

Resonating Opinions and Identities: Using Poetics Methods to Explore Non-Aboriginal Attitudes towards Aboriginal Reconciliation in Australia

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Abstract

This article reports findings from an ongoing research project into non-Aboriginal attitudes towards Aboriginal reconciliation in Australia and Canada. The two countries share important details in their histories of mistreatment of Indigenous peoples as well as in their postcolonial attempts at reconciliation. Our research uses focus groups and an expressly poetic framework of analysis to explore quotidian or “less public” discourses about Aboriginal reconciliation in both countries. The public poetics approach used here lends itself to simultaneous exploration of both referential and textural elements of participant discourses within the focus groups. This leads to the finding that non-Aboriginal people in both countries conceive of aboriginal reconciliation as a highly transactional phenomenon – whose leading parties are a non-Indigenous “us” and an Indigenous “them” in each case.

Keywords

Aboriginal reconciliation, focus groups, public poetics, “Stolen Generation,” Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Indian Residential Schools system

1. Introduction

This paper arises from a collaborative project of research, exploring non-Aboriginal attitudes towards national agendas of reconciliation with Aboriginal peoples. To date, the research has focused on Australia and Canada, two settler colonial countries in the pan-Pacific region. Since the 1980s, successive Australian and Canadian governments have adopted Aboriginal “reconciliation” as a value to underlay national policy frameworks aimed at redressing entrenched Indigenous disadvantage (Pratt). Australia and Canada are also two countries whose federal parliaments endorsed resolutions of apology during 2008, apologising to their Indigenous populations for large-scale policies of

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forced family separation. In Australia's case this was the "Stolen Generations"; for Canada it was the Indian Residential Schools system. The details of these somewhat-parallel histories are both hotly disputed and unevenly known or understood across both countries.

The background purpose of our research project is to gauge the actual and the potential ways in which non-Indigenous settler populations identify with, against, or even without reference to the reconciliation agendas pursued by their respective governments. To explore these identifications, we hold that a research approach which focuses on the poetics of discourses – the ways in which people use discursive formations to exchange and discuss their experiences and beliefs – is particularly valuable. For Aboriginal reconciliation in Australia and Canada, as for public reconciliation processes in other places, much of the business of reconciliation relies on text and talk. In particular, it has revolved around discussion about what happened in the past and what contemporary Australians or Canadians should do in the present. At times it has generated extensive discussion about policies for recognition, reparation, restitution (Barkan xii, 414). That is to say, in these settler-societies, reconciliation is discursive. We argue that discourse leads reconciliation processes. Its raw materials are the discourses of individuals' testimony, of historical research, of legal scholarship, submissions to governments, of political debate, and so on. Its products are equally textual, both written and performed: media reportage, political and public debate, and usually quasi-judicial reports that attempt to summarise what happened and make recommendations about the future. Often these products call for the funding and implementation of other policies that are in turn heavily reliant on discourse, such as new curricula or public education strategies.

For example, in 2012, the YouMeUnity panel tasked with advising the Australian government about the constitutional recognition of Indigenous peoples – stemming from an election promise made by the government – recommended various constitutional reforms. However these were to be preceded, the panel insisted, by "a properly resourced public education and awareness program" (Recommendation E "on the process for the referendum"), which might encompass all forms of print and broadcast media and new communications technologies, as well as contemplating such collective discussion forums as a citizens' assembly (Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Indigenous Australians xix). Similarly, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, established to address the legacy of Indian Residential Schooling and make recommendations in light of that history, has in its recently-released Interim Report, calling for a nation-wide review of existing school curricula and the preparation of appropriate up-to-date materials for use in schools. It also called on provincial and territorial

governments to develop public education campaigns together with the TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 28, Recommendations 4-6).

