TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY COLLOQUIUM: CULTURAL AND COMMUNICATIONS STUDIES SECTION

Reconciliation as Public Culture: Taking Cultural Studies Beyond Ghassan Hage's 'White Nationalist'

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This year we celebrate not only the twentieth anniversary of the Culture and Communication Studies section but also the twentieth anniversary of Ghassan Hage's *White nation*—his ethnographic account of what he calls the white national subject.[i] My paper is an attempt to build on Ghassan's work by considering research published since his book. I will argue that in the public culture of Australia, Indigenous people and Indigenous things are now prolifically affirmed. Before I explore this Indigenous-affirmative culture, let me explicitly exclude two topics: the extent and nature of racism against Indigenous Australians; and Indigenous Australians' experiences of contemporary Australian society.

The Indigenous-affirmative public culture is evident in the most recent of Reconciliation Australia's biennial surveys. The *2018 Australian Reconciliation Barometer* asked non-Indigenous respondents whether the following 'events/changes' would 'celebrate' Australia's 'national unity and diversity'.[ii]

- 78 per cent supported 'official ANZAC Day ceremonies to honour Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander AND non-Indigenous soldiers';
- 72 per cent supported 'acknowledgement of the Traditional Custodians of the land at Australian Citizenship ceremonies';
- 71 per cent agree with 'establishing a national day of significance that celebrates Indigenous histories and cultures'[iii]

- 69 per cent supported 'official dual naming of significant sites in Australia, using English *and* Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander names (for example, Uluru/Ayers Rock)';
- 60 per cent supported 'having Welcome to Country addresses at major sporting events (for example, at the Melbourne Cup, International sporting matches, etc)'.
- The Reconciliation Barometer shows these proportions to have risen between 2014 and 2018.[iv]

This Indigenous-affirmative formation within Australian culture is not what you would expect after reading Ghassan Hage's *White Nation*. Ghassan evoked the white national subject mostly in terms of its unconscious and conscious stance towards the non-English-speaking and non-white migrant. He also devoted a few words to the ways that Indigenous Australians figure in the white nationalist imaginary. He wrote that the 'national will' was formed historically as 'the Australian colonizing national will' when it 'exterminated and caged Aboriginal people'; this white national will 'started valuing [Indigenous Australians] when they no longer constituted a communal counter-will in themselves'.[v]

Since *White Nation*, observers of Australian culture have noted the strength of an articulate anti-racist political identity in Australia.[vi] If the anti-racist Australian subject that these authors have described is as real as the white national subject evoked by Hage, then non-Indigenous ('white') Australian subject positions are heterogeneous, and we should not suppose that there is a modal or typical non-Indigenous disposition towards Indigenous difference. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu to propose that non-Indigenous opinion and feeling is arrayed within a 'field' enables us to reconsider a theoretical feature of *White Nation*: Hage's supposition of single model of white subjectivity, a *typical* white Australian consciousness. I propose that we conceive non-Indigenous thinking about the Indigenous to be a field of different white subject position. I call this field 'the reconciliation orthodoxy'.

Before describing the structure of that field, let's recall some steps in Australia's public culture that have led to the formation of the 'reconciliation orthodoxy':

The 1960s: politically significant public sympathy for the argument that Australians should recognise customary land rights, mandating land rights and native title legislation since 1966, in every Australian jurisdiction.

1973: the formation of the Aboriginal Arts Board within the new Australia Council

1973: the Australian government's renunciation of 'assimilation' as the goal of Australian policy and the promotion of 'self-determination'.

1980s: much debate, during the planning of the 1988 Bicentennial, about how the national story should be told. During this debate, revisionist scholarship featuring the violent conquest of Indigenous Australians became widely accepted.

1988-91: the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody turned from an inquiry into possible criminal liability for specific fatalities into a comprehensive, researched account of colonisation's legacy of inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

1990-91: the formation of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, and the initiation of a civic program that interpellated Australians as either Indigenous or non-Indigenous and enjoined them to work on their relationships with the kind of Australians they were not.

1992: The High Court recognises Indigenous customary law as a source of law in Australia. Keating's Redfern speech.

1995-97: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's *Bringing Them Home* ('Stolen Generations') report and subsequent 'sorry' movement and debate.

2000-2001: Centenary of Federation as a state-endorsed moment of reflection on the nation's past and future.

2001-present: Reconciliation Australia's promotion of Reconciliation Action plans and innovations in Australian rituals.

