Words Don’t Come Easily: The Australian Apology to the Stolen Generations

Eloise Hummell

Abstract
Kevin Rudd’s apology to the Stolen Generations called ‘us’ (Indigenous and non-Indigenous people: ‘the nation’) to reconcile, to join together and unite for the future. This paper will discuss how the rhetoric used by Rudd presented a particular view of race relations and group interactions in Australia. The national apology was not just a political act, it also involved and has been produced by cultural, social and historical discourses, situated in a dominant ‘white’ Australian culture. My research unravels some of the interwoven discourses manifested in the political rhetoric employed in this ‘sorry’ speech. The speech had many aims, one being to apologise to the Stolen Generations. Another was to establish Kevin Rudd as the new Prime Minister who would lead the nation forward. The aim discussed in this paper is Rudd’s stated goal of reconciling and healing the nation. A nation portrayed in Rudd’s speech as divided along one line of difference: Indigenous and non-Indigenous. In the speech race relations are constructed to serve the purpose of overcoming divisiveness, in order for the nation to work together to redress historical and ongoing injustice. This assumes by omission that there are no problems with other groups and peoples in Australia. The speech implies that the only groups with problematic relations that require political intervention are Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and there are no issues amongst people with other ethnicities, religions, and identities. Harmonious race relations were constructed as hindered and overshadowed by this one issue of acknowledging and accepting past injustices. Now that ‘we’ have ‘righted past wrongs’, division and fraught relations have been resolved and the nation can be brought together to ‘turn a new page’, to ‘remove this stain’, and start a ‘new chapter’ in the nation’s future. Interestingly, many subsequent discourses seem to support this claim. My paper considers the way in which many complex issues are presented as unproblematic in the Prime Minister’s speech and the ways in which political rhetoric can work to create new fictive identities and relationships.
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Introduction

“It is time to reconcile. It is time to recognise the injustice of the past. It is time to say sorry. It is time to move forward together”

“For the nation to bring the first two centuries of our settled history to a close, as we begin a new chapter and which we embrace with pride, admiration and awe these great and ancient cultures we are blessed, truly blessed, to have among us, cultures that provide a unique, uninterrupted human thread linking our Australian continent to the most ancient prehistory of our planet”

(Prime Minister of Australia, 13th February 2008)

Reconciliation in Australia draws attention to the legacy of colonization and to the continuing impact of historical injustices that affect current social relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (McIntosh, a2000, b2000; Giles, 2002; Barkan, 2000; Dodson, 2007). The national apology to the Stolen Generations delivered by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was constructed as the catalyst for building harmonious race relations and national unity. This was the first speech from PM Rudd in the form of a motion on the commencement of the 42nd Commonwealth Parliament on 13 February 2008. This was not just a political act, it also involved and has been produced by cultural, social and historical discourses, situated in a dominant ‘white’ Australian society. This paper unravels some of the interwoven discourses manifested in the political rhetoric employed in this ‘sorry’ speech and considers the ways in which complex issues were presented as unproblematic, working to create new fictive identities and relationships.

The national apology represented a significant moment for members of the Stolen Generations, the wider Indigenous community and non-Indigenous Australians by aiming to rectify past actions that continue to impact on the lives of people today. The Australian Labor Government honoured its 2007 election promise and longstanding party commitment to apologise for the suffering caused to Indigenous Australians. This long debated and awaited apology thus fulfilled one of the recommendations from the Bringing Them Home report (HREOC, 1997), commissioned in 1995 by the Keating Labour Government, and received by the Howard Liberal-National Coalition Government. The report brought to public awareness and discussion the vast consequences of state and federal policies and practices of forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, communities and country from 1910 to 1970. Indigenous peoples were deemed lesser citizens, a dying race, and ‘half-castes’ as potential social menaces (LeCouteur & Augoustinos, 2001; Read, 1982, 1998, 1999; Bird, 1998; Reynolds, 2001). The report found that the hurt of separation endures for these ‘Stolen Generations’, and that no Indigenous family was left untouched and “does not know, or is not related, to one or more of his/her countrymen who were institutionalised by the whites” (Read, 1999: 68). Many positive discourses and beneficial
debates have emerged from the national apology. This paper does not focus on these, but rather discusses some of the problematic assumptions, ideologies and philosophies underpinning and expressed in the apology.