Such recommendations make a fundamental assumption: that if contemporary Australians and Canadians – primarily non-Indigenous peoples – are informed about the histories of injustice and exclusion of Indigenous peoples, they will support measures of justice and inclusion. Our research suggests that the targets of these recommendations often do know certain things and do hold certain values. We are seeing this in the ways that people talk about these issues when given the chance. But this has profound implications – hitherto not appreciated – for the ways in which public education and engagement would have to proceed. Just accepting these general observations entails that reconciliation involves the arbitration of highly ineffable concerns, including questions about the textures of reconciliation discourses at least as much as about their procedural logics.

While plenty of commentary on the procedure and ideational “content” of reconciliation discourses exists, work on their stylistic aspects, texture, or (in a word) poetics is more limited. There is a somewhat-established literature in the somewhat-intersecting field of testimonial poetics (Hartman; Hope and Eriksen; Keuss; Toker; Yacobi), although this field has been dominated by testimonies from the Nazi and Stalinist atrocities of the twentieth century. Allowing some generalisation between the fields, however, we would caution that treating the poetics as a valid concern can stand as a form of lip-service to the subjectivity of witness and survivor experience. Importantly, the better scholarship goes beyond this, to consider critical questions of voice, genre and even prosody.

How might such an approach mesh, then, with research that focuses on the poetics of people whose experiences have not been defined by direct or in-family narratives of witness and survival? How could research engage poetically with those people whose structural relationship to Aboriginal reconciliation is most saliently defined by their non-Aboriginality? That status encompasses the majority both of Australians and of Canadians, including all authors of this paper. Our principal aim in this paper is to show how a research project that analyses the poetics of discourses about Aboriginal reconciliation can throw a particularly valuable light on the attitudes and identities of non-Aboriginal people living in Australia and Canada as those countries attempt to conduct versions of that process.

2. A Poetics Approach to Discourse Analysis

By “poetic,” we mean a totalising sense of communicative expression. More specifically, by “a poetics approach” we mean conducting an analysis of discourse which is constantly mindful of textural or aesthetic considerations alongside those of reference or “literal meaning.” This consists of a sequence of

steps. The first of these is to treat any given instance of discourse as though it is an intentionally poetic expression, and allow the totality of its expression to direct our understanding of it. If a given instance of discourse is poetic, then it must fit into one or more poetic genres, it must derive from one or more poetic traditions. The second step, therefore, is to analyse the relations between this instance of discourse and others comparable to it. In doing so, we find that spoken discourse, in particular, is amenable to the analysis of its characteristic formulas of expression (after Parry; there is an overview of this literature in Clark), which are the clearest poetic markers of both genre and tradition. Thus our third step is to identify expressive formulas that link a given instance of discourse with other comparable instances, as well as highlighting distinctions between instances of discourse in some cases.

In conducting our research, we have needed to confront our own assumptions concerning non-Aboriginal discourses about Aboriginal reconciliation outside the public sphere. Wherever it comes up for discussion, Aboriginal reconciliation is such an inherently public issue, in all senses of the word, that respondents invariably adopt postures of public responsibility for the attitudes they are willing to express. By “postures of public responsibility,” we mean rhetorical figurations that acknowledge a need to act on evidence, to persuade others, to defend an opinion against ill-informed or hostile inference, and so forth. The tenacity of this public quality means there is nowhere fully “outside the public sphere” to discuss such questions. Since all discourse about Aboriginal reconciliation operates within a continuum of publicness, the distinctions between “quotidian” and more public-leading discourses are extremely hard to maintain. As researchers observing usages of poetic formulas through these discourses, we find the usages at the “less public” level of the focus group are very much of a piece with the putatively elevated, confident and informed usages at the “more public” level we associate with news media. The public is quotidian and the quotidian is public.

Scholars have fruitfully used analyses of comparative literature, of mainstream media and public or institutional documents to set out important insights and offer critical frameworks for understanding dominant cultural discourses, particularly those pertaining to questions of race and identity. In Canada, scholars have for example written about the valorisation of Canadian citizenship (Thobani), or non-Aboriginal violence affecting Aboriginal people, particularly women (Razack). In other settler societies we can draw out various ideas from research that studies settler identities and attitudes using interviews (Bell) or ethnography (Hage). However, in this research we are seeking out everyday discourses, initially using a methodology of focus groups. Focus groups have been used in comparable research in Australia and New Zealand (Augoustinos, Tuffin and Rapley; Wetherell and Potter 246), and lend

themselves to the identification and mapping of latent discourses that emerge in social contexts.

