>Versöhnung</i> : Reconciliation as Transformation	57
Learning Indigenous Languages: A Way Forward	62
Conclusion	72

Appendix

Glossary of Acronyms	74
Table 1 – List of Australian schools teaching Indigenous language and culture classes.	75
References	76

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CHAPTER ONE

AUSTRALIA'S FORMAL RECONCILIATION PROCESS: OVERVIEW AND CRITIQUE

The Reconciliation Process: A Potted History

The process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is complex, for it embodies a composite of varied and often discordant definitions and perceptions. In its contemporary Australian use however, 'reconciliation' broadly pertains to a process formally initiated on 16 August 1991, when Federal Parliament gave bi-partisan support to the drafting of legislation aiming to remedy issues of inequality and "transform relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians" (Commonwealth of Australia, 1991, p.1). Subsequently, in response to the fact that "to date, there has been no formal process of reconciliation between Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and other Australians",¹ the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) was established under the *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act 1991*, as the official instrument for orchestrating a process of reconciliation. Although the *CAR Act* is credited as being the first formal legislative instrument for facilitating a process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, a raft of questions, concerns, and issues pertaining to 'reconciliation' (or the absence thereof), have existed in one form or another since the outset of the continent's colonial history.

When establishing the first British colony in 1788 on the land of the Eora people, Governor Phillip's instructions included the directive that, "You are to endeavour by every possible means to open an Intercourse with the Natives and to conciliate their affections, enjoining all Our Subjects to live in amity and kindness with them" (Commonwealth of Australia, 1914, p.13). Similarly, in 1794, John Hunter, New South Wales' second Governor, was given instructions to establish a conciliatory relationship with 'the natives' (ibid, p.522). Such notions of 'conciliation' also feature on the far side of the continent, for in 1833, in

¹ *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act 1991*. (Cth). No. 127 of 1991. Table of Provisions (c).

response to an escalation of conflicts between colonists and the local Indigenous population, George Fletcher Moore (the soon to be Advocate-General of Western Australia) acted upon his conviction that a need existed “to lay a foundation for some measure of conciliation”, by publishing in the Swan River Colony’s *Perth Gazette*, the first of a series of articles concerning the culture and customs of the Nyungar people (Cameron, 2000, p.27). Hence, although it is apparent early colonists comprehended, and seemingly intended something akin to a process of reconciliation with Indigenous Australians, what happened instead was a systematic process of dispossession and extermination. Indeed, upon his return to the Swan River Colony in 1832, Captain Fremantle noted that the settlers’ treatment of the Nyungar people “almost amounts to a war of extermination & they are shot wherever they are fallen in with” (Cottesloe citing Fremantle, 1979, p.91). A similar situation of dispossession and killing of Indigenous people prevailed throughout Australia until the 1930s, when policies and practices of assimilation were enacted and remained active as the primary *modus operandi* pertaining to Aboriginal affairs until the 1960s.

Between the 1960s and the formal commencement of a reconciliation process in 1991, a sea-change in Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations unfolded, and although this process involved a comprehensive array of socio-political events,² several incidents stand out as pivotal points of influence and change. For example, the 1967 Citizenship Referendum indicated that most non-Indigenous Australians supported the idea of “recognising Aborigines as fellow citizens” (McIntosh, 2000, p.5), thus legislation was passed by which Aboriginal people were deemed citizens of their own country and given the right to vote. Ostensibly, this marks the first in a series of gradual steps towards the establishment of a formal reconciliation process, and away from policies and thinking of assimilation. Another key juncture occurred on Australia Day in 1972, when Prime Minister William McMahon announced the formation of Federal policy concerning the recognition of four previously ‘non-existent’ rights for Aboriginal people.

First they may decide for themselves to what *degree* they will identify with what the Prime Minister called ‘one Australian society’. Second, they may decide for

² See CAR’s *Timeline for Aboriginal Reconciliation* (2000a, online).

themselves at what *rate* they will so identify. Thirdly, they have the right to *preserve* their own culture and fourth, the right to *develop* their own culture (Stanner, 1979, p.301).

This represents a tangible step towards reconciliatory change, for it presumably aims to create a process of understanding and compromise between Indigenous Australian identity and ‘white’ Australian identity. However, the McMahon government refused to also acknowledge Aboriginal land rights in its policy, consequently sparking the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy by a group of Aboriginal people on the lawns of Parliament House in Canberra. Although this was both a gesture of symbolic protest and a contentious political stance, it arguably also fell within the domain of McMahon’s proclaimed rights, especially in terms of demanding land rights, which are essential to Aboriginal cultural preservation and development. Six months later when the Embassy was forcefully dismantled by police, *The Age* editor questioned whether “the risk is that in demolishing one symbol, the Government might have established violence as a new symbol of black-white relationships” (Dow, 2000, online), thus highlighting and heralding the implicit paradoxical tensions of the formal reconciliation process yet to come.

A third landmark event directly preceding and influencing the formation of CAR, was the 1987 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCADC), which constituted “the most comprehensive examination of the state of race relations ever carried out in this country” (CAR, 1994, p.9). The Commission made 339 recommendations in its 1991 final report, with the last and consolidating recommendation being:

That all political leaders and their parties recognise that reconciliation between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities in Australia must be achieved if community division, discord and injustice to Aboriginal people are to be avoided. To this end the Commission recommends that political leaders use their best endeavours to ensure bi-partisan public support for the process of reconciliation and that the urgency and necessity of the process be acknowledged (Johnston, 1991, p.146).

In direct response to this recommendation CAR was established under the *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act 1991* with the object of promoting “a process of reconciliation between Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and the wider Australian community”;³ a process to ideally be completed before the 2001 centenary of Federation, which was the date of termination for both the *Act* and CAR (Commonwealth of Australia, 1991, p.11). This process involved attending to three primary areas of concern; one, fostering non-Indigenous attitudinal change and understanding of Indigenous culture through education; two, addressing the dire reality of Indigenous disadvantage; and three, establishing documents of reconciliation in order to formally ratify the process (Hollingsworth, 1994, pp.57-8). Prior to its cessation, CAR (2000b, p.4) recommended “the establishment of a new national body to promote and monitor the reconciliation process”, and subsequently the non-government organisation Reconciliation Australia was founded in January 2001, with a charter to continue and maintain a focus for the reconciliation process.

It is apparent then that notions of conciliation and reconciliation have been around since, (as the Bilinara man Munnganyi evocatively describes it), “white people just came up blind, bumping into everything. And put the flag; put the flag” (Rose, 1996, p.18). However, despite early conciliatory sentiments, or formal contemporary reconciliation processes, it is evident that the reconciliation process is not complete. But what constitutes a completed reconciliation process? According to the Commonwealth Government “true reconciliation can never be said to have occurred until Indigenous Australians enjoy the same opportunities and standards of treatment as other Australians” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002, p.2), therefore, when considering the general reality that Australia’s Indigenous people remain in a situation of social inequity, it is evident (by this measure) that true reconciliation has not occurred. Despite the outcome of the 1967 referendum; despite the final recommendation of the 1991 RCADC and the subsequent Federal bi-partisan support for the establishment of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) via the *Council of Aboriginal Reconciliation Act (1991)*; despite the fact that 250,000 people walked across Sydney Harbour Bridge during the 2000 People’s Walk for Reconciliation; and despite the potent symbolic gesture of

³ *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act 1991*. (Cth). No. 127 of 1991. s 5

reconciliation at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games opening ceremony, where Djakapurra Munyarryun and Nikki Webster walked together hand-in-hand (CAR, 2000a, online)...Aboriginal people remain distinctly disadvantaged, thus true reconciliation has not occurred. Despite these many indicators that the Australian people generally and clearly support the idea of reconciliation, the gulf between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is seemingly as wide as it ever was.

Reconciliation: Conundrums of Definition and Perception

Broadly speaking, references to the Australian reconciliation process conjure up notions of establishing some manner of harmonious relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, which is reflective of the official *Oxford English Dictionary* definition for reconciliation as “the action of reconciling persons, or the result of this...the action of bringing to agreement, concord, or harmony” (Simpson & Weiner, 1989a, p.354). In fact, the results of a 1996 research survey “investigating the attitudes and perceptions of mainstream Australians towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the concept of reconciliation”, showed that most people understood reconciliation to be about “coexistence, unity, acceptance, and consultation” (Johnson & Sweeney, 1996, online). It therefore appears that the reconciliation process is a multi-faceted phenomenon; a reality attested to by Pat Dodson (1996, pp.5-6), the (then) Chair of CAR, when he stated in his 1996 address to the National Press Club that,

reconciliation can mean many different things. It might be as simple as a handshake with your Aboriginal neighbour, or, more broadly, better relations between indigenous communities and other Australians in all the places we share across this land....Above all, it must mean some form of agreement that deals with the legacies of our history, provides justice for all, and takes us forward as a nation.

Regardless of its multiple meanings, statistics during this period indicate that 83 per cent of Australians were in support of the reconciliation process (CAR, 2000c, p.32).

Arguably though, the essence of contemporary reconciliation is exemplified in the Aboriginal writer Noonuccal Oodgeroo's poem *The Dawn is at Hand*, in which she envisions:

Dark and white upon common ground
In club and office and social round,
Yours the feel of a friendly land,
The grip of the hand (1970, p.52).

Here Oodgeroo articulates egalitarian notions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians establishing a 'common ground' of shared land and friendship, and of consummating reconciliation through the esteemed Aussie handshake. In terms of the formal reconciliation process, this symbol of shaking hands is synonymous with CAR's proposed first step towards reconciliation, namely that "before change can take place there needs to be mutual recognition of the need for change" (1992, p.5). However, although most of Australian society acknowledges a need for reconciliatory change, what constitutes the substance of this change, is fundamentally different from Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives, because their respective mindsets are each steeped in and shaped by a very different cultural ontology. In effect then, though seemingly shaking hands in agreement to the same notion of reconciliation, each inherently has a very different view as to what this actually means.

Reconciliation as Assimilation: The Prevailing Non-Indigenous View

Despite the positive intentions of the reconciliation process and rhetoric concerning the importance of respecting Indigenous culture, from a general non-Indigenous perspective, there appears to be considerable ambivalence⁴ concerning reconciliation and Indigenous people. For example, the results of a 2000 Australia-wide quantitative survey of *Attitudes to Reconciliation among non-Indigenous Australians* indicates 92 per cent support the proposals that "all Australians should have equal rights and opportunities...[and] *the nation should recognise the traditional beliefs and culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander*

⁴ This ambivalence exists in both contexts of the word's meaning: one, as a form of ambiguity, and two, in having contradictory feelings and thoughts about something or someone.

peoples” (CAR, 2000c, p.33).⁵ Paradoxically however, the same survey shows that “most see reconciliation as an Aboriginal issue, not as an issue for all Australians” (Newspoll et al, 2000, p.36), therefore despite non-Indigenous egalitarian attestations, it appears reconciliation is fundamentally perceived as something Aboriginal people need to do. This attitude also appears to be reflected in the weighted title of the *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act (1991)* which tacitly insinuates that the requisite reconciliatory change is one that Aboriginal people need to make.⁶ Arguably, this involves a process of change whereby Aboriginal people reconcile themselves to the reality of ‘white’ society, and work to become homogenised and assimilated citizens; a supposition supported by the survey’s further finding that “there is a willingness to treat Aboriginal Australians like any other Australians provided they are prepared to accept ‘our’ values and play by ‘our’ rules” (ibid, p.36). According to this logic, reconciliation and equality occur only when Indigenous people exercise the ‘free choice’ to adopt and subscribe to the cultural norms of ‘white’ society. Furthermore, in claiming that “an overwhelming majority of Australians accept friendship as a basic principle of democracy only if it is based on a notion of the friend ‘as another self’”, Collins & Davis (2004, p.17) underscore an imbedded ‘white’ expectation that, in order to be accepted as equals, Aboriginal people must become more like non-Aboriginal people.

Indeed, Short (2003, p.300) refers to the formal reconciliation process as being “inherently assimilationist” because the Government, and the majority of non-Indigenous Australians, refuse to support or acknowledge the significant role of Indigenous autonomy in rectifying issues of disadvantage. Similarly, Crough (2002, p.10) maintains that the Government’s notion of ‘practical reconciliation’ is but a perpetuation of official policy towards Indigenous people since the 1960s, which predominantly focuses on “the delivery of what are essentially mainstream services to Indigenous people”. This perpetuation of policy is evident in Prime Minister John Howard’s concept of ‘practical reconciliation’ which

⁵ Italics in original.

⁶ Perhaps a more balanced and mutually inclusive title such as the *Council for Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal Reconciliation Act (1991)* would better reflect the ideal of reconciliation.

apparently is “best found within practical means to improve the well-being and happiness of Indigenous Australians and raising standards to levels enjoyed and expected by all of us” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000, online). Although he seemingly expresses here a commitment to addressing the reality of Aboriginal disadvantage, the reconciliatory focus and onus is on bringing (or assimilating) Indigenous people more ‘equally’ into the fold of non-Indigenous culture and society. It communicates no concept of supporting Indigenous autonomy, or of reciprocity, where non-Indigenous Australians can enjoy and benefit from Indigenous culture.

Such assimilatory expectations not only confuse the reconciliation process, but are antithetical to it, for they undermine the quintessential thing upon which successful reconciliation is fundamentally dependent on. Various sources allude to this ‘thing’ differently:

- Wenten Rubuntja (1988, p.24), an Indigenous elder and 1988 Chairman of the Central Land Council pre-empts this issue when claiming - “We have to share this country. And this means respecting each other’s laws and culture”;
- in the *CAR Act (1991)* it states that “the object of the establishment of the Council is to promote a process of reconciliation...based on an appreciation by the Australian community as a whole of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures”;
- when discussing the reconciliation process in the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody National Report*, Commissioner Elliot Johnston avers that “good community relations cannot be achieved without...the recognition of Aboriginal rights, Aboriginal culture and traditions...Unless the wider society gives the most tangible proof of on-going and substantial efforts to achieve those objectives, there can be little prospect of permanently and substantially improving community relations” (1991, p.57);
- more recently, Duncan et al (2004, pp. 35-6) directly broach this issue in asserting that “at present, non-Indigenous Australians implicitly expect Indigenous Australians to understand ‘European’ laws, rules and behaviours...But if it is right and acceptable for white Australia to expect understanding from black Australia

(which it is), then surely it is right for Indigenous Australians to expect the reverse.

This notion should become the cornerstone of reconciliation”.

In other words, a successful process of reconciliation is first and foremost dependent on the willingness of non-Indigenous Australians to foster notions and actions of ontological equality,⁷ reciprocity and empathic response. This requires a degree of readiness to place one’s non-Indigenous self in the cultural shoes of the Indigenous other. However, the exact opposite seems to be the case, for when summarising the attitudes of non-Indigenous Australians to reconciliation, the authors of the above mentioned 2000 survey report conclude that there “appears to be a widespread inability or a disinclination to attempt to look at the matter from an Aboriginal perspective” (Newspoll et al, 2000, p.38).