Since the 1990s the State has promoted certain terms for understanding what it is to be 'Australian'. Being 'Australian' now includes being implicated, in some way, in a history acknowledged as colonial and in a future seen as continuing efforts of reconciliation. In promoting this way of thinking about Australia the State has recruited powerful civil society allies. Nowadays, it is a public relations necessity to be seen to be aligned with reconciliation and to find something positive to say about Indigenous people and things.

In a paper co-authored with Anna Pertierra I have attempted to formulate this 'reconciliation orthodoxy' as consisting of three points.[vii]

- That in Australian society there are two kinds of people 'Indigenous' and 'non-Indigenous'.
- That the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous is a problem of nationhood, requiring Australians' ongoing attention.
- That giving such attention includes affirming the Indigenous as valued.

For this three-part framework to become so widely accepted as common sense there has to be room within it for variation of opinion. Anna and I certainly found variation of opinion in our interview data. But what we also found was a high level of reflexivity and wariness in what people said about the Indigenous; interviewees seemed aware that they are taking a position within a field of possible positions. Accordingly, we argue that this three-part structure defines a field in which self-conscious position-taking is possible. Here is the reconciliation orthodoxy again, showing how it is a field open to position-taking.

- That in Australian society there are two kinds of people 'Indigenous' and 'non-Indigenous'. (**Australians take positions on who is truly 'Indigenous'**.)
- That the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous is a problem of nationhood, requiring Australians' ongoing attention. (**Australians contest how the 'problem' should be understood and what 'solutions' are required**.)

- 'That giving such attention includes affirming the Indigenous as valued. (Australians disagree about the terms of positive valuation, but it has become difficult to say that the Indigenous has no value at all.)

To conceptualize 'white Australian' subjectivity as a field in which certain ideas are accepted and others are open to variation and conscious dispute seems to Anna and I to make better sense of our interview data than Hage's postulation of a typical white Australian subject position. Some of our interview subjects seemed to value Indigenous Australians as what Hage calls 'a communal counter-will in themselves'. That is, we think that at least some of our non-Indigenous interviewees now see themselves as answerable to Indigenous Australians' demand for respect. The idea that white subjectivity is a field of variation also helps to make sense of

another feature of our interview subjects: their observable reflexivity. Our interviewees at times consciously situated themselves within what they understood to be a field structured by two axes of difference: the Indigenous/non-Indigenous difference and the difference between white disrespect/ignorance and white respect/openness.

If the reconciliation orthodoxy is part of Australia's 'public culture', then we should recall what Donald Horne, chair of the Australia Council from 1985 to 1990, said about 'public culture' in *Ideas for a Nation*.[viii] By 'public culture' Horne meant the languages, images and myths that 'purport to resemble the national life of that state.'[ix] He recalled that the challenge to rethink Australia's national identity had begun in the 1960s, 'related to the emergence for the first time in Australia of significant groups of highly educated people who wanted to define Australia as a place that had room for them.'[x] This ferment included not only claims by the highly educated but also 'a movement, run by the Aborigines themselves, attempting to define Australia as though the blacks were part of it', rather than a mere 'disposal problem' for the nation.[xi] By the late 1980s debate about Australia's Bicentennial (1988) had raised the issue of how a settler colonial culture can honour a persistent Indigenous presence.

By describing the 'reconciliation orthodoxy' as a structure within which variation of opinion is possible, we have attempted to accommodate an important theoretical point made by Donald Horne. A 'public culture', as Horne presents the concept, is not a true representation of the complexities of society to which it tendentiously refers; rather, as a representation it is 'a form of limiting and organising "realities". By its very nature it must be "representationally repressive" and it imposes 'a coercive monopoly on what purports to be national life and public opinion.'[xii]

The 'reconciliation orthodoxy' is 'representationally repressive' in at least two ways. First, the Indigenous/non-Indigenous binary is not the only binary that figures in Australians' talk about themselves. Other salient binaries are: male/female; immigrant/native-born; English-speaking/non-English-speaking; Christian/Muslim; well-off/struggling. Each of these binaries is the vocabulary for a certain theme of talk about social justice and national unity. James Jupp has argued that it would be possible to make too much of the Indigenous/non-Indigenous binary: 'despite the good intentions of those involved' it is not 'sensible to divide the population between Aborigines…and "settlers or invaders"….This suggests that an English-speaking, thoroughly Australian Aborigine living in Blacktown is in some way more legitimately distinctive than a Macedonian living in Thomastown or a Vietnamese living in Cabramatta. To divide Australians in this simplistic way devalues the significance of a wide variety of cultures.' I agree. However, I also note Jupp's additional remark: 'Yet some form of reconciliation with Australia inevitably will have to be made and…Australian identity has only slowly confronted the lie of its foundation – *terra nullius*.'[xiii] Here Jupp is pointing to the established moral and civic pertinence of this representationally repressive binary.