Our approach has been to locate or solicit non-Aboriginal discourses about reconciliation and particularly about national responses to the histories of Australia's Stolen Generations and Canada's system of Indian Residential Schools from beyond those individuals and networks directly engaged in activism, solidarity or campaigning on any Aboriginal policy issue. We have now instituted three rounds of focus groups – at time of writing we are about to commence a fourth – in a steadily expanding series that we seek to roll out across communities in Australia and Canada.

The first round was a pilot we completed amongst undergraduate students at York University, Toronto, in June of 2010. Students were recruited with a poster campaign and using student bulletin boards on campus and participants were offered compensation for their attendance. We gave potential participants a short questionnaire, ascertaining their existing levels of knowledge and also whether they, their parents and grandparents were born in Canada. We divided the respondents into three groups: those who had been born in Canada and whose parents and grandparents had all been born in Canada (category A); those who had been born outside Canada and whose parents/grandparents had all been born outside the country (category B); and a group comprising those born in Canada but for whom one or more parent/grandparent had been born outside the country (category C). Our goal in doing this was to explore any role that one's length of personal or familial experience with Canada might play in shaping everyday discussions. In total, we recruited four focus groups and a total of 29 people arrived to participate, with each group having between five and nine participants. We had enough respondents to form one group each for categories A and C, and two groups for category B. Each discussion lasted about one hour and fifteen minutes. We recorded these sessions and made transcripts of the recordings. Each focus group was facilitated using the same Discussion Guide, which covered the Indian Residential School system, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the national apology to those affected by the Indian Residential Schools system. Using these as a lens, we explored the following general themes:

1. Is there an obligation to learn about Aboriginality and what should that entail?
2. How is Aboriginal history understood: for example, as genocide, as misfortune, as survival or as progress?
3. Is there acceptance of Aboriginal cultural difference as an enduring fact of Canadian life?

Our second round was built on the earlier pilot to conduct focus groups with members of the broader community in Toronto. With grant support from Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, we contracted professionals working in social research to recruit, facilitate and document two focus groups, which they did according to our discussion guide, generating transcripts that we have analysed. Again, participants were compensated for their time. Responding to pragmatic recruitment factors, and mindful of the similarities between categories B and C in our first pilot round, we agreed to dispense with category C: category A remained those born in Canada and whose parents/grandparents were all born in Canada, while category B remained those who had been born outside Canada and whose parents/grandparents had all been born outside the country. Our contractors have conducted two focus groups in this round, with a total of 15 participants. Importantly, the second round is ongoing. The SSHRC funds will also enable us to conduct similar focus groups using contractors in other locations in Canada. We plan in the coming year to complement this Toronto-centred research with different pictures from rural and Western communities and Francophone communities in Quebec.

In our third round, which we have completed, we tried piloting comparable methods in Australia, this time with participants drawn from the undergraduate student population at Victoria University, Melbourne. Students were recruited with a poster campaign on campus and using student email networks. The auspicing ethics committee for this round was reluctant to approve direct payments to participants, who instead were offered in-kind compensation for their involvement. We suspect we should have pushed harder on this issue, because filling our recruitment targets proved very difficult in this round, meaning we needed to further simplify our recruitment categories in order to fill viable groups. Category A was participants born in Australia, while category B was all others. We convened two focus groups, containing three and four participants respectively. Additionally, our sense of an emerging philosophical gap in rounds one and two encouraged us to pilot a discussion guide that began with general exploration of reconciliation as a concept, largely replacing the discussion about Aboriginal history, and foregrounding the applied idea of Aboriginal reconciliation in Australia. As we shall see below, this new theme brought to the fore some differences between the participants with a Catholic school education and the others. Our questions in this round were:

1. What does the word "reconciliation" mean for participants?
2. Is there an obligation to learn about Aboriginality and what should that entail?
3. Is there acceptance of Aboriginal cultural difference as an enduring fact of Australian life?