Overall then, it seems that despite the non-Indigenous population’s genuine support for a reconciliation process, much of their thinking about this is arguably the antithesis of reconciliation; for it precludes practical ways for meeting key Indigenous reconciliatory needs and issues. Concomitantly, it seems that most non-Indigenous Australians surreptitiously translate ‘reconciliation’ as being an expectation for ‘Indigenous assimilation’, or for Aboriginal people to become more like non-Aboriginal people. This expectation is held in both contexts of the notion; firstly, for Aboriginal people to become *more like* ‘white’ people, and inversely and simultaneously, for them to become *less like* Aborigines. In contrast, it can be argued that equitable reconciliation depends upon the willingness of the dominant culture to genuinely create both the ontological and political space necessary, for negotiating with Indigenous people, concrete ways to include, respect and meet Indigenous socio-cultural needs. Furthermore, the latter phases of reconciliation (i.e. creating social justice and documents of reconciliation) are dependent on non-Indigenous people acknowledging, challenging and changing their own prejudiced cultural

⁷ The notion of ‘equality’ in the formal reconciliation process generally refers to “social and economic equality for Indigenous people” (CAR, 2000c, p.196), however, the above proposal that “a successful process of reconciliation is first and foremost dependent on the willingness of non-Indigenous Australians to foster notions and actions of ontological equality” introduces a further dimension of equality to reconciliatory thinking. Although the distinct terms ‘Indigenous society’ and ‘non-Indigenous society’ are used in generalist reference to two societies that are in fact interconnected and multifarious within themselves, each can also be construed of as a *discrete cultural entity*; hence the concept of ‘ontological equality’ infers that each is an equally valid *being*, and needs to be perceived as such for reconciliation to occur. Ontological equality is the counter-measure to non-Indigenous society’s belief in its superiority as a cultural entity.

assumptions, for without this there can be no real social justice, or consequential documents of reconciliation. Of course, the adoption of such attitudes also applies to Indigenous people, but as the dominant and oppressing culture, the practical weight of responsibility rests with non-Indigenous Australians.

Reconciliation as Autonomy: The Prevailing Indigenous View

There is no one Indigenous view on reconciliation because there is no one Indigenous people. This in itself is a reconciliation issue, for while the entire Indigenous population is conceptually lumped together as a singular racial and cultural entity by the English word 'Aboriginal', Australia's Indigenous population in fact consists of a multifarious diversity of cultural, linguistic and family groups, each with its own reconciliatory perceptions and needs. As a generalisation however, lawyer and Jesuit priest Frank Brennan (1991, p.17) forwards the opinion that Indigenous views on reconciliation fall into two main camps.

One group of Aboriginal leaders...have continued to argue that Aborigines have never surrendered their sovereignty. Another group of Aboriginal leaders were satisfied with being Australian citizens, but were concerned that Australian laws and policies be improved to give Aborigines a better deal, guaranteeing their control of their own affairs...For them, autonomy within the Australian nation rather than sovereign separation was the issue.⁸

Hence, core Indigenous views on reconciliation are simultaneously in concord and conflict, for while aspirations for negotiating Indigenous autonomy and maintaining cultural integrity are common to both camps, one sees reconciliation as an obstacle to achieving this, while the other sees reconciliation as a pathway to achieving this.

Another related view held by many Indigenous people is that the formal reconciliation process is an anomaly, for there was no conciliation in the first place (Mayne, 2004, online; Castejon, 2002, p.29). Certainly, this is historically correct for despite early

⁸ Although Brennan's statement is a 'white' analysis of Indigenous views on reconciliation, his extensive experience in working with Aboriginal people on land rights and reconciliation issues, provides credibility to his conclusions.

colonial musings and proclamations concerning the need for an official process of conciliation (i.e. a treaty) between the British government and Australia's Indigenous peoples, no such conciliation has ever occurred.⁹ This view also holds semantically, for when the word 'reconciliation' is broken down into its constituent parts:

're', a Latin prefix denoting a "restoration to a previous state or condition", and 'conciliation', meaning "the action of bringing into harmony; harmonising, reconciling...peaceable or friendly union" (Simpson & Weiner, 1989b, pp.248, 662),

then reconciliation means a return to, or restoration of a former state of conciliation. Strictly speaking then, the contemporary concept of reconciliation is a misnomer, for how can that which has never occurred be returned to or restored? For many Indigenous people this misnomer raises the question: How can there be any reconciliation without there first being a treaty, or some genuine form of recognition of Indigenous autonomy? The recognition of autonomy is central to Indigenous reconciliatory needs and includes a spectrum of views, ranging from those that see the need for Indigenous sovereignty and a treaty, through to the need for Indigenous self-governance and self-determination, through to recognition of the right for Indigenous people to identify with and maintain the cultural integrity of their Aboriginality.

The initiation of a formal process of reconciliation in 1991 represents a significant point of divergence in the Aboriginal quest for recognised autonomy, for while many saw this as an opportunity to further their cause, others saw it as a 'white' political manoeuvre to sidestep the contentious issue of growing Indigenous demands for a treaty (Short, 2003, p.307). For instance, Aboriginal activist and lawyer Michael Mansell epitomises an Indigenous view which sees "government talk about reconciliation as a denial of their separate nation status", thus an acceptance of reconciliation is a tacit acceptance of

⁹ In 1833, George Fletcher Moore publicly promoted the idea of negotiating a formal treaty between the Swan River Colony and the local Indigenous population (Burningham, 2003, p.260). This was not an uncommon sentiment amongst early Australian settlers. Indeed, a core issue in the founding of NSW's first colony was the political tension existing between those who advocated for a formal process of conciliation and those who opposed it (Willmot, 1988). Yet despite the fact that many independent relationships of conciliation have occurred between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people throughout Australia's colonial history, no legal or formal processes of conciliation transpired.

homogenous citizenship, and subsequently a denial of “sovereignty that has never been voluntarily surrendered” (Brennan citing Mansell, 1991, pp.13-14). In August 1991, proponents of this view, who were members of the Sovereign Aboriginal Congress,¹⁰ formed an embassy of one hundred delegates from all Australian states at Canberra’s Grevillea Park, and voted against the reconciliation legislation passed by government a week earlier (Dow, 2000, online). A Congress spokesperson stated that “at the moment the whole reconciliation process is a farce” (Canberra Times, 1991, p.10), for in their view it side-stepped and sublimated the pending issue of the need for a treaty between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. In other words, the launching of a formal reconciliation process that did not recognise Indigenous autonomy (sovereignty) via a treaty was perceived to be a process of further assimilation in disguise.

Concerns about the need for a treaty, and the veracity of the formal reconciliation process, are not only expressed at the time of CAR’s establishment, but also after its closure. For example, in July 2000 at a conference in Melbourne, Aboriginal activist and elder Isabel Coe notes in her speech that “they speak about reconciliation, when they should speak about ending the war” (Castejon citing Coe, 2002, p.29), and suggests that a treaty is necessary to achieve this. Interestingly however, calling attention to the need for a treaty is not only the petition of an activist minority, for despite the body of scepticism about and opposition to CAR as the Government’s formal reconciliation instrument, CAR (2000c, p.106) itself suggests in its *Final Report* that

the Commonwealth Parliament enact legislation (for which the Council has provided a draft in this report)¹¹ to put in place a process which will unite all Australians by way of an agreement, or treaty, through which unresolved issues of reconciliation can be resolved.

¹⁰ According to Aboriginal activist Kevin Gilbert (1988, online), the Sovereign Aboriginal Congress of each state consists of Indigenous representatives from the Regional Sovereign Councils in that state, who actively promote Indigenous sovereignty and the need for a treaty.

¹¹ Appendix 3 of CAR’s *Final Report* includes a draft document of proposed legislation titled *Reconciliation Bill 2001* (ibid, pp.163–180), which is subsequently rejected by the Government on the grounds that it “would impose a potentially divisive, protracted...and inconclusive process on the nation” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002, p.18).

Hence a calling for recognition of Indigenous autonomy through a process of formal conciliation is common to both sides of the reconciliation fence, and differ only in that the anti-reconciliation camp believes a treaty is the requisite first step to reconciliation, while the pro-reconciliation camp believes a treaty is an advisable next step to furthering reconciliation.

Paralleling this is another Indigenous view, which does not seek a treaty *per se*, but still condemns the duplicity of a so-called reconciliation process that promises equality, yet contravenes the integrity of Indigenous cultural autonomy. This view is optimised by Ray Jackson from the Indigenous Social Justice Association who vehemently proclaimed at a Sydney reconciliation meeting in June 2000, that

“the Federal Government, like all the others before, continue to insult our Elders and Leaders. They continue to malign our true history. They continue to steal the land. All with impunity. Yet they talk of Reconciliation” (Short citing Jackson, 2003, p.308).

This is a view seemingly supported by the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) President Geoff Clark, who claims that reconciliation is “whitefella’s business” (Castejon, 2002, p.3). Indeed, Short (2003, p.308) contends that due to the Government’s adamant refusal to acknowledge Indigenous autonomy, be this through a treaty or otherwise, “it is understandable that many indigenous peoples view Official Reconciliation as but the latest phase in the colonial project”. When considering the seeming reality that mainstream non-Indigenous Australians are proponents of reconciliation through assimilation, and that assimilation has been a central tenet of the colonial project, then this Indigenous view is arguably justified.

Conversely, Indigenous advocates of the formal reconciliation process hold the more pragmatic view that since white people are here to stay, then CAR and subsequent reconciliation bodies such as Reconciliation Australia, at least provide a medium through which Indigenous needs, views and culture can be expressed and shared. In terms of Indigenous education, Coombs (1993, p.39) describes this as a “two-way approach [where Indigenous Australians] want their children first to grow up as Aborigines; second, they want

their children to acquire the skills and knowledge which will enable them to deal with [non-Indigenous] society”. Ostensibly, the same approach applies to reconciliation, hence, according to this Indigenous view, although *adapting* to Western cultural mores is acknowledged as a necessity for contemporary Aboriginal people, this does not mean *adopting* them wholesale and abandoning their own cultural identity. Establishing concrete Indigenous autonomy is also paramount to this view, be this through a treaty or another official document, and formal reconciliation is seen as a possible path to this.

In summation then, whereas the anti-reconciliation view sees a treaty as a necessary precursor to any genuine process of reconciliation, the pro-reconciliation view sees a treaty (or its equivalent) as one amongst many of the necessary outcomes of gradual reconciliation in process. However, central to both views is the imperative of non-Indigenous Australians accepting Indigenous autonomy in one form or another. Without this, true reconciliation is impossible.

Never the Twain Shall Meet¹²

Returning to the image of Oodgeroos’ handshake of reconciliation between ‘dark and white’, it seems that only one aspect of its suggested twin symbology has been fulfilled in contemporary Australia. For instance, the first symbolic aspect of this handshake is a gesture of mutual recognition between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians of the need for a reconciliatory change; a step that clearly occurred during the formative stages leading to the establishment of CAR as the instrument for a process of reconciliation. However, the fulfilment of Oodgeroo’s reconciliatory vision apparently starts and stops here, for the second symbolic aspect of the handshake (i.e. the egalitarian essence and outcome of the reconciliation process) indisputably remains unrealised. Largely this is due to the fact that, in the very act of shaking hands, the non-Indigenous party generally ignores the RCADC finding that “the root cause” of inequality in Australia, is the Indigenous population’s loss of land and autonomy (Short, 2003, p.299). In so doing, non-Indigenous

¹² This phrase is taken from Rudyard Kipling’s poem *The Ballad of East and West* (Kipling, nd, online).

Australians transgress reconciliation's fundamental prerequisite; namely that they develop a capacity to pay genuine heed to the key reconciliatory needs of Indigenous Australians. Hence, not only is the central Indigenous need for autonomy contested by 'white' society, but the equally important issue of Aboriginal land rights is resisted; and equality of 'land rights' quite literally represents the absolute common ground of a reconciliation process, for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are dependent on territorial rights and access in order to exercise their respective brands of cultural existence and autonomy.

From an Indigenous perspective land or country is fundamental to reconciliation for as the Tangani-Mientangk spokeswoman Irene Watson (1998, p.17) contends,

without land we have no future. The survival of indigenous foundations of life are woven into the land. Without it, our laws, culture, languages and history struggle to find form in a land that we are dispossessed of.

Likewise, Strang (1997, p.66) notes that for Indigenous people "their primary concern is still the land, living on it, drawing spiritual and economic sustenance from it, regaining control over it, caring for it, using it in both traditional and new ways", while Brennan (1991, p.4) sees land rights as the starting point for reconciliation. This is because Indigenous identity, autonomy and culture are inextricably tied to their rights to own or access ancestral lands, and consequently essential to their reconciliatory needs. Yet on the whole, the Australian government and non-Indigenous population oppose and seek to thwart Indigenous struggles for land rights. This opposition is exemplified in Short's (2002, online) claim that

around the same time as the Howard government set about 'extinguishing' the land rights granted by the High Court in the historic cases of *Mabo* and *Wik*, it began to advocate a notion of 'practical reconciliation'...[motivated by] the desire to 'go beyond' the 'catchcry' of key indigenous aspirations concerning land rights, sovereignty and self-determination.

Here governmental rhetoric of 'practical reconciliation' is used to sidestep assertions that Indigenous autonomy and land rights are essential to the reconciliation process,¹³ and hides

¹³ In very practical terms, Aboriginal land rights and autonomy represent the physical and political grounds upon which culture depends for existence and development. Without these, Aboriginal

an unspoken Eurocentric motif that reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is fine, so long as the 'white' right to promote property ownership and profiteering through exploiting the land is not compromised. How then, can fair reconciliation ever be actualised if Western land use interests predominantly continue to supersede the Indigenous *primary concern* for land rights? Ultimately then, reconciliation must include a pivotal focus on reconciling cultural notions of land use practices, for generally speaking, non-Indigenous people perceive the land as 'my property', or as a natural resource to be utilised for production and profit-making, while Indigenous people see 'country' as the spiritual foundation and centre-post of life, community and culture.¹⁴

Additionally, for most Aboriginal people, an integral component of reconciliation and reparation is to have non-Indigenous Australians genuinely listen to, know and acknowledge the truth of the past. Indeed, Orentlicher (1994, p.457) holds this to be a crucial aspect of reparation, while Soyinka (1999, p.83) maintains that "reparations...serve as a cogent critique of history and thus a potent restraint on repetition". Conversely however, the previously mentioned survey shows that 80 percent of non-Indigenous Australians believe "everyone should stop talking about the way Aboriginal people were treated in the past, and just get on with the future" (Newspoll et al, 2000, p.34); a perception of reconciliation which apparently favours expunging Australia's ugly colonial history of Indigenous dispossession from the national psyche. In the view of Olandina Caeiro, the Commissioner for the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in East Timor (CAVR), such an attitude prevents reconciliation, because in actuality, it is an attempt to "lay a brand new carpet over a dirty floor" (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2005, online). Therefore settling the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous histories is an important aspect

culture is left 'hanging in the air', and a reconciliation process that ignores or avoids this reality is fundamentally impractical and assimilatory. For example, the Swan Valley Nyungah Community (2004, online) addresses this issue directly in stating that "without our sites and without a continuous connection to our sacred land and waterways we will cease to exist as a people and be forced to assimilate into non-Aboriginal society. Genocide will therefore have been committed on us, the Nyungah people".

¹⁴ As stated, this is a generalisation, for it is obviously the case that many Indigenous people also subscribe to the notion of private property, and that many non-Indigenous people support environmental protection and have spiritual feelings for Australia's natural environs.

of reconciliation, for it is synonymous to sweeping the national floor clean, before laying the carpet of social equity and inter-cultural accord upon it.

It is apparent then, that (apart from a mutual agreement about the need for reconciliation) a conflict of interests exists at many, if not all of the key junctures of Australia's formal reconciliation process. Indeed, such discord is reflected in the major finding of social research throughout the ten year legislated reconciliation period, that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians "are talking past each other, not with each other" (CAR, 2000c, p.31). Although reconciliation is a collaborative process, this 'talking past each other' is largely due to the selective deafness of Western domination, which operates first to serve its own socio-political interests and biased convictions, and secondly, to negotiate a process of reconciliation that does not interfere with the maintenance of these. Any such problematic issues are 'tuned out', hence the primary onus of willingness to listen and change must ultimately fall upon non-Indigenous Australians, for without this, the reconciliation process will default into an extension and repetition of circumstances where Aboriginal people are expected to make the majority of concessions and changes. Such 'reconciliation' invariably develops into, or more correctly, *perpetuates* a situation of inequitable partition, which (despite the efforts of CAR) remains the present case in Australia.