The national apology has meaning because of the lived human experience of those who directly and indirectly witnessed the proceedings. This experience varies depending on the individual and the context, never having the exact same meaning or set of meanings for everyone in every place and every time. In addition, no analysis will exhaust the reality of the text for a number of reasons, including that there can never be an objective analysis because it will always be biased by the analyst’s subjectivity, their particular perspectives and interests (Deifelt, 2007; Fairclough, 2003; Schandt, 2000). According to Walter Benjamin (1969) we write our own interpretations, not the ‘truth’. Paul Ricoeur (1974) argues that understanding is interpretation, in the act of interpreting individuals cannot escape their biases, prejudices or assumptions shaped by their cultural and historic location. Therefore, in my research I have interpreted speeches and represented the ideas of other individuals and groups from a certain academic background; I am not speaking on behalf of others, although I have attempted to respectfully re-present others’ perspectives (Schandt, 2000; Ezzy, 2002). I am not presenting a concealed meaning or ‘truth’ behind the national apology, but am creating a text of my own interpretations that provide a point for further discussion and debate.

Western research brings to any study “a cultural orientation, a set of values, a different conceptualisation of such things as time, space and subjectivity, different and competing theories of knowledge, highly specialized forms of language, and structures of power” (Smith, 1999: 42) which can contrast greatly with Indigenous peoples’ worldviews. In this work I am conscious of this and acknowledge that this research may be very different if undertaken by an Indigenous person. Drawing on various discussions about terms, including Amanda LeCouteur and Martha Augoustinos (2001), I am aware that my use of the “generic term Indigenous to refer to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has the potential to convey meanings that either exclude categories of belonging, or suggest artificial homogenisation of what is a diverse group of peoples” (60). I employ this and other terms and concepts such as ‘western’, ‘hegemonic’, ‘settler’ and ‘white’, with the knowledge that discussions cannot be carried out without them (Clifford, 1986), and I alert the reader “to the problems inherent in the taken-for-granted usage of such terms” (LeCouteur and Augoustinos, 2001: 60).

A “day of national reconciliation”
According to Robert Weyeneth (2001: 12) “an apology is comprised of two components: the acknowledgement that one has been in the wrong, together with a statement of remorse”. Elazar Barkan (2000: xix) similarly describes apologies as referring to an “admission of wrongdoing, a recognition of its effects, and, in some cases, an acceptance of responsibility for those effects and an obligation to its victims”. A growing number of governments, public and private institutions, support organizations, social movements, individuals and communities have been requesting and offering apologies for historical injustices in the past two decades (Cunningham, 2004). Apologies have been delivered around the globe for genocide, slavery, religious persecution, racial segregation,
colonialism and dispossession, institutionalisation, war crimes and sexual abuse by governments, institutions, religious groups and individuals (Barkan, 2000; Weyeneth, 2001; Brooks, 1999). Despite much criticism and opposition, the number of apologies being requested and given globally demonstrates the importance and significance that people place on them. Apologies are viewed as having meaning for those who see themselves as recipients of historical wrongs, for those who view themselves as perpetrators, and for the re-building of relations within the wider society.