As a final point on these methods for now, we intend conducting a fourth round as well. Like the Canadian second round, this would consist of focus groups conducted by professional facilitators in urban and rural locations around Australia. We are currently exploring a range of possibilities to fund and organise such a round.

3. Findings I – Imagining Reconciliation

For the first Toronto pilot groups, we had significant difficulty in recruiting people in category A. By the time we had recruited barely enough people for a group in that category, we had enough for two full groups in category B. Our Melbourne pilot experienced the opposite difficulty, whereby immigrant and international students were much harder to recruit than those from established Australian families. The professional support for participant recruitment during the first post-pilot focus groups was sufficient to ensure that our second round did not suffer from comparable imbalances in participant numbers by migration background. We do not draw elaborate conclusions from this: there could be multiple explanations to do with the method of recruitment, the campus, or the time of year. However, we are interested in differential levels of willingness among non-Aboriginal peoples to engage in subjects that may lead to uncomfortable or unsettling realisations about Australian and Canadian nationality. Indeed, for some recent writers (Bell; Regan), it is precisely the question of “decentering” or “unsettling” the settler within that is the key to reconciliation. Low response rates and levels of participation, then, may be an indication of a deeper concern.

Reconciliation and Settler Identities

That there may be an intersection between the familial and personal links to place, and a willingness to engage in potentially “unsettling” dialogue was suggested by the focus groups themselves. Perhaps the most striking finding on discursive “content” was the readiness of the groups in the Canadian migrant categories to talk about race and racial discrimination, including volunteering words like “racism” and “genocide,” whereas category A did not raise this at all. We intentionally did not use any of these terms in the topics we posed, but participants in categories B and C were able to swiftly represent the Stolen Generations and the Indian Residential Schools system as racist. In thinking about the government’s response to the Indian Residential Schools system, Catherine asked: “They’ve said this apology, but what have they done? Just in their actions, what have they shown? They still have their discrimination, their biases towards the First Nations people in Canada, and it’s really shameful.” Ari’s comments were among some of the most sustained remarks of this sort:

ARI: I'm not sure if we even have a full grasp for what they went through. Because technically the proper term for residential schools and all these people went through is social and cultural genocide. And that is a horrific thing to go through, regardless of on whatever stage. It's not as simple as, 'You're assimilating them into our culture.' We were stripping them of all of their needs, made them naked in every society, and powerless, and then turned them into little Indian robots for Canadian kind of well-being or what's good for us.

In fact, several respondents in our first round (but none from category A) saw the discrimination against Aboriginal peoples as part of a broader orientation in Canada affecting all minorities. Ehi, who identified himself as being from Nigeria, put it as follows:

EHI: It's almost the same concept of trying to create the perfect, white model of society. So I say it's Canadians like the government itself has a big responsibility like, trying to merge the cultures together, because it's the second Canada is multicultural above, it's... there's a model of an ideal Canadian and Aboriginals don't fit into that. Most immigrants don't fit into that. They have to walk on the aspect of the old Canadian cultural system to like, incorporate all different cultures into, because Aboriginals have certain beliefs, Blacks have certain beliefs, Italians have certain beliefs, and you know, it's... they have to merge that into taking stock of each person's perspective.

During the Australian pilot, an Indian national, at pains to stress her lack of detailed knowledge about Australian history, still tacitly construed the Stolen Generations as a function of British colonialism:

HANNA: I don't know too much about how the children were taken away by the English people.

"Why Weren't We Told?"