This is patently spelled-out in the disparity between differing perceptions about the primary impetus of reconciliation; namely assimilation verses autonomy; for Indigenous people are placed in a situation where they must resist the assimilatory pull of Western culture in order to maintain some semblance of autonomy and cultural solidarity, while simultaneously needing to align with the ubiquitous reality of colonialism in order to survive. Warren Mundine, the Indigenous Labor Party national president-in-waiting, attests to this precarious situation when recently stating that "Aboriginal Australians these days are focussed entirely on survival to the exclusion of just about everything else" (Stannard, 2006, p.20). It could be argued that this is primarily due to the non-Indigenous assimilatory view of reconciliation, which essentially promotes the idea of social sameness, whereas the achievement of egalitarian outcomes must respect Indigenous autonomy and difference. As

Brennan (1991, p.5) points out, “equality is not the same as uniformity. Equality of treatment requires a recognition of differences”, and the trend of non-Indigenous ‘reconciliation as assimilation’ works in opposition to this, for its inherent character is that of absorption, namely a general and systemic process of drawing Indigenous people into Western culture, and *ipso facto*, away from their Aboriginality.

It is logical to assume then that equality of treatment requires *recognition of equality*, because an absence of the former is the result of an absence of the latter.¹⁵ Therefore an essential step towards true reconciliation is the willingness of Westerners to examine imbedded cultural prejudices, which are rooted in notions of their own omnipotence and superiority. This ‘hidden’, yet active and influential aspect of Western ontology, operates to create a chasm between cultures, and tips the process of reconciliation off balance. Additionally, it is likely that non-Indigenous ambivalence, with its twin concurrent movements of aiming to absorb and distance ‘the Aboriginal other’, stems from the assumed superiority of non-Indigenous society. If so, does ‘white’ Australia simultaneously harbour twin contradictory expectations of Aboriginal people; on the one hand that they should assimilate, while on the other hand, that they should remain at a distance, on the social fringes as the inferior ‘Other’? Is the general thinking of Eurocentric Australia something to the effect of – “Aboriginal people should learn to live like white people...but not next door to me”? If this be the case, then Australian Western culture places Aboriginal people in a situation of ontological impasse, where neither fully accepted nor rejected, they are perpetually assigned to an inferior and ambiguous social space along the margins and corridors of superior ‘white’ society.

As clearly stated by Commissioner Elliot Johnston (1991, p.57) in the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody National Report*, for reconciliation to occur “there must be a complete rejection of concepts of superiority and inferiority”, as its fruition is dependant on meeting and negotiating from a place of mutually recognised equality. Without the fulfilment of this fundamental step, the defining essence of mainstream non-

¹⁵ Here I use the phrase ‘recognition of equality’ in terms of the previously mentioned notion of ontological equality (see footnote 7).

Indigenous reconciliation cannot help but be intrinsically farcical and assimilatory, for in being predominantly governed by Western interests and dictates, it fails to truly respect and embrace Indigenous cultures on equal footing. Consequently, the underlying issues steeped in and stemming from culturally different worldviews remain unreconciled. It can be stated overall then, that a truly egalitarian process of reconciliation cannot and will not occur until a fundamental shift transpires in Western notions of cultural superiority, and subsequently in how 'reconciliation' is perceived and orchestrated between Indigenous non-Indigenous Australians.

CHAPTER TWO

ONTOLOGICAL RECONCILIATION:

A DIALECTICAL APPROACH

Creating Common Ground: The Reconciliation and Dialectic Nexus

By definition, the word ‘definition’ refers to “a precise statement of the essential nature of a thing...[and] a declaration of formal explanation of the signification of a word or phrase” (Simpson & Weiner, 1989c, p.385). Etymologically speaking, giving definition to something refers not only to articulating its essence, but also to consolidating this essence within a conceptual framework of limits (Hoad, 1986, p.116). In effect then, defining a word or phrase provides a picture of both its essential nature and the limits of its use, thus establishing a fundamental base for conceptualising and communicating about it, while in terms of legislation and social policies, a definition maps both the core and the parameters of that which is to be made manifest. It therefore seems that the presence of a guiding definition plays an important, if not essential role in effectively facilitating social change through legislation and policy, for it provides a solid base for cohesive and focussed planning and action. Taking this into account, it is remarkable that the *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act 1991*, which represents the first formal step towards reconciliation in Australia, does not define ‘reconciliation’, though it does define ‘Council’ and ‘Aborigine’.¹⁶ No explanation is given for this omission in the *Act* itself, though a decade later in CAR’s proposed *Reconciliation Bill 2001* the appended explanatory notes reason that the earlier omission occurs because “a definition of reconciliation, is inherently difficult” (CAR, 2000c, p.177).

Indeed, reconciliation is understood in varying and often discordant ways, for as one of the key founders of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Johnny de Lange claims, he has “not met two people with the same definition of reconciliation” (Doxtader, 2003, p.268). It appears then that the absence of a definition for ‘reconciliation’

¹⁶ *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act 1991*. (Cth). No. 127 of 1991. Table of Provisions (c).

in the *Act* is justified, yet be this as it may, it can be conversely posited that, the formal reconciliation process has been rendered inherently difficult because the nature and parameters of the desired ‘reconciliation’ were not defined (or at least delineated) more clearly at the outset. Consequently, reconciliation in Australia has become an unanchored, amorphous, fractured and factionalised process; a hit and miss affair guided by fundamentally conflicting understandings. This creates a paradoxical and apparently irresolvable situation where the concept of reconciliation is in need of clearer definition, while simultaneously being intrinsically difficult, if not impossible to define. A proposed solution to this conundrum lies in a paradigmatic shift of thinking, from a *formal* to a *dialectical* perception of reconciliation.

According to Novack (n.d., p.20), formal logic is “thinking dominated by laws of identity, of contradiction, and of the excluded middle”, therefore the Australian reconciliation process, with its implicit identity-based contradictions and absence of a socio-cultural middle ground, is clearly steeped in formal logic. Subsequently and ironically, ‘reconciliation’ becomes a process where the assimilatory pull of colonial nationalism necessary to maintaining non-Indigenous identity, struggles with an Indigenous counter-pull towards maintaining its cultural identity and survival through autonomy. In other words, formal reconciliation through formal logic, innately and quite literally creates a social situation where ‘never the twain shall meet’. Hence a solution lays neither in continuing to operate without a definition for reconciliation, nor in providing a fixed definition for reconciliation, but in establishing a fluid and *dialectical* understanding and process of reconciliation.

The nineteenth century German philosopher Georg Hegel (1770 – 1831) is recognised as the originator of dialectical logic in modern thinking (Novack, n.d., p.44), and his concept of ‘Dialectic’ is central to his voluminous works. According to Hegel (1830, p.116) “wherever there is movement, wherever there is life, wherever anything is carried into effect in the natural world, there Dialectic is at work”. In a similar vein Berthold-Bond (1993, p.84) states that Hegel’s Dialectic is

the transition of things, and of knowledge, from potentiality or abstraction to actuality and content, but in such a way that the arising of a fuller determination points beyond itself to a further determination...A thing becomes more and more fully developed through this successive dialectic of self-reconstruction.

Here Dialectic refers to the dynamic process whereby any person, any society, any 'thing' in life is in a constant evolutionary process of flux, of change, of reinventing his, her or itself. However, Dialectic not only pertains to the ever changing relationship of a life-entity within and unto itself, but also to relationships between life-entities. For example, Novack (ibid, p.9) claims "an important lesson in dialectical thinking... [is that] something is not truly known until it is known through its opposite", thus Dialectic is also an eternal and pervasive force, which operates to fulfil the sacrosanct purpose of reconciling the innumerable dynamic tensions within and between distinct social bodies, so that different cultural 'units' come to recognise themselves as complementary parts within a multi-different global whole.

Another pivotal and related element of Hegel's philosophy is his broad-reaching notion of reconciliation. According to Hardiman (1994, pp.3, 95) "reconciliation is the main goal and central organizing category of Hegel's social philosophy", and although he recognises this as a phenomenon operating throughout all aspects of life/society's fabric, he essentially perceived it as "the movement that makes estrangement disappear". Hegel used the word *Versöhnung* to describe his notion of 'reconciliation'; and whereas the English word 'reconciliation' generally means a process of restoring harmony, the German word *Versöhnung*

strongly connotes a process of transformation. When two parties become *versöhnt*, they do not resume their old relationship unchanged. They become *versöhnt* by changing their behaviour in fundamental ways. Parties who have attained *Versöhnung* do not have to decide to get along together; their getting along together is, instead, the natural result of their being in a new transformed state (ibid, p.85).

It seems then, that Hegel's notions of Dialectic and reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) are organically intertwined, for both elucidate upon the fact that life is never static or rigidly

delineated, but rather, is a constant process of flux, impermanence and organic interrelationship between its manifest 'parts'. In fact it could be argued that reconciliation is Dialectic's aim and fulfilment, while Dialectic is the animating life-force propelling both the process and the product of reconciliation. Furthermore, this conceptualisation of reconciliation as an *outcome* of inter- and intra-cultural transformation theoretically addresses and redresses key obstacles inherent to Australia's present and formal reconciliation process, particularly the assimilation versus autonomy conflict.

This becomes clearer in light of Novack's above statement that 'something is not truly known until it is known through its opposite', for when transcribed into terms of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, it speaks of each culture knowing itself more fully, through a process of knowing the other. Subsequently, a dialectical approach establishes an elastic 'middle-ground' (absent in the oppositional thinking of formal logic), where the set borders of differing cultural ontologies become more mutable, pliable and open to mutual exchange and understanding. When taking into account that 'ontology' is defined as "the subjective preconditions of human knowledge...[and] of human 'being-in-the-world'" (Eliade, 1987, p.80, 81), this dialectical approach can essentially be called a process of *ontological reconciliation*, for it offers a way for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to develop a genuine relationship of respect, reciprocity, and understanding with, and between, each other's cultural 'nature of being-in-the-world'. Furthermore, upon closer scrutiny, it seems that Novack's above statement is comprised of, and operates according to three distinct, yet interrelated motifs, these being: i) that of *unity in difference*,¹⁷ ii) that of *knowing the self*, and iii) that of *knowing the Other*. Therefore, under the rubric of the term *ontological reconciliation*, each of these will be discussed in turn to demonstrate how a dialectical approach to reconciliation offers a fresh spectrum of potential processes and egalitarian outcomes for relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

¹⁷ I have borrowed the term "unity in difference" from Doxtader (2003).

Ontological Reconciliation: Unity in Difference

The term *unity in difference* is used by the rhetorical and social theorist Erik Doxtader (2003, p.272), to elaborate upon Hegel's contention that the fundamental mission of reconciliation is that of establishing "a middle course of Beauty between the extremes". Here, Hegel refers to the establishment of the 'middle' that is excluded in systems of formal logic, and it is this 'middle course of Beauty between the extremes' which acts as a medium for achieving a *unity in difference*. As Doxtader contends, "reconciliation works toward...a unity in difference" and in so doing is "an expression of the desire to forge an interest in intersubjectivity" (ibid, pp.272, 273), thus it is a phenomenon that creates a composite space of unity between, and joining, two different cultures. Unity in difference then is the aim and the result of reconciliation, or in the term adopted in this paper, of ontological reconciliation. Doxtader also claims that "reconciliation...endeavours to dismantle those modes of definition that legitimize identitarian violence", meaning those modes of definition common to formal logic, and furthermore, that in reconciliation "neither difference [is] subsumed into unity nor unity defined as difference" (ibid, pp.267, 272). This latter statement is better understood when contrasted against the Australian reconciliation process, which is antithetical to a dialectical approach, for it promotes the subsuming of difference into unity (i.e. assimilation via nationalism), while maintaining a separatist belief in 'unity defined as difference' (i.e. the Aboriginal Other). Ironically, this is an example of the 'legitimised identitarian violence' that reconciliation aims to dismantle. Conversely, ontological reconciliation ideally establishes a mutable middle space between each 'Other' (Indigenous and non-Indigenous); a sort of cultural antechamber or meeting place where each changes and is changed by the Other in ongoing rounds of reciprocity. Hence, in ontological reconciliation an ever-present liminal space exists between cultures, which effectively transcends and establishes a bridge between the paradoxically assimilating and separating ways of formal reconciliation. Far from being a process of cultural merging, such reconciliation aligns with Hegel's concept of *Versöhnung*, for it simultaneously embraces cultural difference and self-transformation.

The concept of a liminal-cum-mutual cultural space is also posited by the post-colonialist theorist Homi Bhabha (1990), who refers to this as “the third space”. Although Bhabha does not discuss this in terms of reconciliation *per se*, his ideas help clarify the distinction between Australia’s formal reconciliation process and a proposed process of ontological reconciliation, especially in terms of the general political inclination of each approach. Generally speaking, Bhabha (ibid, p.211) describes the third space as one of *hybridity* which “displaces the histories that constitute it...enables other positions to emerge...and sets up new structures of authority which are inadequately understood through received wisdom”, however the nature of this ‘third space’ is better grasped through considering his notions of *cultural diversity* and *cultural difference*. Bhabha makes a clear distinction between cultural diversity and cultural difference, for he sees the former as a political and rhetorical device for engulfing and controlling the latter. In his view, the notion of cultural diversity is a Western construct that appears to promote multiculturalism, while at the same time acting to contain it, for it is “a norm given by the host society or dominant culture, which says that ‘these other cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our own grid’” (ibid, p.208). In other words, such rhetoric promotes supposed diversity within the broader framework of maintaining a mandatory common identity, a practice which Sethi (2002, p.28) claims is common to colonialism “where the figuration of a common identity leads to unitary nationalism for it is only through collective...linguistic sentiments that political ends can be reached”. This dynamic underpins and governs the formal reconciliation process in Australia, and the ‘assimilation verses autonomy’ struggle is a manifest symptom of the promotion of cultural diversity as a nationalist strategy.

On the contrary, Bhabha holds that cultural difference is something that cannot “be accommodated within a universalist framework” (ibid, p.209). This is because

different cultures, the difference between cultural practices, the difference in the construction of cultures within different groups, very often set up among and between themselves an *incommensurability*...[and] it is actually very difficult, even impossible and counterproductive, to try and fit together different forms of culture and to pretend that they can easily coexist (ibid).

In this situation, reconciliation as an intended harmonising force works to fulfil the ‘very difficult, impossible, and counterproductive’, a dynamic that is evident in the conflict of reconciliatory interests between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. How then to reconcile the incommensurable? Bhabha (ibid, p.210-11) theorises that “no culture is full unto itself”, meaning that no culture is a fixed identity; that all cultures share in common a certain “liminality”, for they are ever involved in an open-ended process of flux, change and “hybridity” within their own milieus, and therefore each can extend its individual hybridity to meet in an arena of common hybridity, and to generate “something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation”. This third space of hybridity allows cultural difference, enables unity in difference, is synonymous with Hegel’s ‘middle course of Beauty between the extremes’, and is a vehicle for ontological reconciliation. If one accepts the suggestion that fixed cultural identity borders are artificial constructs, and that in actuality, all cultural groups share in common a mutable hybridity, then it stands to reason that different cultures can meet, or superimpose, with hybrid equality in a third space, to establish what Bhabha (ibid, p.208) sees as a contemporary need for “a politics which is based on unequal, uneven, multiple and *potentially antagonistic*, political identities”. Such a politics could change the landscape of reconciliation in Australia, from the present assimilationist situation that seeks ‘unity in diversity’, to an ideal dialectical situation that embraces ‘unity in difference’.

