

Tim Rowse Response to David Trigger

Since the bipartisan *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act 1991*, Australians have been experimenting with a new civic vocabulary of 'reconciliation' – a set of terms that expresses what Australians have in common while simultaneously acknowledging and honouring Indigenous Australian difference. Our criticism of the limitations of 'reconciliation' has to be rooted in a charitable assessment of a settler colonial society's efforts to do something which it is difficult for a settler colonial society to do: to work continually on the structures and ideologies of 'co-existence'. I get weary of the commentary – which effortlessly qualifies one as a critic - that says that this project is always already a failure. (The most common critical word is 'limited', as if politics could ever yield a result that was not 'limited'.) As I understand David's question, it is: can we find in the implementation of the *Native Title Act* (with its insistence on 'distinction') the terms in which to re-imagine co-existence?

That is, David is calling the attention of Australian anthropology to an object of study for which I will suggest a label: the practices and representations of co-existence. In David's invitation to an anthropology of co-existence, 'empathy' is both an object of study and a method of study.

Co-existence is an intrinsic feature of any settler colonial society. Co-existence is not equal or symmetrical. The settler colonial state can lawfully extinguish native title, but those who carry the authority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander customary law cannot extinguish titles authorised by the settler colonial state.

The fact that co-existence is lived without symmetry or equality does not tell us much about how it is experienced. That is what David is inviting us to investigate. David is drawing our attention to changes in the settler-colonists' experience of place.

These changes in settler colonial sensibility have been accelerated by the proliferation of native title, for native title reframes places as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander places.

What can explain the fact that such a large proportion of the Australian land and sea mass has so rapidly come under some kind of Indigenous ownership since the 1960s? One explanation dwells on the weaknesses of the conceded Indigenous titles. That is, one could argue that little of substance has been conceded. Another explanation – which I have explored in *Indigenous and*

other Australians since 1901 (2017) – is that Australians have been predisposed by certain geographical facts and by certain ideologies to concede much title.

Whatever our explanation for the spread of Indigenous title, we now live with an extensive and growing Indigenous Estate, and David wants to know whether settler-colonial relations with land and place [quote] ‘...bear any resemblance to, or at least have any possible engagement with, key elements of Indigenous native title connections.’

Let us distinguish David’s two questions: ‘resemblance to’ and ‘engagement with’. Much of his paper pursues ‘resemblance’, and he thoughtfully teases out eight possible planes of resemblance between non-Indigenous and Indigenous senses of identity with place. He draws attention to the word ‘native’; it is one of the most complicated words in Australian English. As a noun and an adjective, ‘native’ takes up 9 pages of William Ramson’s *The Australian National Dictionary* (1988).

When David raises the possibility of non-resemblance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous senses of place, he discusses spirituality, gender and localism/cosmopolitanism as possible planes of non-resemblance. I will make only two remarks, here. Perhaps David understates the extent to which Indigenous Australians are Christian. Of course, there are many different ways of being Christian. On gender, I have the impression that gender equality is a strongly held value among the urban Indigenous middle class and perhaps beyond it, as we will see when we start co-designing the Voice or Voices.

After his thoughtful discussion of resemblance and non-resemblance between non-Indigenous and Indigenous senses of belong to places, David has little to say about ‘any possible engagement with’. I want to suggest that this is a distinct topic for an anthropology of co-existence: two sensibilities that are very different may nonetheless find stable terms of ‘engagement’. One party can engage with another through transactions that require little convergence of outlook between the two parties. I once argued that the rationing relationship was an institutionalised colonial transaction that enabled the reproduction of different ways of inhabiting a shared place.

In the native title era, land use and land title are transactable objects. That is, the *Native Title Act* enables two parties to make certain land-uses into a commodity for exchange. Australia may become a land of many negotiated deals, without the parties to those deals coming to resemble each other in

their sense of place. Engagement of the deal-making kind does not require cultural convergence; all it requires is an impersonal medium of exchange: money. Some of the most enduring structures of co-existence may turn out to be quite impersonal, accommodating persistent cultural 'non-resemblance'.

In the final section of his paper David confronts the presumption of radical alterity. In the context of Australian humanities scholarship, presumptions of radical alterity, of ontological difference and of settler colonial deracination have become, for some, a kind of political commitment. David's exploration of non-Indigenous/Indigenous resemblance and 'overlap' is a knowing challenge to that presumption. The presumption of radical alterity may be stronger in the academy than in any other domain of Australian society. Much of the 'abrasive cultural politics' to which he refers is taking place in Australia's universities, as a growing number of Indigenous scholars mobilise their versions of standpoint theory to stake their claims for resources within the social sciences and humanities departments and within non-fiction publishing.

Of course, we cannot do without a sense of the distinct and unique heritage of Indigenous Australia. The Native Title/land rights apparatus has required us to develop notions of distinct rights, and this is necessary and unavoidable in order to give back as much Indigenous estate as politics will allow (and this turns out to be quite a lot). However, such languages of distinction sit uneasily within a vocabulary that is oriented to expressing what Australians have in common. David's paper is about the potential for developing a language that publicly acknowledges the resemblances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous commitments to places. People may question whether, by doing that, David is subverting the discourse of difference, which they see as politically necessary and legally encoded.

So it is important to distinguish (as Kevin Smith's commentary on David's paper did) the project of land and sea recovery – where the assertion of difference and first-ness is fundamental – and the project of co-existing once there has been some formalisation of Indigenous entitlement. Two different projects of 'modernity' are in play here: the Weberian rationalisation of social life (the rationalisation and juridification of custom, the impersonality of contractual relations) and the Durkheimian (the formation of mythical charters of national community). The anthropology of coexistence has to be about both ways of being 'modern', and David's lecture has invited anthropologists who have been

primarily involved in the former to acknowledge the necessity and the research potential of the latter.