Among the focus groups we conducted, category A was consistently the most reticent to discuss questions seen as politically contentious in both countries. In Canadian focus groups, these participants appeared and sounded uncomfortable when the discussion began and especially on questions of present responsibilities for the Indian Residential Schools system. In the Australian pilot, their responses as discussions moved from reconciliation as an abstract term to specifics of the Stolen Generations changed more immediately and observably than their category B counterparts, increasingly hedging their language and (we inferred) adopting more defensive postures. In particular, we observed numerous instances of the "why weren't we told?" syndrome (Reynolds 264). In the following exchange between two category A participants

in our first round, there is an implication that the Indian Residential Schools system was a policy carried out without public knowledge and against Canadian values and expectations:

LINDA: But also I think Aboriginal cultures have been and still are so isolated from mainstream Canada. Like, I didn't even know this was going on and I'm sure that there were a lot of people even over that same time period that didn't know it was happening. The government obviously didn't tell people, 'Hey we're taking this culture and trying to eradicate them.' Maybe people would have been more up in arms about it, had they known. I don't know.

RICHARD: Well, it was founded in 1870, like, back then it was easy for people to grab on to catchphrases, right, that were easy to print like, 'Kill the Indian in the child,' right, and it becomes something that can kind of continue, yeah, taking over 100 years to fix it.

Indeed, that assumption about the inherent goodness of dominant societies is, we think, one of the key obstacles to deeper social transformation. It is made possible by recurrent errors about the most basic facts of the Stolen Generations and the Indian Residential Schools. Across all our focus groups, the levels of knowledge about Aboriginal issues were limited and participants often made mistakes about fundamental details. Our expectations here were not high, but we were still struck by the extent of respondents' misconceptions, spanning both those more and less sympathetic to the goals of reconciliation processes in both countries.

Several Australian participants recollected material on the Stolen Generations from their experiences of school and university study, but several observed a distance between the issue and themselves or peers. This exchange between Tom as facilitator and one participant was indicative:

TOM: How much do you feel like you knew about the Stolen Generations before now?

JENNIE: My knowledge was completely limited to a play I once saw and the movie *Rabbit Proof Fence*. Bits and bobs that you hear, but honestly I had no real knowledge of it. It wasn't that I wasn't interested.

TOM: When did you watch *Rabbit Proof Fence*? When it first came out?

JENNIE: Probably. I studied it at school.

Many respondents reported such fragments of knowledge but it was rare that someone was able to rely on this education to correct or improve the

discussions. While there was a consensus running through all the focus groups that more education is necessary, there was conspicuously less agreement on what education should comprise and who it should be for. Some felt that better education should be provided for Aboriginal peoples, so that they could succeed in contemporary Australian and Canadian societies. Most participants felt non-Aboriginal people should learn more about Aboriginal peoples and their history, but there was a division in some groups over whether that should encompass learning about Aboriginal culture and history in general, or simply the specific national histories of forcible family separation and its legacy in each country. Some felt these issues were fundamentally intertwined but others saw them as very distinct. Several participants felt that learning about the Stolen Generations or Indian Residential Schools system was their own personal responsibility, but most discussed the need for education without specifying who it was that should be educated. Given the recommendations of both reports noted above, stressing the need for major public education strategies, it is clear to us that such education should reflect on fundamental questions of content, form and audience.

Proximity and Distance

A problem related to the “why weren’t we told” complex is a form of radicalism. It manifests in respondents’ sense of outrage at the injustices of colonialism in ways that appeared to entrench their own distance from those injustices or from ongoing legacies. In response to the query about whether non-Indigenous peoples should learn about Indigenous histories, the following exchange took place among category A participants in our second round:

C: ... Because they were here before we were. And my personal feeling is that no one has the right to come in and say, ‘You can’t live here. You have to march off to some godforsaken place and that’s where you belong.’ I mean, this is before us, and I think that’s unfair! And I sympathise with the... never mind the free taxes, or tax-free – that doesn’t bother me a bit. It bothers me that they are lumped in here and there and everywhere. I just think it’s wrong.

M: So if they moved into a house beside you, didn’t pay property taxes, you’d be fine with that?

C: It’s a free country, they live here, they were here before me! That’s my... we came in.

M: Yeah.