The establishment of this ideal socio-political landscape through reconciliation however, is dependent upon two other critical provisos. Firstly, in contrast to the formal model of reconciliation which is governed by a driving aim of overcoming conflict, Hegel contends that “conflict is an integral component” of dialectical (ontological) reconciliation, and that “concrete unity...is not unity *without* difference but instead unity *in* difference...one that preserves and embraces division, conflict, and otherness” (Hardimon, 1994, pp.92, 40). Bhabha also alludes to this in his above reference to a ‘potentially antagonistic’ politics via the third space, while Jay (1993, p.146) speaks of “a dialectical concept of experience...combining negations through unpleasant episodes as well as affirmations through positive ones to produce something akin to a wisdom that can be passed down via

tradition through generations”. However, this notion of embracing conflict appears to embody an implicit conundrum, which is evident in Hegel’s contention that “the requirement of *sovereignty* precludes the possibility of the establishment of an international organization...that could guarantee that states settle their disputes peacefully” (Hardimon, 1994, p.231); and also in Bhabha’s (1990, p.216) statement that

the notion of hybridity...is about the fact that in any particular political struggle, new sites are always being opened up, and if you keep referring those new sites to old principles, then you not actually able to participate in them fully and productively and creatively.

Here both Hegel and Bhabha suggest that fixed identity and ideas are conflict-causing and conflict-maintaining, and therefore must be circumvented in order to further reconciliation; yet they also claim that embracing conflict is necessary to achieve reconciliation. What then differentiates between conflict that must be embraced, and conflict that must be circumvented? For instance, rigid attitudes that promote the assimilation of Indigenous people into ‘white’ society are conflict-causing and conflict-maintaining in a process of establishing ontological reconciliation, and indeed, operate to prevent such reconciliation occurring. How then, can conflict caused by such rigidity be embraced if it thwarts the objective of achieving reconciliation, or unity in difference? The answer may lay in generally embracing (accepting the reality of) conflict as an integral and realistic part of any reconciliation process, but not accepting some forms of conflict, or their root causes, as a final statement of affairs.

The second proviso has been touched upon already throughout the conundrum above, and is clearly explicated in Bhabha’s (ibid, pp.212, 213) claim that

the possibility of producing a culture which both articulates difference and lives with it could only be established on the basis of a non-sovereign notion of the self...It is only by losing the sovereignty of the self that you can gain the freedom of a politics that is open to the non-assimilationist claims of cultural difference. The crucial feature of this new awareness is that it doesn’t need to totalise in order to legitimate political action or cultural practice.

This notion of a non-sovereign self is arguably the lynchpin of an ontological approach to reconciliation in Australia, for it challenges a core discourse of Western mentality that underscores the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians; namely the positivist belief in the colonial sovereign self as being exclusive, autonomous and superior. This colonial sovereign self maintains its identity both in contrasted opposition to, and through the assimilation of, the Other, hence notions of a third space, or dialectical interaction, or ontological reconciliation are anathema to its survival. It has a highly vested interest in promoting a political environment of cultural diversity over one of cultural difference. However, the notion of the non-sovereign self raises two problematic questions.

1. Is it possible to do away with sovereignty *and* maintain and promote cultural difference, when the very existence of cultural difference apparently depends on some measure of individuated sovereignty?
2. In each seeking to promote its own sovereignty, are the two opposing camps of Australia's formal reconciliation process (Indigenous autonomy and non-Indigenous assimilation) different sides of the same coin of sustaining the survival of the sovereign self? If so, where does the notion of a non-sovereign self fit into this dynamic?

In response to the first question, it can be proposed that Bhabha's notion of the non-sovereign self oversteps the mark, for perhaps it is not a 'losing of the sovereignty of the self' that is required, but rather, a refined definition of the sovereign self. For instance, upon closer examination it is apparently the *immutability* of a sovereign body, and not its autonomous existence, that thwarts ontological reconciliation, therefore refining and redefining the concept of sovereignty to mean *a mutable and autonomous social structure*, both recognises the interdependent relationship between sovereignty and cultural difference, and allows for the dialectical third space necessary for promoting unity in difference. In response to the second question, the notion of sovereignty as *a mutable and autonomous social structure* ideally allows a space for intercourse and mutual reciprocity between the presently antagonistic sovereign needs of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Furthermore, another dimension for refining sovereignty can be elicited from the present

state of affairs, because although each side of the reconciliatory process share in common the desire to maintain its own sovereignty, they differ in that non-Indigenous society generally upholds the *superiority* of the sovereign self it struggles to maintain, whereas on the whole, Indigenous society does not conceive of sovereignty in terms of superiority.¹⁸ Notions of sovereign superiority work against unity in difference, therefore an imperative undertaking for each party in ontological reconciliation, is to adopt both an equitable and mutable view of sovereign autonomy.

Overall then, it seems that establishing unity in difference is dependent on an attitude of openness, combined with a willingness to enact change in many arenas of one's cultural ontology. However, an indispensable and integral part of enacting change in one's self (be this an individual, or a socio-political body), is to become aware of the need to change, of which changes need to be made, and why. This leads to the second motif of ontological reconciliation; namely *knowing the self*.

Ontological Reconciliation: Knowing the Self

In reflecting on his eight trying years as a political prisoner, the now president of East Timor Xanana Gusmao declares that "I didn't reconcile with Indonesia but I reconciled with myself in the mind, in the spirit of openness, spirit of tolerance. Because the hatred was in myself, and I started reconciliation with myself" (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2005, online). Here Gusmao exemplifies a watershed awareness in the process of ontological reconciliation; namely that a primary onus of reconciliatory change lays in the self and not the Other. In this vein of thinking Doxtader (2003, p.285) states that "there is no reconciliation without (self) opposition", and Dalal (2002, p.29) believes that "you cannot change the outer world unless you begin by changing yourself". 'Knowing the self' is also part and parcel of Hegel's (1949, p.230) assertion that, in reconciliation "action from one side would be useless, because what is to happen can only be brought about by both". In other

¹⁸ The assertion that Indigenous society generally does not conceive of sovereignty in terms of superiority, is evident in the views expressed by many Indigenous people throughout this paper (particularly in Chapter 3) of promoting a two-way relationship of knowledge exchange between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians (i.e. Oodgeroo, Wenten Rubuntja, David Mowaljarlai, Paddy Roe, Marcia Langton, the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council, Pincher Nyurrmiyarri).

words, the space for reconciliation is opened to the degree that each party takes responsibility for self awareness and change, and conversely, is thwarted to the degree that one (or more) parties neglect this responsibility.

In principle this idea seems obvious and logical, but it carries with it the innate dilemma of *knowing when the need for self change is necessary*, because the awareness of a need for change is relative to perception. For example, around the advent of the twentieth century many non-Indigenous Australians subscribed to the Social Darwinist belief that, as the pinnacle of civilisation, it was ‘white’ society’s destiny to transcend, conquer, control and utilise the natural world, and *ipso facto*, that the primitive Aborigine, as part of the natural world, should fade away. This view is clearly expressed by the explorer H. G. B. Mason (1919, p.56) in his traveller’s guide titled *Darkest Western Australia*, in which he claims that

since the advent of the whites, nothing mortal man can do will prevent the passing of the Australian black within a few decades. Niggers are cut out for a wild free life and it’s a pity to spoil Nature’s handiwork.

Although many reading Mason’s passage today would view it as being a racist, bigoted and ludicrous social belief that patently needs to change, the fact of the matter is that those who held this belief, genuinely saw it as *the truth*, and therefore *not* in need of changing. Although this belief in the inevitable extinction of the Indigenous population did change over time, it did not lose its racist and elitist undertones. As Moran (1999, pp.266, 268) points out, ‘white’ Australia today is governed by the dictates of “assimilationist settler-nationalism”, which subscribes to the belief that “the indigenous need to become reconciled *to* Australian society”. However, as in the above example, many people now hold this to be *the truth*, and therefore do not entertain the concept that it is a view that needs to change.

This poses an ostensibly irresolvable dilemma in terms of fostering ontological reconciliation, for if it is imperative that non-Indigenous society be self-responsible for changing this assimilationist belief, then how can they do so if they have no concept of needing to do so? There is no all-resolving answer to this question. On the contrary, it can readily be argued in response that no dilemma exists; that there is no requirement for a

change in non-Indigenous attitudes; that people have an inalienable right to believe whatever they believe; that the conquest, domination and assimilation of others is simply how the world works; that ‘might is right’ and all this talk about ontological reconciliation is an exercise in utopian delusion. Indeed, such counter-assertions cannot be categorically refuted, for there are no universal benchmarks in the realm of human values, hence it is only possible to assume and propose, but not to *prove*, that equity and reconciliation are preferable to conquest and assimilation as modes of human interaction. Consequently, rather than (re)solving this dilemma, it seems the task of ontological reconciliation is to accept and embrace such ambiguity as part of life’s paradoxical nature. Although this may seem a tenuous footing to rest upon, it is congruous with its own dialectical thinking, and congruous with ‘reality’, for it seems that all social structures and ideas rest on the same indefinite grounds.

On this footing then, and in the spirit of ontological reconciliation, it can be assumed and proposed that the predominant onus of responsibility for ‘self’ change rests with non-Indigenous Australian society, for they are the primary orchestrators of social inequity. In fact Malbon (2002, p.32) holds that a foremost assumption of reconciliation is that “indigenous people have certain inherent constitutional rights to equality and to flourish as distinct people within a broader community”, but constitutionally speaking, this is not, and will not be possible in contemporary Australia “until the indigenous people are truly seen to hold equal status in our community”. Berman (2000, p.6) generally addresses this issue of inequality in his discussion regarding the role of *paradox* in human thinking, for he contends that “paradox...includes holding contradictory propositions, or emotions, simultaneously; sustaining the tension of this conflict so that a deeper reality can emerge than one would have if one simply opted...for Self or Other”. He refers to social actions stemming from ‘either-or’ thinking where paradox is abandoned, as “psychologically infantile solutions to the problem of bipolar (Self/Other) contradiction” (ibid), and Western assimilationist thinking clearly fits this description.

Extending this concept of embracing paradox into the motif of *knowing the self* in ontological reconciliation, it is apparent that the extent to which one can know the Other,

corresponds with, and is dependent upon, the extent to which one can open to knowing oneself, for it is often our fixed yet unexamined beliefs which set the barriers to reconciliation, and govern the extent to which reciprocity can occur. In effect then, this is a process of furthering inter-cultural reconciliation via intra-personal reconciliation, and although there are many areas for doing so in non-Indigenous thinking, the primary area of concern is the divides, inequities and iniquities resulting from the West's notion of its own superiority. This can be referred to as reconciling the Manichean Allegory.

Reconciling the Manichean Allegory

According to the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia (2006), Manichaeism is an ancient Iranian religion named after its founding prophet Mani, and “because Manichaeism is a faith that teaches dualism, in modern English the word ‘manichean’ has come to mean dualistic, presenting or viewing things in a ‘black and white’ fashion”. In 1922, the French psychiatrists Maurice Dide and Paul Guiraud coined the phrase ‘manicheism delirium’ in reference to a particular psychiatric syndrome which Smith (1993, p.39) describes as “a state of alienation from those relations which allow the subject to develop”. This term is later adopted, adapted and used by the Afro-Caribbean theorist and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon in his critique of colonialism and the colonial mind. Fanon (1967, p.183) introduces this principle in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, in which he proposes

Good-Evil, Beauty-Ugliness, White-Black: such are the characteristic pairings of the phenomenon that, making use of an expression of Dide and Guiraud, we shall call ‘manicheism delirium’.¹⁹

Continuing this line of critique in his next book *Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (1968, p.41) asserts that “the colonial world is a Manichean world...As if to show the totalitarian character of colonial exploitation the settler paints the native as a sort of quintessence of evil”. It is interesting to note that Fanon does not equate colonialism to the neutral dualistic interpretation of ‘manichean’, but instead to the pathological sense of the term in psychiatry,

¹⁹ This quote is taken from the 1967 translation of Fanon's book, however he first used the term ‘manicheism delirium’ in his original French version in 1952.

thus inferring that the thinking promoted by and shaping 'the colonial world' is a form of mental illness.

Fanon's concept of the colonial world being a Manichean world, subsequently influenced the coining of the idiom "Manichean Allegory" by the postcolonial theorist Professor Abdul JanMohamed (1985, p.63), who states that

the dominant model of power- and interest-relations in all colonial societies is the manichean opposition between the putative superiority of the European and the supposed inferiority of the native. This axis in turn provides the central feature of the colonialist cognitive framework and colonialist representation: the manichean allegory – a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilisation and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and Other, subject and object.

This concept of the Manichean Allegory is interpreted variously by other authors, for Baker (1998, online) contends that it "posits the native as absolute evil by projecting onto him or her all the darker motives and desires that the colonizer refuses to acknowledge in him or herself", thus in Freudian psychoanalytic terms, is akin to the psychological defence mechanism of projection.²⁰ Brady (1996, p.143) describes it as

the way of looking at the world in which white is to black as good is to evil, superior to inferior, civilised to savage...and so on. A field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions...which installs Aboriginal people into a permanent position of inferiority;

thus representing a form of political control and coercion. Arguably the Manichean Allegory is a fusion of both these views for the joint movement of elevating the self and controlling the Other, by envisioning the Other as the repository of one's rejected shadow-side, and thus making the Other inferior, is ostensibly a cocktail of power, politics and pathology.

²⁰ According to Corsini (2002, p.767), Freud's notion of 'projection' refers to "a defence mechanism of attributing to others what is actually true of the self, often used to justify prejudice or evade responsibility".

It is of concern then that the contemporary assimilationist attitude of Australia's government and general non-Indigenous population, indicates the Manichean Allegory is alive and well in the 'white' national psyche. At the core of such thinking is the erroneous and socio-politically convenient belief (for 'white' people) that Western culture is the superior culture, a practice which the renowned scholar Edward Said refers to as Orientalism. According to Said (1985, p.7), as a colonial strategy, Orientalism depends on a "flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand". This dynamic works to undermine one of the key objectives of Australia's reconciliation process; that of addressing and redressing Aboriginal disadvantage, for the non-Indigenous belief in its own supremacy maintains an imbalanced binary construct where 'white' is ever in a position of superiority and advantage, and 'black' in a position of inferiority and disadvantage.

As proposed already, an ontological approach to reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is dependent on reciprocity based on an understanding of cultural equality, and in terms of Aboriginal disadvantage, this can only be fully remedied by changing the non-Indigenous 'superior' beliefs, policies and practices that created such disadvantage in the first place. Although availing Aboriginal people to the same social and economic advantages as non-Aboriginal people is a critical issue in reconciliation, if this is orchestrated only via the framework of Manichean thinking, it must negate the Aboriginal need for autonomy. Consequently, under the auspices of 'practical reconciliation', assimilation is the hidden price that Aboriginal people must pay in exchange for equality opportunity. Therefore, while reconciliation is ultimately a two-way process, a fuller redress of its many component issues requires a change in the supremacist thinking that largely creates and perpetuates them; and it is only 'white' people who can put to rest the 'white' superiority complex which prohibits egalitarian outcomes.