Second, the 'reconciliation orthodoxy' is 'representationally repressive' in that it puts pressure on non-Indigenous Australians to be careful, self-censoring, and it might even confuse them. When Anna and I analysed 'Australian Cultural Field' interviews with non-Indigenous Australians about their tastes we were struck by the wariness of many people's words about Indigenous matters. In their carefulness and reflexivity people also made reference to what they see as recent and fast-moving changes in their own understanding of Indigeneity.

However, we should not assume that a 'representationally repressive' public culture is politically reactionary. Horne assured his readers that the themes of a public culture can be politically progressive: they 'can show people how to act.'[xiv] Indeed Horne wrote in 1989

that 'among non-Aboriginal Australians sympathies for Aborigines appeared in the public culture well ahead of sympathy amongst most of the people.'[xv] Within the reconciliation orthodoxy there are ideological resources for a progressive politics, such as the campaign for constitutional recognition and a more respectful response to the 2017 Uluru Statement from the Heart.

Notes

i.   Ghassan Hage White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society. Sydney: Pluto Press 1998

ii.   The 2018 Barometer surveyed a national sample of 497 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and 1995 Australians in the general community across all states and territories. Both the general community and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander samples were weighted to be representative in terms of age, gender and location (state and territory populations), as per Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016 Census data. Participants received a small incentive for their participation. The general community sample of 1995 completed the survey between 16-30 July 2018, and is associated with a margin of error of +/-2.2% at the 95% confidence interval. This means that if a result of 50% is found, we can be 95% confident the real result is between 47.8% and 52.2%. Polity Research and Consulting 2018 Australian Reconciliation Barometer Sydney, 208, p.6.

iii.   But not to replace Australia Day, as 72 per cent of the General Community sample wants January 26 to continue as 'Australia Day' (Polity Research and Consulting 2018 Australian Reconciliation Barometer Sydney, 2018, p.94)

iv.   Polity Research and Consulting 2018 Australian Reconciliation Barometer Sydney, 2018, p.94

v.   Hage White nation, p.111.

vi.   Sara Ahmed 'The politics of bad feeling' Australian Critical and Whiteness Studies Association Journal 1, 2005: 72–85; Chilla Bulbeck 'The "white worrier" in South Australia: Attitudes to multiculturalism, immigration and reconciliation' Journal of Sociology 40(4), 2004: 341–361; Kelly Jean Butler Witnessing Australian stories: history, testimony and memory in contemporary culture New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers 2013; Haydie Gooder and Jane M Jacobs 'On the border of the unsayable: the apology in postcolonizing Australia', Interventions, 2(2), 2000: 229-247; Kowal, Emma 'Time, indigeneity and white anti-racism in Australia' The Australian Journal of Anthropology 26(1), 2015: 94-111;Emma Kowal Trapped in the gap: doing good in Indigenous Australia New York: Berghahn Books 2015; Tess Lea Bureaucrats and bleeding hearts: Indigenous health in northern Australia Sydney: UNSW Press 2008; Yin Paradies 'Attitudinal barriers to reconciliation' in Sarah Maddison, Tom Clark and Ravi de Costa eds The limits of settler –colonial reconciliation Singapore: Springer 2016, 103-118

vii.   Tim Rowse and Anna Pertierra 'From white nation to white caution: non-Indigenous reflections on Indigenous difference' in Journal of Australian Studies 2019: DOI: 10.1080/14443058.2019.1640769. The interview data were gathered in 2016-2017 by the researchers associated with the Australian Cultural Fields Project (ARC DP140101970)

viii.   Donald Horne Ideas for a nation Sydney: Pan Books 1989.

ix.   'Ideas', p.81

x.   'Ideas', p.36

xi.   'Ideas', pp.39, 89

xii.   'Ideas', p.82

xiii.   James Jupp 'Identity' in Richard Nile ed Australian Civilisation Melbourne: Oxford University Press 1994, 74-92, p.88

xiv.   'Ideas', p.82

xv.   'Ideas', p.191