C: We came in here.

Amongst those who were cynical about the goals of reconciling Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups, one participant in the first round suggested that Canada's June 2008 apology was a response to blockades that were going on around the country, a view that went uncontested by others in the group. No one in any of our focus groups could confidently provide more than rudimentary information about what took place in the stealing of children or in the Indian Residential Schools, nor about what national and institutional responses there had been. What they declared usually restated the few facts we had shown them in video extracts (of both the apologies and in the Canadian case, of a survivor's testimony to the TRC) to catalyse discussion or in our information hand-outs. This is not a surprising finding – indeed much of the discussion about reconciliation has sought to “break the silence” about family separations and their legacy.

A related topic that we expressly sought to explore was the idea of interpersonal relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. Our respondents reported very little personal contact with any Aboriginal people and numerous respondents pointed to barriers they perceived to exist preventing such relations from developing, including institutional barriers to non-Aboriginal people who wanted to work as teachers on First Nations reserves, and an unwillingness amongst some people to readily introduce Indigenous peoples as partners or friends to their own families. There is a widespread lack of confidence amongst non-Indigenous peoples that they should initiate such relations. On the other hand, there was a universal agreement that more extensive personal connections would be important to improving relations. Of the few who discussed Aboriginal individuals whom they knew personally, two men in category A (one in each country) mentioned that they knew Aboriginal people but went on to characterise them as victims, hopelessly afflicted by lives of drugs, alcohol and petty crime. A Canadian immigrant reflected that her relationships with Aboriginal people had helped her overcome considerable prejudices. An Australian woman in Category A told a similar story, but used it to distinguish deserving Aboriginal victims of history from, in her view, mendicant refugee boat arrivals plaguing Australian shores:

BINDI: I don't think we should have very many if any asylum seekers coming in because we need to invest in the Aboriginal people, they were here first, they deserve the investment more so than people coming offshore from overseas and I don't understand still why we have the investment in such big immigration programmes.

Defining “Reconciliation”

A striking final observation on “content” comes from the Australian pilot, in which we specifically asked for understandings or definitions of the word

“reconciliation.” Those participants who had been students at Catholic secondary schools all related their sense of that word to experiences of religiously guided, formal reconciliation processes their schools had routinely asked them to conduct, as with the following example from Roy:

ROY: I went to Catholic school, so we had to do our Reconciliation which was basically saying sorry, making peace, that sort of thing.

In fact, when we were recruiting for the Australian pilot groups, several people who expressed interest in the study asked us about our project’s relationship or affiliation to religious activity. Within the focus group setting, such students showed they could call on a clear sense of this key term – a clarity we did not find so clearly in evidence among other Australian participants. That disparity of background exposures to this key term must underpin other differences between the views of participants, however our failure to anticipate it meant we were ill-placed to investigate it in depth during the third round. The same discrepancy has not featured in the literature around Aboriginal reconciliation to date. We would like to explore this issue in greater depth when we roll out the fourth round of focus groups.

4. Findings II – Stylistics

As we have suggested above, in addition to surveying literal questions of topicality – of “what” people know and believe – we want to explore “how”: the figures of speech and aesthetic turns that respondents deploy as they express their knowledge and beliefs. In part, this is because it helps us understand what respondents think they mean by the terms they use.

An especially important case in point, extremely revealing for our line of research, has been the use of personal pronouns “we” and “they” and their various grammatical aspects (“us,” “our,” “ours,” “them,” “their” and “theirs”). When discussing Aboriginal reconciliation, all respondents in all focus groups have articulated a “we” that includes all non-Aboriginal Australians or Canadians and a “they” that specifically and exclusively indexed Aboriginal Australians or Canadians. The quotation from Ari, above, is illustrative. In the context of reconciliation between “us and them,” this categorisation did not only play up a sense of difference or division between two conflicting camps; it also entailed that all non-Aboriginal peoples in each country had a shared stake in the process. The purpose of Aboriginal reconciliation and the relationship between its constituent parties, as described by Maddison, is essentially the situation as all our participants discussed and understood it. This is the purpose of Aboriginal reconciliation, according to a consensus of non-Aboriginal views in both countries:

Indigenous and non-Indigenous people must engage in new negotiations, through processes of intercultural dialogue, with the aim of achieving a new relationship that is acceptable to both parties. (Maddison 164)

The only moment this consistency of the “us and them” lexis slipped was when one of our immigrant Canadian groups interrogated it explicitly – but the conclusion they drew (unprompted by us) was to affirm the prevailing us/them dichotomy. These remarks from the category B participant who led the exchange on this issue in her round 1 focus group seem extremely pointed in the broader consideration of non-Aboriginal attitudes – in mentioning the topic explicitly, Cynthia has posed the exception that proves the rule:

CYNTHIA: It’s interesting that we’re talking about, ‘they, they’ and you said Canada, and I’m always asking myself, so Canada: who? Who is Canada? Who represents it? And who is responsible to make that apology? And you also mentioned about the Chinese experience, and that goes with so many other cultures. I could talk about the Black experience, I could talk about the Jewish experience, so everybody has their own issue they’re all waiting for some sort of um, compensation or something that the government recognises, but who? Who are we holding accountable at the end of the day? We say we are Canadian, that’s a wild question to ask.

A second virtue of poetic analysis is that it reveals the stylistically embedded acts of affiliation and dissociation that respondents perform as they endeavour both to articulate and to develop their points of view. An ability to capture this process of discursive alignment as it unfolds is central to the genius of focus group methodology. As numerous communications theorists have argued, it is also central to the negotiated development and exchange of political identity (Voloshinov xvi, 205; Fairclough; Wetherell). That is to say, people who want to express similarity to others will attempt to emulate their style. Within the focus groups, we found many instances of formula-repetition that revealed deeper agendas of affiliation and contestation, for example the Australian participants with backgrounds in Catholic schools who explicitly aligned their definitions of the word “reconciliation” with one another:

STEVEN: It’s interesting, because I was in a similar school [to Roy’s] and at a young age we didn’t think about the definition of the word, it was something we just did and it’s something about reconciling us with God after being away for too long. I would consider it closer to April’s definition of bringing back together two groups who weren’t together at the start, or separated through some disagreement.

A small number of respondents used formulas to indicate that they subscribed to an ideology they suspected most of their colleagues did not share – and that they were unwilling to negotiate it. Note the putative completeness of these popular formulations; they constitute what Wetherell and Potter have termed “self-sufficient propositions” in the rhetoric of race relations (Wetherell and Potter 246). In this exchange between Ravi as facilitator and a category C participant during our first round, the phrase “rationality” has become axiomatic, its value and relevance beyond question:

RAVI: Patric... you sort of said you sound impolite if you do certain things, but what do you think is the source of that?

PATRIC: I think it's the moralistic approach to education as opposed to a rational perspective. Because the moralistic approach says, 'These people were bad,' or did the wrong, and then, 'These people are good,' or were the innocent victims, and therefore you get this entire perspective of good and evil. You get this biblical conception of what happened when, like I said, the rational perspective is usually in a medium. Because not everybody in Canada participated in taking land, in raping children and killing babies and doing all this stuff. It was specific government officials or laws or things which are no longer part of the constitution, and if there are remnants of it, they're being worked on. So, therefore, I'm thinking the rational perspective will always benefit more so. Removing the moralistic perspective, the emotional aspect, that way we can see things clearly.

Other respondents used formulas to align their arguments with others in the broader public discourses across Australia and Canada. This was abundantly true of respondents in all focus groups and all recruitment categories. Such usages indicate individual and group alignment in the terms of political formations defined in public discourse – outside the controlled space of the focus group. In other words, through such formulas as these, we can see focus group participants clearly conscious of a need to relate their “present moment” conversation within the group to ongoing conversations outside it. This example, from a second round participant, shows that urge to relate and align her opinions to broader debates clearly overriding her lack of confidence about listing the facts in detail:

CLAIRE: Yeah, and so I would go to visit there often and deal with the Indians, the First Nations there. They used to be really underprivileged, I'd say, but in the last few years they have really... I don't know who contributes or how they do it, but they've built beautiful schools and community centres, and little touristy places, and they see – I don't know if they own or just operate a lot of tourist camps and things on lakes, on Rice Lake and so on. They seem to have in that area picked up speed a little bit.