Ontological Reconciliation: Knowing the Other

The third motif of *knowing the Other* is a crucial aspect of ontological reconciliation, for as Indigenous filmmaker Christine Jacobs so astutely puts it – "How can you reconcile

with something if you know nothing about it?” (*Deadly Yarns*, 2004, video).²¹ Ultimately, in ontological reconciliation, knowing the Other is as much a joint responsibility as knowing the self, however, the initial onus of obligation falls again on non-Indigenous Australia, for although many, if not most non-Indigenous Australians will contend that they know something about Aboriginal people and their culture, in reality they know very little. This is because the non-Indigenous perception of Aboriginality is for the most part an imaginary one, constructed under the auspices of the metaphorical Western gaze. The Western gaze operates as a strategic instrument of European political power for constructing cultural identities in order to exercise and maintain sovereign control, and was used extensively by the British during the colonisation of Australia. According to Attwood & Arnold (1992, p.xi) this practice results in Indigenous Australians losing control over their identity, as it is “manufactured in ontological and foundational terms as an essence which exists in binary opposition to non-Aborigines...(and) has had enormous power to determine who Aborigines are – to say they are this and not that, that they belong here and not there”.

Hence the Western gaze is part and parcel of the Manichean phenomenon, for it operates by the same principle of presumed Western superiority. Additionally, as a generic rule-of-thumb, the Western gaze works to categorise Indigenous cultures into ‘static identities’, thus making it easier to formulate and implement policies for regulating and controlling Indigenous populations (Healy, 2000, p.45). Thus the heterogeneity of Australian Indigenous culture is funnelled into the homogenising appellation of ‘Aboriginal’, effectively moulding the diversity of Australian Indigenous cultures into a uniform unknown ‘Aboriginal’ mass. Subsequently, from within the cultural milieu of their self-proclaimed supremacy, and through the myopic eyes of the Western gaze, non-Indigenous Australians do not see the reality of Indigenous people and culture, but see instead their own fabricated myth of ‘Aboriginality’.

In regards to this myth of ‘Aboriginality’, the Yawuru man and prominent Indigenous rights advocate Mick Dodson asserts that “the construction of Aboriginality, in

²¹ Chistine Jacobs makes this comment in the short film *Don't Say Sorry*, which is one of several films featuring in the *Deadly Yarns* (2004) Indigenous short film initiative.

all their variations...has depended on what the colonising culture wanted to say or think about itself" (1994, p.8), while in a similar vein, Fielder (1996, p.15) describes the Western notion of Aboriginality as "the way in which dominant cultural forces work to assimilate otherness and difference into manageable, compliant and controllable subjects". In other words, 'Aboriginality' is neither an Indigenous word nor concept, but instead a constructed composite of shifting stereotypes, fashioned by 'white' political powers to serve their own ends, and subsequently adopted by mainstream 'white' Australia as 'the truth' about Aboriginal people. In fact, Attwood & Arnold (1992, p.xiii) claim that "real Aboriginality does not exist within (or even beyond) European discourse", and building on Said's concept of Orientalism, Hodge & Mishra (1990, p.27) coined the term 'Aboriginalism' to describe the practice and process by which Indigenous Australians have been constructed, represented and *mis*represented by Western discourse as a means to fulfil non-Indigenous political, economic, territorial and assimilatory interests. However, as already inferred, the Western gaze (as Manichean phenomenon) does not only operate as a *modus operandi* of colonial control, but also as a medium for constituting Western identity.

Within the fabric of Manichean Western superiority-making, there exists a deeper motive to the construction of Aboriginality that runs to the ontological heart of non-Indigenous self perception. For instance, Lattas (1992, p.47) holds that "the primitive Other is the horror of the mechanical self" and that racism and the concomitant oppression of Indigenous people in Australia "is grounded...not in a loathing of black tribal people, but rather in the constructing of the tribal Other as the annihilation of modern identity and individuality". Sethi (2002, p.23) also alludes to this dynamic in stating that,

from the point of view of the civilising mission of the British, a land chiefly constituted of villages was the antithesis of a modern and progressive Britain. In their logic; the modern (signifying developed society) would dominate the ancient. They argued that the essence of the 'ancient' lay in its inwardly-turned communal societies in opposition to the outward, expanding, competitive, and individualistic 'modern'.

This constitutes a major barrier to ontological reconciliation, for if Western thinking is systemically programmed to perceive ‘the tribal Other’ (Indigenous Australian culture) as representing the primitive past from which modern society has transcended, then non-Indigenous Australians will innately experience equitable cultural reciprocity as identity destroying. In other words, they will ‘unconsciously’ respond to the reconciliation process as a threat to the structural integrity of their social and individual identities. Therefore, in order to protect and sustain their identity, non-Indigenous Australians will generally adopt an assimilatory approach to reconciliation, for to genuinely meet with Indigenous people face-to-face, is to ‘backslide’ along the path of progress and modernism. In this situation, *not knowing the Other* is concordant with preserving modern Western identity, and the constructed myth of ‘Aboriginality’ acts as a functional substitute to learning about Indigenous people and culture from Indigenous people.

In concrete terms then, the Western gaze is blind to Indigenous people, for through the eyes of its own assumed superiority it perceives only its own fantasies about them, knows nothing of them from their own perspective, and in so doing renders them invisible. Aboriginal²² activist Bobbi Sykes addresses this dynamic in her assertion that “we call ourselves the ‘Invisible people’....No doubt in the future, we will succeed in controlling the projection of our own image, and from that position we will be able to say who we really are” (Ansara & Wickert citing Sykes, 1980, p.13). In light of this situation Said (1989, p.225) maintains, “being asked to take the Other seriously” is a fundamental issue with which the West must contend, and a paramount aspect of taking the Other seriously, is seriously doing what is necessary to know the Other, through the eyes of the Other. As long as the non-Indigenous perception of Aboriginal identity is forged and fixed within the matrix of the Western gaze, the Australian reconciliation process cannot be one where non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians come to know each other, but instead is a bizarre attempt by non-Indigenous Australia to reconcile with a figment of its own imagination.

²² Although the word ‘Aboriginal’ is a Western construct, strategically coined and utilised for the subjugation of Australia’s Indigenous population, it is a term now adopted by Indigenous people in reference to their own identity, thus its use throughout this paper is appropriate.

Fostering the Meeting of the Twain

In comparing and contrasting the dynamics of Australia's formal reconciliation process with the three motifs or movements of ontological reconciliation (unity in difference, knowing the self, and knowing the Other), it becomes evident that a mutually inclusive and egalitarian reconciliation outcome has not occurred, and cannot occur, because in its present form the reconciliation process is predominantly governed by non-Indigenous perceptions and interests, and is consequently more assimilatory than reconciliatory. The lynchpin and fulcrum of this situation is the West's implicit belief in its own superiority,²³ and the concepts of unity in difference, knowing the self, and knowing the Other all challenge and demand a change of this fictitious conviction. Indeed, although knowing the self and knowing the Other have been presented here as separate motifs, they are in fact fundamentally interrelated, as clearly indicated by Kennedy (2000, pp.135-136) in his claim that

the word 'understanding is, I think, what Aborigines themselves use to pin-point the almost despairing problem they have with us whites. We simply don't understand. We don't know them, we don't understand them...They know us well and often make the crucial observation that, not only do we not understand them, but we don't understand ourselves. We desperately need a new way of looking at ourselves so that we might come to recognise that we ourselves are in need of liberation and that our own liberation ultimately is bound up with theirs.

Therefore, rectifying the Western gaze is an essential step towards non-Indigenous Australians taking Indigenous Australians seriously, and this requires from them the willingness to:

- i) step aside from notions of their own cultural superiority;

²³ It is prudent to reiterate here that references to 'Western superiority' do not suggest that all non-Indigenous Australians uniformly perceive themselves as the superior race at all times. Rather, this is a generalisation used in reference to a predominant trend, which consequently operates to effect an assimilatory climate in Australian society and social policy.

- ii) identify within themselves the Western gaze, reject the authority of its knowledge, and adopt an open attitude of ‘tell me about yourself and your culture, for I know nothing’;
- iii) learn about Indigenous culture from Indigenous people;
- iv) develop relationships with and *know* Indigenous people, via social interaction and/or cultural exchange.

Arguably, the first of these requirements is unrealistic, for to ask Western society to abandon its presumed superiority is to ask it to abandon its very identity, yet if this superiority is not relinquished, then the political rhetoric of reconciliation (i.e. ‘a fair go for all Australians’), will smack of the infamous double-talk expressed in George Orwell’s novel *Animal Farm*, that “all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” (1971, p.90). When considering however that the notion of Western superiority and the Western gaze are intrinsically intertwined, then stepping aside from the former is a necessary part of rectifying the latter.

This creates a paradoxical set of circumstances, for on the one hand, the implementation of ontological reconciliation cannot occur between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians if one or both implicitly believes in its own superiority, while on the other hand, Western identity is rooted in and ostensibly dependent upon a belief in its superiority. It is patently futile then to attempt to force non-Indigenous people to change their self-conception through direct confrontation, for they have as much right to protect their cultural identity as Indigenous people do. However, if it is accepted that presumed Western superiority is a self-serving fiction that needs to be rectified in order to actualise reconciliation, then an indirect approach to fostering such a change is a possibility, and this can occur through paying attention to the latter two points above. In other words, it is through creating circumstances through which non-Indigenous Australians can learn about Indigenous culture from Indigenous people, and develop relationships with and *know* Indigenous people, via social interaction and/or cultural exchange, that the issue of assumed Western superiority may gradually be countered. As stated by Nettheim et al (2002, p.361), “effective co-existence must be more than constant compromises by Indigenous peoples. The

non-Indigenous community could benefit from a more reciprocal flow of ideas”. Ideally, the Western superiority-complex (manicheism delirium) which drives the present assimilatory ‘reconciliation’ process in Australia, can be gradually remedied through programs, partnerships and approaches that establish lines of interaction, relationship, communication and knowledge exchange between Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members.

CHAPTER 3

ONTOLOGICAL RECONCILIATION:

WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

We can't go back. The old law was for the old problems. Now we got this new law, this White man's way. And we got these new problems. This law doesn't fix them either. It's no good. What we got to do is put them together, the old and the new. Mix them up. And they'll be hard and strong like cement (Tacey citing a Kowanyama elder, 2000, p.100).

As a theoretical construct, the notion of ontological reconciliation is an ideal outlook akin to that presented by the Kowanyama elder above; hence it is mostly representative of how relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians *could* be, rather than how they actually are. However, although there is no absolute nation-wide example of ontological reconciliation to point to and say, "This is what it looks like", there are cases throughout Australia which demonstrate practical aspects of the theoretical whole. Therefore, an effective way to illustrate what ontological reconciliation looks like is, first, to view it generally, in comparison to other broad modes of interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and second, to examine a selection of cases throughout Australia, in which specific features of it can be discerned.

Ontological Reconciliation: A Domain of Intersubjectivity

In discussing the phenomenon of the construction of 'Aboriginality', Aboriginal academic Professor Marcia Langton (1993, p.81) posits "three broad categories of intersubjectivity", where,

the first is the experience of the Aboriginal person interacting with other Aboriginal people in social situations, located largely within Aboriginal culture.

The second is the stereotyping, iconising and mythologising of Aboriginal people by white people who have never had any substantial first-hand contact with Aboriginal people. The third is the construction generated when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people engage in actual dialogue, where the individuals test and adapt imagined models of each other to find satisfactory forms of mutual comprehension.

If Langton's three categories are considered in terms of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, then the first category ostensibly represents the domain of Aboriginal autonomy; the second category represents the domain of the colonial mindset, where Indigenous people are rendered effectively invisible by the non-Indigenous Manichean Western gaze, and are expected to assimilate into 'white' Australia society; and the third category corresponds with the notion of fostering reconciliation. Collard & Palmer (2001, pp. 3, 6) draw a parallel between Langton's third category of intersubjectivity and the Nyungar concept of *gnulla koorling*, which refers to Indigenous and non-Indigenous people "going along together" and being equally responsible for "driving the reconciliation process". They also observe that the third category "is possibly the most difficult one to work within" (ibid, p.6), however, it can be argued that this 'difficulty' is reflective of the formal reconciliation process and its unresolved ambiguities, while the ideal of *gnulla koorling* is synonymous with the notion of ontological reconciliation, and represents a *fourth* category of intersubjectivity that is yet to be achieved. In other words, the formal reconciliation process arguably represents a *third* category of intersubjectivity that is intrinsically a domain of difficulty and struggle due to unresolved beliefs of the non-Indigenous 'superiority' mindset being carried through from the second category. In comparison, authentic *gnulla koorling* (or ontological reconciliation) represents an ideal *fourth* category of intersubjectivity, where the majority of 'white' people have stepped beyond their biased and uninformed beliefs to forge a relationship of mutual understanding and equal opportunity with Indigenous people. Thus, the establishment of an ideal *fourth* domain of ontological reconciliation will transpire to the degree that the non-Indigenous superiority complex is resolved.

This thwarting of a fuller ontological reconciliation by unresolved biased attitudes within the formal reconciliation process, is addressed by the Ngarinyin elder David Mowaljarlai (1995, online) who proclaims that,

we have a gift we want to give to you. We keep getting blocked from giving you that gift. We get blocked by politics and politicians. We get blocked by media, by process of law. All we want to do is come out from under all this and give you this gift. And it's the gift of pattern thinking. It's the culture which is the blood of this country, of Aboriginal groups, of the ecology of the land itself.

Later, in a similar vein, Mowaljarlai (1996, online) extends this idea of Indigenous people 'being blocked' from sharing knowledge, to include concepts of reconciliation.

Looking at how long we live with white people, they don't really recognise who we are, and recognise the land...This is a big thing for us too - this reconciliation that we're talking about - so we can teach, then they can recognise what we really want to show them the nature they were born under...And that's a very important thing. We feel we want to share this gift to white Australia.

Here, Mowaljarlai clearly indicates that a deeper process of reconciliation (ontological reconciliation) is being 'blocked' and limited by the dominant force of Western interests, which prevail in the formal reconciliation process. Hence, compared to the formal reconciliation process, which is dominated by 'white' views and interests, an ontological approach to reconciliation is one where non-Indigenous people take Indigenous people seriously enough to engage in an even and mutual knowledge exchange.

Having established a general comparative picture of what ontological reconciliation looks like, it can be argued that the concept is little more than an altruistic exercise in wishful thinking, when considering the prevailing reality in Australia of non-Indigenous culture wanting to first and foremost promote its own interests. However, there are numerous cases throughout contemporary Australian society which clearly demonstrate particular aspects of ontological reconciliation in practice. An examination of some of these will serve the dual purpose of, one, demonstrating the efficacy of ontological approaches to reconciliation, and two, providing a selection of partial examples, that when combined, may

form a composite depiction of what ontological reconciliation potentially looks like in practice as a whole.

Case 1: The Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council

The Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women's Council was formed in 1980 when women from each of these language groups gathered to discuss the problem that their needs and views were not represented throughout the Pitjantjatjara land rights claims in South Australia during the late 1970s. Consequently they formed the NPY Women's Council, which initially aimed to contend with a host of Indigenous women's issues in 26 Indigenous communities, throughout a region spanning the Western Australian, Northern Territory and South Australian borders. During the late 1990s, the Council expanded its focus to develop services and projects that also advanced the welfare of Aboriginal men in the region, and continues to operate successfully to the present day. These services and projects are governed by the NPY Women's Council Executive, and implemented via two interconnected operational features; one, an action research approach, and two, the *malparara* way (Woods et al, 2000, pp.91-93).

The action research model used is one developed "by Tjikalyi Colin from Ernabella community in South Australia" (ibid, p.94),²⁴ who incorporates regional Indigenous language and concepts into the framework in the form of the three fundamental components of *Kulikatinyi*, *Nyakukatinyi* and *Palyalkatinyi*, which are described as follows:

Kulikatinyi can be defined as 'thinking, listening, comprehending as one goes along; thinking (something) through, deliberating; considering (something) over a long period of time'. *Nyakukatinyi* means 'looking (for something) as one goes along; looking for, watching out (for something) over a period of time'; and *Palyalkatinyi* refers to 'making/doing (something) as one goes along; to keep on doing/making something over a period of time (ibid, p.94).