They seem to be more educated and so on. When I was a kid, a child growing up there, if... sort of if you dated an Indian from the reservation or if you even got friends with them, you were frowned upon.

Of course, participants also conspicuously reused formulas their colleagues had uttered within the group, quoting (and misquoting) one another frequently. Olga captures the complexity and agility of this discursive strategy as she tries to reconcile the pro-apology stance of one colleague (Ari) with another's (Patric's) view that it was "ridiculous:"

OLGA: I agree with Ari. I'm also not from Canada and I never heard about anything like that before I came here. I never heard about this apology. I have heard about residential schools from my friend because she is Native. So, and like, I've been to powwows and stuff like that, and she told me about it, that's how I found out. And I do agree with what Patric said, I do think it's ridiculous because they're apologising for it now but like they're not doing anything to improve their lives. Like, she just came back from a residence, and, 'cause she like she volunteered there for the summer, and she said that people literally have nothing to eat. But like you're apologising for them right now but at the same time you're not doing anything to improve their lives, so it's like an empty 'I'm Sorry' kind of thing. Like back it up, show them that you care about them, show them that you're sorry. Same thing like right now Indian people they still have like trouble, they're still fighting for their lands because a lot of companies want their lands to build like factories and stuff and they want their lands to like, go hunting and stuff, and still they're fighting the government for their rights. I don't think it's right for you to come up and say it's better than nothing, I guess, to say that you're sorry, but I don't think that you should... I think actions speak louder than words.

There is no turn of rhetoric more slanted towards consensus than quoting your interlocutor's own rhetoric back at her or him, as analyses of "affiliation behaviour" in talkback radio have demonstrated particularly clearly (Crofts and Turner; Ferencik; Fitzgerald and Housley). Group-internal affiliation behaviours are critical to understanding formations of private opinion about public matters across a society as large and complex as a university undergraduate population, let alone a city or a country in its entirety.

5. Conclusions

Prior to the completion of rounds 2 and 4 in our focus group research, it is still too soon to draw fixed conclusions about the discourses we have examined and the commitments underlying them. However, what we have found obliges us to wonder what the connections may be between, on the one hand, a sense of belonging to (or membership in) a country of settlement and, on the other,

attitudes towards those whose identity revolves around a priority of belonging or membership within that place. One's sense of belonging, of entitlement to speak of and for others, and of comfort in talking about race and racism appear to be factors in how non-Aboriginal people think about Aboriginal people and their histories. We need a much better understanding of these dynamics. Observing the emergence of political identities and opinions in a group context is a key to understanding these complexities, possibly harnessing and transforming the non-Aboriginal collective stake in Australia's and Canada's respective reconciliation processes.

That argument may not seem especially groundbreaking – although its focus on non-Aboriginal attitudes and identities within a context of Aboriginal reconciliation is surprisingly little-considered alongside the attitudes and identities of Aboriginal or Indigenous people, White people, and ethnically unsectioned groupings. As the evidence from personal pronouns shows, when non-Aboriginal people in Australia and Canada address the topic of Aboriginal reconciliation, they (which includes us, the authors) consistently construct a first person plural agent that spans all ethnic categories of the non-Aboriginal population in each country respectively. Equally significant, at least as a point of research practice, is the poetic consciousness that has made our project receptive to such a finding: as Klemperer argued, also in response to a history of genocide, the texture or “style” of people's remarks often reveals greater truths about their attitudes than its reference or “content” (Klemperer ix, 274). A focus on poetics offers great potential to all politically engaged fields of research.

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