²⁴ According to Lienert (2002, p.18) "an action research evaluation is often talked about as a dynamic process: cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, then planning again for a new action...[and a variation of this] model has been developed by Tjikalyi Colin and Anne Garrow in the Indigenous community of Ernabella in South Australia", and is explained in their book *Thinking, Listening, Looking, Understanding and Acting as You Go Along* (1996).

Hence this model operates through a cycle of interrelated steps, where actions are formulated and instigated after a comprehensive process of consulting, listening to and considering the views of community members. The subsequent services and projects are reevaluated in an ongoing manner via the same process, and adjusted accordingly when necessary.

The adoption and adaptation of an action research approach by the Women's Council is in keeping with the dialectical nature of ontological reconciliation, for it effectively merges a non-Indigenous social research paradigm with an Indigenous framework of problem solving. In so doing it demonstrates that, although Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems are seemingly divergent, they can also become complementary with a little innovative thinking. The Council's successful application of an action research model is a concrete testament to the fact that Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems can meld and work together, without either culture diminishing its fundamental identity through assimilating with the other. It is also commensurate with Hegel's notion of the Dialectic, where "a thing becomes more and more fully developed through [the] successive dialectic of self-reconstruction" (Berthold-Bond, 1993, p.84). For instance, an action research approach implemented by non-Indigenous professionals to contend with the same issues, would most likely fail if it did not incorporate Indigenous input; but as a composite of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge, the cyclic and successive stages of *Kulikatinyi*, *Nyakukatinyi* and *Palyalkatinyi* promote an ongoing reconstruction of projects and services, which otherwise may have been static and ineffective. As Council member Elsie Wanatjura states,

Whitefellas don't know about the issues here, they need to call for help to understand what's going on. It's through Anangu that they will understand...Anangu have lots of ideas and really understand the situation...Whitefellas don't really understand and can only talk a little bit about the situation here (Woods et al, 2000, p.95).

Hence the effectiveness of the Council's action research approach is primarily due to the fact that it is created, implemented and governed by the Indigenous people of the region. Of equal importance though is the ability of non-Indigenous workers to transcend the notion of

‘white’ superiority, which usually assumes the right to control Indigenous people and projects, for this enables the establishment of a common ground where dialectical interchange can take place.

The Council’s other operational feature is *malparara* way. *Malparara* means “a person together with a friend or companion”, thus *malparara* way refers to two people working together as a team on projects and in service delivery, “one of whom is a non-Anangu [non-Indigenous] woman employed for her specific professional skills, and the other a senior Anangu woman” (ibid, p.94). The *malparara* way approach to service delivery and project work is in many ways the epitome of ontological reconciliation. To begin, *malparara* is a derivative of the word *malpa*, meaning ‘friend’ (ibid, p.94), therefore the relationship between the Anangu and non-Anangu team members is not an impersonal vocational one, but rather a developing partnership and friendship. As Tjikalyi Colin explains,

Now all the women are working *malparara* way – friend and friend...It makes difficult things much easier to understand when you are working together. We work together, we have cups of tea together and sometimes at night when work is over we sit down and talk together (ibid, p.98).

This is strikingly akin to Hegel’s concept of *Versöhnung*, where reconciliation not only includes the facilitation of harmony between parties, but also a fundamental transformation *within* each party, so that they “do not have to decide to get along together; their getting along together is, instead, the natural result of their being in a new transformed state” (Hardimon, 1994, p.85). In other words, reconciliation is not the aim but the outcome of *Versöhnung*. *Malparara* way exemplifies this, for in establishing circumstances where Anangu and non-Anangu are working on a common project, and sharing cultural knowledge together in friendship, a situation is created where reconciliation spontaneously occurs, even though it is not primary original objective. In this manner, *malparara* way demonstrates one of the key differences between the formal reconciliation process, and a dialectical or ontological approach to reconciliation.

Malparara way also embodies the three core motifs of ontological reconciliation. Firstly, the team structure creates a ‘third space’ where a dialectical exchange can occur

between different cultural worldviews, thus establishing a relationship of *unity in difference*. In this way Anangu and non-Anangu simultaneously work in difference and unity on projects. However, although the team structure is based on an equitable contribution and exchange of Indigenous and non-Indigenous skills and knowledge, the locus of leadership rests with the Anangu senior women. This is explicated clearly by the Anangu project worker Nura Ward who gives the following instructions to new non-Anangu workers.

You are not in the lead, those Anangu workers are...If you go out ahead of them, people won't talk with you...They'll simply ignore you. Keep close with Anangu. They are your teachers and guides. Work together with the Anangu women and they'll teach you the work, the cultural aspects and all the things you need to know (ibid, p.96).

Therefore, secondly, the arrant leadership of Anangu women demands from non-Anangu women a willingness to *know themselves*; to find and transcend within themselves any encultured traces of Manichean thinking and supposed superiority, which might otherwise undermine the effectiveness of teamwork. Consequently, this arrangement also meets the third motif of ontological reconciliation, because by stepping aside from the falsifying and objectifying Western gaze, non-Anangu workers can learn from Anangu teachers, and thus come to *know the Other* from the Other's perspective. As Tisdell (2003, p.163) states, "one's own cultural understanding changes with increased contact with people from other cultural groups", and on the whole, *malparara* way creates an environment for effectively orchestrating such changes for both Anangu and non-Anangu workers.

Finally, *malparara* way generally fulfils the long-term vision of ontological reconciliation, which is to move beyond the present situation where the principal onus of responsibility for listening and change rests with non-Indigenous people, to create a situation where a more balanced relationship of reciprocity can occur. Although the locus of leadership and governance rests with Anangu women, Tjikalyi Colin acknowledges the value of having a working partnership where "the white workers learn Anangu women's way and the Anangu learn the white worker's ideas" (Woods et al, p.99). Subsequently, Anangu women also recognise the reality that non-Anangu workers possess knowledge and skills that

they do not possess, which are also essential to successful service delivery, for as well as Anangu cultural insight, the effectiveness of *malparara* way depends on the capability of non-Anangu workers to deal with the requirements of a plethora of mainstream institutions, including governmental, legal, medical and funding bodies.

The NPY Women's Council is a functional and exemplary example of healthy interaction and cooperation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and challenges some of the core dynamics underpinning the general state of their mutual disharmony and misunderstanding. Overall, the long-standing effectiveness of the Council as a self-governing body, and its combined inclusion of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous skills and knowledge, clearly demonstrates that it is possible for Aboriginal people to live autonomously, while simultaneously maintaining productive relationships with non-Indigenous people and mainstream Australian society. This counters a general assumption held by mainstream non-Indigenous Australia, that while Aboriginal people have much to learn from 'white' people's knowledge, the reverse does not apply. On the whole, non-Indigenous approaches to issues of health, education, housing, domestic violence and substance abuse have failed in Indigenous communities, whereas the NPY Council's cross-cultural approach has reaped, and continues to reap positive outcomes. As Tjikalyi Colin affirms, "the best way is working together and sharing knowledge, going from one way to the other, both working together that way, that's the best way...We want to work the two ways, our way and whitefella way" (ibid, p.100). This is the voice of ontological reconciliation, and if similar circumstances were established as the mainstream *modus operandi* of communication and interchange between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, then arguably, the project of reconciliation would be largely fulfilled.

Case 2: Petrol-Sniffing and Yolgnu Youth

I was always asking myself, how am I going to learn for my people about the Western world? But not only that: how can the people outside learn something about Yolgnu as well?...So how can we live together, learn to be with each other

more closely, in this one Australia – help each other, understand each other (Rothwell quoting Gawirrin Gumana,²⁵ 2003, p.R4)?

In his book *Why Warriors Lay Down and Die* (2000), Richard Trudgeon provides a comprehensive analysis of the many existing layers and levels of miscommunication and misunderstanding between Yolnu²⁶ and Balanda ('white' people), and the innumerable problems stemming from these. He also proposes solutions to these problems. Trudgeon's book is the result of living and working with Yolnu people for nearly 30 years, and most of his experiences and proposals regarding improved communication and relationship between Yolnu and Balanda are representative of ontological reconciliation. He holds that "Yolnu...have almost lost control of their lives and living environment as the dominant culture has moulded them to fit its own reality"; that this loss of control underscores a host of problems plaguing Yolnu communities; and that it is only via the restoration of Yolnu self-control that these problems can be redressed (2000, p.220). This contention has a dual implication; one, that assimilatory approaches to 'working with' Aboriginal people *creates* rather than solves problems, and two, that the restitution of Aboriginal autonomy is an essential aspect of reconciling differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, and of establishing a national environment in which they can live in the spirit of *unity in difference*. Trudgeon illustrates the veracity of his claims by describing his involvement in a project that successfully resolves a chronic petrol-sniffing problem amongst Yolnu youth.

After being asked by Yolnu elders to help with the petrol-sniffing problem, Trudgeon begins by conducting extensive research into the history of petrol-sniffing and petrol-sniffing programs, thus establishing a broad-spectrum picture of the situation. Hence, he first utilises his Balanda research skills to collect, collate and assess information which later plays a central role in facilitating clearer communication between all parties involved.

²⁵ Gawirrin Gumana is a Yolgnu lawman and a Uniting Church minister from the Gangan community in Arnhem Land, Northern Territory.

²⁶ Trudgeon (2000, p.ii) uses the designation 'Yolnu' (normally 'Yolgnu') in reference to the "Aboriginal people in north-east Arnhem land", and his spelling of the word is used throughout this section.

Significantly, his research revealed that the only successful petrol-sniffing program was one that employed a translator to facilitate communication between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants, and when this program ended, the petrol-sniffing problem returned (ibid, p.239). This information corresponded with his experience and conviction that taking the people's language seriously is "the number one thing that could help create 'Yolnu-friendly' environments" (ibid, p.226); and by taking language seriously he means that Balanda should at least communicate and work with Yolnu via an interpreter, or better still, that Balanda learn Yolnu language. Trudgeon contends that "language and worldview are inseparably linked" (ibid, p.106), therefore taking Yolnu language seriously is the gateway to understanding the Yolnu worldview. In terms of ontological reconciliation, this is a quintessential step towards *knowing the Other*, for in a bi-lingual environment, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are more fully able to understand, reconcile and benefit from their different worldviews. It also concurs with Said's (1989, p.225) assertion that remedying the blindness of the Western gaze requires 'taking the Other seriously', because the process of a non-Indigenous person learning an Indigenous language intrinsically involves taking 'the Other' seriously (i.e. seriously enough to consider learning the language), and necessitates some degree of stepping away from distanced and predetermined views of Aboriginality.

Non-Indigenous people working in Indigenous communities through the dictates of the Western gaze, are mostly under-informed or uninformed about Indigenous viewpoints, hence their programs are resultantly based on uneducated assumptions. Indeed, in his research on petrol-sniffing, Trudgeon discovers that the standard non-Indigenous response to this problem is to promote recreational programs, based on the assumption that Indigenous youth sniff petrol because they are bored. However, after discussing the problem with Yolnu petrol-sniffers, he uncovers some glaring contradictions between the Balanda 'boredom' theory, and the Yolnu perspective. For example, when he asked Yolnu youth why they sniff petrol, many gave the answer that they were emulating the "lucky" Balanda who they saw as "*rommiriw* (lawless) and *raypirri'miriw* (lacking discipline of mind, body and soul)", and they wished to "be *free* like Balanda", because "Australia is a free country" where you can

“do whatever you want” (ibid, pp.242-243). This is how they interpreted and responded to what they had learned from Balanda school teachers, and from a class trip to Singapore, where they witnessed the seeming opulence and freedom of ‘white’ society; thus, seeing their own culture as comparatively inferior and oppressive, “they were sniffing to forget who they were” (ibid, p.243). Additionally, Yolnu elders and youth did not clearly comprehend the irreparable dangers of petrol-sniffing, and believed any ill-effects could be cured by Balanda doctors. Overall, this situation is reflective of CAR’s finding in its *Final Report* that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians “are talking past each other, not with each other” (2000c, p.31), and demonstrates how easily mutual misunderstanding can occur between cultures in the absence of a ‘third space’, where each can share its worldview with the Other, and in turn, understand the Other’s worldview.

The final stage of redressing the petrol-sniffing problem involved facilitating a process of clarification and communication between Yolnu and Balanda worldviews. Being fluent in both Balanda and Yolnu language, Trudgeon was able to mediate this process, and his manner (and the nature of the process in general) exemplifies the efficacy of a dialectical and ontological approach to cross-cultural communication and project management. Firstly, the core group of Yolnu elders with whom he was working on this project, told him that they “wanted to know the *dhudi dhawu* (real, true foundational information) about petrol” (ibid, p.241), and a meeting was organised with a Balanda doctor, who through an interpreter, described the medical effects of petrol-sniffing. Consequently, the elders decided the entire Yolnu community should be similarly informed. Secondly, after Trudgeon told the Yolnu elders why their youth were sniffing petrol, they discussed at length the similarities and differences between Balanda and Yolnu law and culture, and he affirms that “much of what I learnt about Yolnu law throughout this period was totally new to me. A whole new world of codified law opened up” (ibid, p.243). On the strength of these discussions he was then more effectively able to rectify the Yolnu youth’s misconception of Balanda ‘lawlessness’ and ‘freedom’, by drawing parallels between their own social structures, and those of Balanda. For example, he explained how “Balanda young people are also forced to go to ‘ceremony’ (school) by law”, and that Balanda often work their whole lives to pay for their houses, cars

and other such items (ibid). Hence this was a process of clarifying misunderstandings while simultaneously upholding the value of Yolnu culture and law. Finally, after another meeting, it was decided by the elders to reintroduce a ceremony called *Gakawarr* long ago banished by missionaries, in which elders could teach Yolnu youth “their ancient law and the new knowledge they had learnt from the doctors and others” (ibid, p.244). With the commencement of this ceremony, petrol-sniffing stopped in the Yolnu community, never to return.

As with the NPY Women’s Council practice of *malparara* way, this occurrence clearly demonstrates that Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can work, learn and resolve problems together in effective partnerships of reciprocity. However, whereas there is a clear and necessary delineation of roles for Anangu and non-Anangu in the former case, Trudgeon portrays a situation where his knowledge of Yolnu language and culture enables a freer flow and interchange of knowledge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews. The fact that he is the only Balanda capable of communicating so effectively with Yolnu people does not diminish the value of his example; on the contrary, it provides clear evidence of what is possible in terms of facilitating mutually rewarding relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. In this case, Yolnu youth regain a sense of pride and identity in their culture; the relationship between Yolnu youth and elders is restored; an old ceremony is resurrected; a destructive petrol-sniffing problem is resolved; and the Yolnu community recovers a significant amount of control in dealing with its own affairs. On the other hand, in operating in partnership with Yolnu, Balanda workers may benefit both personally and economically, because the increase of successful outcomes resulting from such partnerships, will reduce the levels of stress experienced and money lost in misguided programs that continuously fail. Working together, both Yolnu and Balanda grow to understand each other’s culture, and are subsequently better informed and equipped to resolve problems that are largely caused by communication gaps.

Additionally, it is evident from both the Yolnu petrol-sniffing project, and the projects of *malparara* way, that interpreters can play a crucial role in fostering clear communication between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, however Trudgeon’s

prompt to take Indigenous languages seriously is a fundamental first step towards to establishing ontological reconciliation at a national level in Australia. This will be discussed more fully later, but within the framework of the Yolnu example, Trudgeon shows that any reconciliation process which does not include a non-Indigenous willingness to take Indigenous language and culture seriously, will invariably result in people ‘talking past each other’. This implies that, in its present mono-lingual form, the reconciliation process carries the seeds of its own limitations and failings, while conversely, processes whereby Indigenous and non-Indigenous people learn each other’s language and worldview, can cultivate an ontological transformation in both, which is intrinsically reconciling.

Case 3: *Versöhnung*: Reconciliation as Transformation

Although touched upon already in the above *malparara* way case, some further consideration of the process of ‘transformation’ implicit to Hegel’s concept of *Versöhnung*, will better illustrate the significance and potentiality of ontological reconciliation. Such transformation can occur in many ways, ranging from a simple adjustment of opinion as a result of attending cross-cultural education programs, through to experiences that reconfigure core characteristics of a person’s ontology. The experience of Frans Hoogland, a Dutchman living in Australia, in his relationship with Paddy Roe, a Nyigina elder and law-keeper from the Kimberley area around Broome (Western Australia), is an excellent example of the transformative capacity inherent in cross-cultural exchange and cooperation.

In 1994, while considering his responsibility for the wellbeing of his ‘country’ and the maintenance of *Bugarragarra*, “the law, the Dreaming that gave life” (Roe & Hoogland, 1999, p.24), Paddy Roe thought himself,

This is no good! How we gonna look after this country? I think I must do something. I must bring somebody to look after this country...I can’t get the Aboriginal people to come out. They come out but they like the town. All right...better I get European people to help look after the country, because they’re the people who got English...the high English, well I can’t say this

language. I must get somebody with the English that can turn things around to the government (ibid, p.17).

This thinking is that of ontological reconciliation, for it patently acknowledges the reality of distinct Indigenous and non-Indigenous social and governance systems, while also envisioning actions and channels of inter-cultural exchange that may result in outcomes of reconciliation and mutual benefit. Subsequently, Frans Hoogland was the first European approached by Paddy Roe regarding 'looking after the country'.

In order to demonstrate the profound nature of Hoogland's conceptual and ontological transformation as a result of learning from Roe, it is necessary to quote him at length. He states:

This is *living country*...In order to keep country alive, you have to experience it, you have to get the feeling for it...In order to experience this we have to walk the land. At a certain time for everybody, the land will take over. The land will take that person...When you experience this, it's like a shift in your reality...you become aware that when you're walking the path, it's coming out of you – you are connected to it. See, you are that land, and the land is you...We [Westerners] have separated from it because we are told it is separate. We made a division between the garden and people. We put people on top. We have people and then everything else...Our culture, European, Anglo-Saxon culture, we not living with the land. We living from it. We taking from it all the time. We don't give back to it. But traditional people give back to it, look after it...We're lucky we still got this culture here because we can learn from it, we can learn how to maintain it for our future...So if there's a process where we can be guided through to learn and get to the stage of making contact with the land again, we get some calling of responsibility ourself...Paddy is trying to maintain this *living country*. His idea is to have black and white walking together through this country and maintaining it and taking responsibility for it...But if you kill this country, you kill the people. We all go down together. No matter what colour we are (ibid, pp.18-28).

It is significant to note here that Hoogland is not parroting a collection of Indigenous concepts that he has learnt from Roe, but is speaking directly from his own experience. He speaks from a place that straddles both cultural worldviews, with a firm foot in each, and in doing so, he can be described as the quintessential personification of ontological reconciliation. Without abandoning his European identity, he undergoes a profound personal transformation that not only enriches the quality of his life, but also instills in him a new ontological paradigm, which enables him to intellectually, empathically and viscerally understand the Nyigina worldview. Essentially, Hoogland's transformation is a process of waking up to "that feeling of *le-an*, seeing through that feeling" (ibid, p.21), and in doing so, he is able to articulate and highlight an issue that is arguably the absolute core of contention between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians; the issue of reconciling the conflict of interests between Western land use practices, and Aboriginal practices of looking after country.

Generally speaking, the issue of reconciling Indigenous and non-Indigenous land use practices involves a dialogue between two divergent ways of comprehending, perceiving and being in the world. From a traditional Indigenous perspective, "indigenous people are the land, the land is in their bodies. They don't see any separation from it" (ibid, p.24),²⁷ while in contrast, the predominant non-Indigenous perspective is one of separation from the land. The Indian scholar-sage Sri Aurobindo (1870 – 1950) succinctly illustrates this difference in his statement that

ancient belief...saw a soul, a living godhead everywhere in the animate and in the inanimate and nothing was to its view void of a spiritual existence. The logical abstracting [Western] intellect with its passions for clean sections intermediately swept away these large beliefs as an imaginative superstition or a primitive animism and, mastered by its limited and dividing definitions, it drove

²⁷ This statement pertains mostly to Aboriginal people who maintain close links with their traditional culture, country and language. However, although many Indigenous Australians may not experience themselves 'as part of the land' in the same direct manner, particularly those growing up within a social milieu informed by the beliefs of Western ontology, the importance of maintaining ties to country and land rights is still a common issue for many urbanised Aboriginal people (i.e. see the Swan Valley Nyungah Community statement in footnote 13).

a trenchant sectional cleavage between man and animal, animal and plant, animate and inanimate being (Auroboindo, 1989, p.132).

Similarly, Strang (1997, p.290) claims that “technological ‘progress’ and growth has gathered a momentum that, inexorably, divorces people from the land, pulling threads of affective value out of the landscape and snipping away the ties that bind”. Contending with this fundamental Western belief of a separation between self and land is a vital phase in ontological reconciliation, for it is a notion born of the Western superiority complex, which perceives both land and its Indigenous inhabitants as necessarily subservient to the expansion and growth of imperial civilisation.

This is highly problematic because such a belief works in opposition to the Indigenous worldview, where autonomy, land rights and looking after country are intrinsically part of each other. Indeed, it is precisely this problem that Paddy Roe’s vision aims to rectify, by “climbing up from the ground, with European people too, because on our own we won’t be able to look after the country” (Roe & Hoogland, 1999, pp.29-30). This issue is also addressed by Aken (1998, online) who asserts that,

reconciliation means changing your ideas, your views and understandings, and accepting that there are differences...for European Australians it means moving aside to let in our agendas about ‘country’. It means accepting words that break in to the science view and bring our cultural world into the discussions. Your knowledge is important but as...scientists you need to recognise that it is not the only knowledge and world view that is important. My elders have knowledge that rivals yours and they have every right to have this respected and recognised.

Hence, in order to free reconciliation from the hobbling forces of Western self-promulgation, and to halt the wholesale pollution and destruction of Earth’s life-supporting environs, there is a need for non-Indigenous people, both individually and collectively, to be willing to resolve within themselves the encultured Manichean worldview which works to dominate and devastate the culture and country of Indigenous people. This requires non-Indigenous people to be willing to go through a learning and transformative process something akin to the one exemplified by Hoogland; and although this does not mean they must forsake their homes and lifestyles to go

walking around in the bush, it does necessitate a readiness to learn from Indigenous people in urban, rural and ‘bush’ localities.²⁸

In this regard, Paddy Roe recognised the reality that ‘white’ people cannot learn from Indigenous people, if no formal program or process existed for enabling such learning, so he developed the Lurujarri heritage trail in 1987 with the hope that “people who walk the trail learn to respect his country, and return home to be caretakers of their own country” (ibid, p.15). The Lurujarri trail is part of a larger song cycle, and over a period of several days, groups of non-Indigenous visitors walk the trail with Indigenous guides, who relate to them the stories and knowledge of that country. Hence, rather than gaining an abstract insight into Indigenous culture, as from a book, lecture or documentary, non-Indigenous visitors learn directly through walking the land, interacting with Aboriginal people, and gaining a first-hand education about Indigenous knowledge from the mouths of Indigenous people. As Hoogland (ibid, p.27) explains;

People are introduced to the song cycle through direct experience of walking and being with it, trying to understand the living quality of that country. That has to be experienced. It’s very hard to grasp that out of reading books...It’s a very personal experience.

This concept of ‘white’ people learning directly and personally from Aboriginal people barely exists (if at all) as a concrete reality in the formal reconciliation process, and is completely absent from the Howard government’s model of practical reconciliation. Yet Lurujarri’s example shows that Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures can co-exist, and maintain their respective autonomy while interacting in mutually beneficial ways. For instance, as well as being an Indigenous conduit for sharing culture and country with Europeans, walking the Lurujarri trail is also a thriving eco-tourism enterprise, and an accredited unit for students at Melbourne’s RMIT and Perth’s Notre Dame universities.

²⁸ Although Hoogland’s example demonstrates the principle of transformation in a mainly traditional setting, this can just as well occur in an urban setting. For instance, the Catholic priest Father Ted Kennedy, who lived and worked closely with Aboriginal people for 30 years in the suburb of Redfern in Sydney states that “when I got into the black world, what I discovered was so much beauty...there’s this extraordinary spirituality...and it makes me very humble, really, because I realize that I can’t step in there...All I can do is learn from them. I’m not the evangelizer. I’m the one who’s in the process of being evangelized by them” (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2006, online).

Hence, it effectively creates and operates within a 'third space' where Indigenous and non-Indigenous social institutions and world views can meet, mingle, exchange knowledge and create learning and economic opportunities that benefit both.

Finally, Roe (1983, p.1) also established the Lurujarri trail in the hope that, after walking it, 'white' people "might be able to see us better than before". In terms of the concept of ontological reconciliation, this is synonymous with the motif of 'knowing the Other' by way of transforming the Western gaze, and although it is ultimately the responsibility of non-Indigenous people to facilitate such transformation for themselves, Roe's efforts demonstrate that teaching, learning and transformation can be a joint venture, by which both cultures may gain. As implied by the concept of *Versöhnung*, transformation and reconciliation are part inextricably part of each other.

Learning Indigenous Languages: A Way Forward

The inclusion of Aboriginal languages in education frameworks is not a new idea. Indeed, bilingual education programs were implemented in many remote schools throughout Australia during the 1970s, however, rather than serving the purpose of maintaining Indigenous languages, these early ventures were based on a transition model of teaching, which intended "the eventual replacement of a student's language with a foreign language" (Fesl, 1994, p.130). Hence, Indigenous bilingual education students were first introduced to non-Indigenous schooling structures in their own language, with the larger aim of gradually working towards teaching all classes in English; and subsequently Fesl (ibid, p.133) argues that "bilingual education was to be another method in the attempt to achieve the goal of assimilation". This is a view reflecting the reality of such schooling, because government policy of the time stated that

The Australian Commonwealth Government is committed to a policy of assimilation of Aborigines into the European community. Effective and profitable assimilation requires facility in the English language, written and spoken. By an initial gaining of literacy in their own vernacular, Aborigines can achieve a quicker and greater facility in English (Harris, 1968, p.24).

Therefore, the original transition model of bilingual education was not an attempt by non-Indigenous people to better understand Indigenous people, nor an attempt to preserve Indigenous language and culture, but rather, was a patent strategy for harnessing Indigenous language as a vehicle for promoting assimilation. Consequently, a 1992 Indigenous language maintenance survey report, appropriately titled *Language and Culture – A Matter of Survival*, makes a recommendation to government to “ensure that bilingual education is clearly based on a maintenance model rather than the transfer-to-English model” (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 1992, p.xvi). This survey is conducted around the same time as the launching of the formal reconciliation process, when government rhetoric speaks of departing from previous policies and practices of assimilation, and of seemingly valuing Indigenous people, language and culture; however the reality is that the assimilation agenda simply went underground and continues to operate covertly today.²⁹

The early 1990s also saw the beginning of bicultural or two-way education. Whereas bilingual education is predominantly run by ‘white’ people within a Western schooling framework, employing Indigenous people as language assistants, bicultural or two-way education ensures that “ATSI³⁰ culture has at least equal status with white culture and language [and that] ATSI matters are taught by ATSI teachers in an ATSI way” (ibid, p.46). The rationale and necessity for this shift to an equal status bicultural education model is articulated clearly by the Yolngu school principal Mandawuy Yunupingu (1990, p.3) who states that “power in education was taken away from yolngu...How could we use yolgnu thinking if the school was run by balanda with balanda language?...we had to use English for everything...This helped the balanda maintain power”. Here Yunupingu validates the reality that an Indigenous worldview (Yolgnu thinking) can only be fully expressed in and through Indigenous language, and that ‘white’ processes of assimilation rob Indigenous people of the power to teach and maintain their language and culture. Therefore, in terms of reconciliation,

²⁹ For example, Rothwell’s (2006a, p.4) recent political analysis indicates that “in John Howard’s ministerial reshuffle, the Indigenous Affairs portfolio has been handed to the Minister for Family and Community Services – a clear sign of Canberra’s intent to ‘mainstream’ the Aboriginal world”. In other words, the Howard government’s notion of practical reconciliation is clearly underpinned by a ‘hidden’ agenda of assimilation.

³⁰ ATSI is an acronym for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

the advent of two-way education represents a progressive step towards respecting Indigenous people, and their need for some form of autonomy in order to maintain their language and culture. However, in this model the ultimate control of school curriculum still remains in the hands of 'white' people, thus Yunupingu (ibid, p.5) promotes a "both ways curriculum", which is essentially the same as two-way education in its inclusion of both "balanda and yolgnu ways", but differs in its claim for "yolgnu to have control over both sides of the curriculum". Apart from enabling Yolgnu people to teach their own language and culture, such control will also allow them to learn English in ways that meet their designated specific needs, rather than having English forced upon them in culturally irrelevant and inappropriate ways by dominant 'white' society.

This progression from transition to maintenance bilingual schooling, and then to two-way and both-way schooling, is definitely a promising trend towards non-Indigenous people taking Indigenous people, culture and languages seriously, but only to a certain point, because none of these models include programs for teaching Indigenous languages to non-Indigenous students. Indeed, although the 2005 *National Indigenous Languages Survey Report* (NILS) recommends that,

1. all Australian states and territories should consider the introduction of...an Indigenous curriculum component in state schools,
2. a national centre and regional centres would promote the feasibility and value of bilingualism and bi-literacy as alternatives to 'English only' approaches (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2005, pp.117-118);

these recommendations refer to a bilingual education for Indigenous students only. Interestingly, the report also states that exposing students to "two or more worlds of experience" (ibid, p.36) is an advantage of bilingualism, for Indigenous students are able to learn from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews, but it does not extend this advantage to non-Indigenous students. Indeed, the report makes no direct suggestion about non-Indigenous students learning Indigenous languages, which may be due to the overriding fact that in Australia

there is certainly a strong ideology of ‘monolingualism’...Under this ideology, minority languages are seen as handicapping the children of minority groups and preventing them from acquiring a valued resource (the majority language). English is prompted as ‘the power language’ which opens doors to education and employment (ibid, p.19).

Clearly then, ‘white’ people deem it unnecessary that they learn an Indigenous language. Additionally, when considering that the NELS report is undertaken as a joint venture by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages (FATSIL), it appears that the recommendations for Indigenous bilingualism only, also represents an Indigenous view. From this it could be construed that Indigenous people do not want non-Indigenous people to learn their languages, and undoubtedly this may be the case for some. However, there are many examples (including several in this paper) of Indigenous people expressing a desire and willingness to share language and culture with ‘white’ people, therefore it is more likely that the NELS authors believe it is unrealistic to seriously propose such a thing, when faced with the reality of the white superiority complex.

Although the two-way learning model does not extend to two-ways for *all* students, it does incorporate notions of teaching in culturally appropriate environments. In fact, Harris (1990, p.9) believes that the effectiveness of this model depends on “a culture domain separation in the school”, because Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures are “largely incompatible” and antithetical. This view is mirrored by the 1992 Indigenous language maintenance report, which suggests that Indigenous language and culture classes be held “in a separate domain from the white education part of the school” (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 1992, p.46), and also by Yunupingu (1990, p.5) who sees that “on the YOLGNU side, we want our children to learn yolgnu culture and history *from a yolgnu point of view*. We want restricted traditional knowledge to be taught by old men *outside* the school”. This is a particularly important matter for Indigenous people because it creates a space for them to consolidate their identity,

language and culture free of 'white' expectations and influences. Concerning this issue, Nyungar author Kim Scott believes that

in order to help strengthen Indigenous communities...we need some sort of 'gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies, a moratorium, a time of exclusion to allow communities to consolidate their heritages. After that, exchange and interaction from relatively equal positions should be possible (Scott & Brown, 2005, p.58).

Here Scott concurs with the idea of maintaining a 'separate cultural domain',³¹ but additionally, he envisions future interactions beyond this, which the two-way education model falls short of doing. For instance, in Scott's view separation is a temporary precursor to a foreseen future of equitable cultural exchange and reciprocity (ontological reconciliation), whereas the two-way teaching model maintains the *status quo* of non-Indigenous people not taking Indigenous people seriously enough to incorporate the teaching of Indigenous languages into the 'white' school curriculum. Therefore, although the two-way teaching model is not assimilatory, nor is it fully reconciliatory. Interestingly, one of the principal instigators of two-way schooling (the Gurindji elder Pincher Nyurmiyarri) saw it as an education process where "there should be a two-way flow in reciprocity and recognition of equality; a two-way exchange of knowledge" (Harris, 1990, p.13). Nyurmiyarri obviously envisioned two-way education as exactly that; a two-way exchange of knowledge, language and culture between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, but the bias of 'white' culture has mutated this into a 'one-way' two-way model, which applies only to Indigenous students.

From an ontological reconciliation perspective, the idea of non-Indigenous people learning an Aboriginal language is not only an excellent way to respect and preserve Indigenous languages, but is arguably an essential component of a sincere and equitable reconciliation process. As Duncan et al (2004, p.35) proclaims

³¹ This idea of a 'separate cultural domain' is synonymous with Langton's first category of intersubjectivity.

the key to reconciliation is understanding. Reconciliation is about understanding Indigenous cultures, understanding Indigenous customs, understanding Indigenous links with the land and understanding Indigenous history. To make reconciliation work, Australians need to understand the Indigenous story and weave it throughout the national story.

If the key to reconciliation is ‘understanding’, then the key to understanding Indigenous cultures is the learning of Indigenous languages, because as stated earlier by Trudgeon (2000, p.106), “language and worldview are inseparably linked”; and this can be established by teaching *all* students in *all* schools, both the English language *and* an Indigenous language appropriate to the region in which they live. Yet according to the NILS report, the stark reality is that “public attention to [Indigenous] languages has been sporadic, and there is little systematic study of them in any educational institution” (AIATSIS, 2005, p.19), while a 1997 national survey on Indigenous languages found that “there is no tradition of teaching any indigenous language in schools that is anywhere as extensive as the tradition and experience of teaching foreign languages, such as French” (Henderson & Nash, 1997, pp.32-33). This is particularly alarming when further considering that,

- the 1997 survey also predicts that “80 of the 90 surviving languages will be extinct within 30 to 40 years” (ibid, p.131);³²
- recent social research indicates that “the more likely a person is to endorse traditional Australian identity, the more likely they are to be...anti-Aboriginality” (Phillips, 1998, p.296); and
- “studies of popular views of Australian identity have found that they are totally devoid of reference to a relational identity with Aborigines” (Tilbury, 2000, p.83).

Apart from the dire threat to the survival of Indigenous languages, such statistics and findings bring to light a conundrum where the chasm between ‘black’ and ‘white’ Australians is sustained and perpetuated by the latter having no institutional medium for understanding and relating with the former. Hence any so-called reconciliation process that

³² This projection is corroborated by the NILS finding that from 1986 – 2001 “there has been a steady decline in the proportion of Indigenous people speaking an Indigenous language (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2005, p.85).

allows Indigenous languages to vanish, and promotes an Australian identity that is fundamentally devoid of a 'black' worldview, is by default a process of assimilation.

Furthermore, the above findings validate the concern expressed by Ngaanyatjarra elders (and undoubtedly many other Indigenous Australians) that "integration into mainstream Australian society destroys their language, destroys their law, destroys, in fact, everything special about them" (Rothwell, 2006b, p.23); a view also held by Harris (1990, p.10) who contends that

for remote Aborigines to adopt all the shared overarching values such as democracy and freedom of the individual, an economic system based on private enterprise/state initiatives, a legal system which protects the rights of individuals, and the English language, listed...as being the basis of a common Australian culture, means giving up much of what makes them distinctly Aboriginal.

This emphasises the imperative need for the reconciliation process to include measures that will ensure the preservation of those Indigenous languages that remain, for government policies and 'white' attitudes that result in the diminishment or loss of Indigenous language, culture and identity, are intrinsically antithetical to reconciliation. However, the Federal government's push towards mainstreaming Indigenous people works against this need, and its model of so-called practical reconciliation is part and parcel of an assimilatory endeavour that is effectively a highway to the eventual loss of Indigenous language, and subsequently, a considerable loss of Indigenous culture and identity. Again, a logical counter-measure to this impending and irreversible tragedy is the mandatory inclusion of a regionally appropriate Indigenous language in the curriculum of state and private schools. It is through the education system that much of a child's worldview and identity is formed, and the inclusion of Indigenous languages in the school curriculum will provide 'white' students with an increased understanding of Indigenous people, and is thus a powerful reconciliatory agent.

Although the NILS report states that such teaching programs are 'sporadic', there are examples throughout Australia which illustrate the efficacy of teaching Indigenous culture and language to non-Indigenous students. For example, Perth's Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) has published an education package titled *Exploring*

Woodlands with Nyongars: Teaching Activities for Upper Primary School, which was created in response to the situation that

the general understanding of Aboriginal culture within Australia is poor. If reconciliation between Nyongar and Wadjela (non-Aboriginal people) is to occur, then this lack of understanding must be redressed. This package aims to help in this process and to encourage empathy with other cultures. A second and equally important intent is to encourage people to explore Aboriginal culture and understand its relationship to the land. Our present land use practices cannot sustain, in the medium to long term, a high quality of life...While we cannot return to past ways, and would not want to if we could, past successes and failures are an important guide for present and future actions. In this sense, for our self-interest, we should examine and learn from traditional Aboriginal culture (Wallace & Huston, 1996, p.2).

The package also subscribes to the view that “different languages provide valuable insights into the way humans think, and the way they perceive the world. Therefore studying different languages may help us to understand how humans think” (ibid, p.104); hence this project is highly representative of an ontological or dialectical approach to reconciliation, for it aims to help ‘white’ students to understand and empathise with Indigenous cultures. In recognising that ‘white’ Australia can learn from Indigenous knowledge systems, it also upholds the notion of equitable reciprocity, which logically entails some degree of willingness from non-Indigenous people to rectify what Kennedy (2000, p.107) refers to as “the many prejudices and smug complacencies of white supremacy”. Similarly, CALM's Indigenous Heritage Unit (2006, online) offers a variety programs and excursions to Perth's primary and secondary schools, which introduce students to Nyungar culture and language,³³ and there are numerous other examples of teaching Indigenous language and culture to ‘white’ students in Australian schools (see Appendix: Table 1).

³³ During the 2004 – 2005 financial year the Unit presented 67 programs to a total of 6, 190 students, which indicates that there is a noteworthy level of interest amongst Perth's schools for teaching non-Indigenous students something about Nyungar culture and language. I obtained these statistics through a personal communication with Denise Griffith, the Project Officer for CALM's Indigenous Heritage Unit.

Although the existence of such classes is a promising development in terms of facilitating reconciliation and understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, in the bigger picture, they are isolated and sporadic occurrences, and thus insufficient to change mainstream ‘white’ prejudices. However, it is clearly the case that relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians can be improved to the degree that each learns the other’s language. This not only applies to contemporary cases, such as those presented above, but has held true since the time of colonisation. For example, during the founding years of the Swan River Colony as tensions arose between settlers and the local Nyungar population, the colonist Robert Menli Lyon wrote that “their acquisition of English and the publication of a vocabulary of their language led for a time to the most friendly intercourse between them and settlers” (Carter citing Lyon, 2006, p.37). It is therefore apparent that reconciliation requires a general willingness from non-Indigenous Australians to learn the language of the Indigenous people upon whose land they live; and the formation of government policy that implements the mandatory teaching of both English and Indigenous languages in Australian schools is a way to do this nationally.³⁴

The appropriate³⁵ inclusion of Indigenous languages as a compulsory component of primary and secondary school curriculum would constitute a dynamic step forward in promoting ‘unity in difference’, for it addresses the key issues pertaining to both a practical and ontological reconciliation process. First and foremost, such a nation-wide education

³⁴ In 2004, the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) (2004a, online) instigated its Aboriginal Languages Policy by which “a new Kindergarten to Year 10 syllabus will be introduced from the beginning of 2005 - enabling students in the State to study an Aboriginal language through to Year 10”. However, the policy’s primary purpose is to “assist Aboriginal people and communities across NSW to revitalise traditional languages” (DAA, 2004b, online), thus it is chiefly a language maintenance model. The policy also posits the secondary objective “that the NSW population have an understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal languages as an integral part of Aboriginal Culture and the Australian heritage” (ibid), and although this is ostensibly a strong reconciliatory gesture, it is vaguely presented near the end of the policy document, and does not directly state that ‘white’ students must learn an Aboriginal language. Hence, the Australian government (State or Federal) is yet to implement an Indigenous language teaching policy that equally applies to non-Indigenous students.

³⁵ It is not possible to introduce a uniform formula for teaching Indigenous languages to non-Indigenous students, because teaching programs need to be *appropriate* to the circumstances in each school and language region. For instance, programs need to consider factors such as the extent to which the language has survived, the number of available speakers to teach it, the ratio of Indigenous to non-Indigenous students, and hence the culturally correct way for teaching each class. Indeed, Father Ted Kennedy’s example (see footnote 28) shows that even in an urban setting where an Indigenous language has been fragmented or lost, there is still much ‘white’ people can learn about (and from) Indigenous people and culture.

process would provide the (presently absent) avenue by which non-Indigenous Australians may come to understand an Indigenous worldview, and to see the Other from the Other's perspective, rather than through the eyes of the Manichean Western gaze. This could also turn the tides of the predominant non-Indigenous assimilatory view that reconciliation means Aboriginal people should reconcile themselves to 'white' society, because the stereotyping, conjecture and ignorance which inform such a view, can be largely corrected via a national language education process. Additionally, the learning of an Indigenous language would enable non-Indigenous people to understand that Indigenous autonomy is essential to reconciliation, for autonomy represents the ontological crucible in which culture is developed and maintained. Learning language also establishes a 'third space' in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural ontologies can meet and overlap; where each may be stimulated to broaden and transform its worldview through exposure to the Other's way of seeing and being in the world. The subsequent increase in a 'white' understanding of the 'black' situation and worldview, would probably also facilitate a concomitant increase in 'white' empathy towards Aboriginal sufferings, thus issues of Aboriginal dispossession and disadvantage are more likely to be redressed. In terms of the earlier adaptation of Langton's 'categories of intersubjectivity', the teaching of Indigenous languages to non-Indigenous people can be the medium through which the present formal reconciliation process (the third category dominated by the unresolved non-Indigenous superiority complex), may graduate to the fourth category of ontological reconciliation. On the whole, the learning of each other's language can establish the ontological common ground upon which Oodgeroo's 'dark and white' may shake hands in the spirit of reciprocity, equanimity, mutual understanding and mutual respect.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this proposal of an ontological approach to reconciliation aims to create an environment of mutual interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, which transcends and transforms the present stand-off between the non-Indigenous ‘reconciliation as assimilation’ and the Indigenous ‘reconciliation as autonomy’. It does not claim to be an immediate panacea to the many conflicts, issues and divides between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, but it does demonstrate that innovative new approaches to reconciliation can be conceptualised, and therefore have the potential to be actualised.

In this endeavour, ontological reconciliation aligns more with Hegel’s concept of *Versöhnung* (transformative reconciliation), than with the tussles, trade-offs and compromises that comprise Australia’s present formal reconciliation process. As such, the ‘reconciliation’ established via an ontological approach, is more an outcome than an aim. In progressively generating a ‘third space’ for dialectical exchange between cultures - a space for finding *unity in difference* through *knowing the self* and *knowing the other* - this proposal also seeks to gradually create a social atmosphere within which Indigenous reconciliation needs, such as land rights, reparation and autonomy, will be acknowledged, understood and taken seriously by non-Indigenous Australians. Furthermore, if reconciliation requires non-Indigenous people to understand and take Indigenous people seriously, then what better way to fulfil both of these requirements than for non-Indigenous people to be willing to learn an Indigenous language? Finally, although this proposal primarily focuses on the need for contending with the Manichean Western gaze, this is an initial necessity only. Ideally, the long-term vision is to see ontological reconciliation adopted as a national medium for fostering processes of mutable and beneficial reciprocity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Although it is arguably naïve to attempt to draw non-Indigenous society down from the bastions of its self-proclaimed superiority, to the common and equal ground of ‘unity in difference’, such an attempt must be made if any meaningful process of reconciliation is to

transpire in Australia. Indeed, Oodgeroo's envisioned handshake takes place between 'dark and white upon common ground', with each reaching across to the other in equality, friendship and reconciliation. However, the non-Indigenous assimilatory approach to reconciliation paints a very different picture, with 'white' condescendingly reaching down in contrived benevolence to take the up-stretched hand of 'dark', and gradually lead them from the inferiority of their primitive past, into the Enlightened halls of 'white' supremacy. An ontological approach to reconciliation may rectify this present imbalance, and exemplifies practical reconciliation in a complete and genuine sense – a practical reconciliation that works for both cultures, and which both cultures work for.

APPENDIX

Glossary of Acronyms

AIATSIS	Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
ATSI	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
CALM	Department of Conservation and Land Management
CAR	Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation
CAVR	Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation in East Timor
CRANA	Council of Remote Area Nurses of Australia
DAA	Department of Aboriginal Affairs
FATSIL	Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages
NILS	National Indigenous Languages Survey
NPY	Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council
RCADC	Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody

Table 1 – List of Australian schools teaching Indigenous language and culture classes.

School	State	Details
East Manjimup Primary School	WA	“ <i>Many Under the One</i> cultural diversity learning program which includes learning Noongar language and history” (Department of Indigenous Affairs, 2004, online).
Lance Holt Primary School	WA	“The class investigates the origins of the Noongar names and makes links between the myths and legends and the geographical features of the areas between Fremantle Harbour and the Narrows Bridge” (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2006a, online).
Lockridge Primary School	WA	Teaching Nyungar language 1995 (Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1995, online).
Melville Senior High School	WA	Plans to introduce “Noongar language classes” in 2005 (Melville Senior High School, 2004, p.1).
Northam Senior High School	WA	Nyungar language and culture classes (Northam Senior High School, 2004, online).
Quinn's Beach Primary School	WA	“Promote respect and awareness of Noongar language and culture” (Quinn's Beach Primary School, 2003, online).
Willagee Primary School	WA	Learning Nyungar language 2004 (Melville Times, 2004, p. 6).
Virginia State School	QLD	“Study of Aboriginal Dreaming stories through language activities” (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2006b, online).
Tarwin Lower Primary School	VIC	Learning about Indigenous art and dance, using Indigenous language (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2006c, online).
Port Lincoln High School	SA	“For students to develop an awareness of law and democracy with a specific focus on justice and Aboriginal law”. Includes Indigenous language (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2006d, online).
Claremont College	TAS	“Allows students to experience Aboriginal people's writing, poetry, film, and language” (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2006e, online).

This list is not a complete record of all Australian schools that teach (or at least introduce) an Indigenous language to non-Indigenous students, however it fulfils the objective of demonstrating that such classes exist.

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