Weyeneth (2001) posits that a key element constituting an apology is the aim of achieving better relations between those giving and those receiving an apology. An apology is not a solution to a problem, but begins or continues the process of reconciliation. Reconciliation consists of a moral and ethical engagement between people, groups and communities with whom a relationship based on the principles of mutual respect and concern has, for various reasons, not existed (Barkan, 2000; Nicoll, 2004; Rose, 2004). The view of Australian settler society was that Indigenous peoples were ‘primitives’, ‘uncivilised’ and ‘inferior’ to the European populace (Read, 1999; Attwood, 2005). These pervasive views remain, to some degree, in the present and are manifested through social inequality and discrimination (Augoustinos et al., 1999; Aldrich et al., 2007). A moral engagement in the case of relations between the wider Australian society and Indigenous Australians involves understanding the enduring effects of colonisation and domination, recognising the violence and destruction, and acknowledging “the moral burden of that knowledge” (Rose, 2004: 13). Reconciliation “consists of efforts to acknowledge the harm of the past and its links to the present, to undo some of this painful history and to work towards new relations between and among us” (ibid, p.184). These new relations are based on establishing connections of mutual benefit.

Deborah Bird Rose (2004: 184) discusses the journey of reconciliation as an open-ended process that has no final conclusion but is an “ongoing domain of our lives in which we sustain an open commitment to social and cultural change”. This ‘journey’ encompasses more than a metaphorical meaning, it also has a literal meaning. Reconciliation is social, temporal and spatial. These latter two elements are less considered and not often recognised as a common part of reconciliation. The temporal aspect refers to how the past and future influence the present, regarding the continuing impact of injustices on the survivors and their descendents. Future orientation can be inclusive or exclusive, affecting present well-being and identity. The spatial element is that this journey takes place within Australian environments including: the physical spaces we inhabit, as well as the political and social spaces, including issues of concern and importance to Indigenous peoples. These include land rights and protecting sacred sites, the interconnectedness of society and the environment, and engaging with Indigenous knowledges about the mutual health of country and people. Sustained reconciliation requires a commitment to social and cultural change and a thorough engagement with “issues that matter to Indigenous people” (Rose, 2004: 184), challenging and changing institutionalised racism and oppressions that are maintained through the established social hierarchy.
To encourage new relations between settler Australians and Indigenous peoples based on “mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility” (Rudd, 2008) the national apology had a wider audience beyond members of the Stolen Generations. It included “all Australians, whatever their origins” (Rudd, 2008). The plural pronouns of ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’ aimed to unite Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, the speaker with the addressees, the audiences in the chamber with those around the nation, and politicians with the public (LeCouteur & Augoustinos, 2001). The use of these pronouns in dominant Australian society commonly refers to non-Indigenous people, thus locating Indigenous peoples as the ‘other’. However, in parts of the national apology the use of “let us turn this page together”, “we begin a new chapter”, “we might fully embrace the future”, and “this new page in the history of our great continent” (Rudd, 2008) was deliberately inclusive. In addition, the use of plural pronouns included those non-Indigenous Australians who disagreed with the need for an apology. The intent is consistent with LeCouteur and Augoustinos (2001) who assert that “[r]hetorically, this usage functions to break down possible differences with those with whom one might disagree, to inoculate against claims that one is engaging in *ad hominem* arguments, and to encourage those who hold an opposing view to overcome shared weaknesses and adopt a morally and psychologically superior position” (LeCouteur & Augoustinos, 2001: 57). “These our fellow Australians” (Rudd, 2008) was another incorporative rhetorical manoeuvre in which Indigenous peoples were being invited to become true members of the Australian community. However, as identified by Rose (2004), Weyeneth (2001) and Barkan (2000), reconciliation requires more than rhetoric, and the following sections explore the assumptions and ideologies underpinning the national apology.

**Race relations**

The political rhetoric used in the national apology presented a particular view of race relations and group interactions in Australia. The groups being reconciled and relations ‘healed’ were Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Reconciliation was constructed as being between two opposed sections of society, expressed as the only two groups that have problematic relations in Australia: “reconciliation across the entire history of the often bloody encounter between those who emerged from the Dreamtime a thousand generations ago and those who, like me came across the seas only yesterday” (Rudd, 2008). Indigenous and non-Indigenous were presented as two homogenous and bounded cultures, requiring the “building [of] a bridge” (Rudd, 2008) to overcome the gulf separating them. This represents a dominant perception of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples as clearly divided groups with clearly different experiences. However this does not consider that “the lives of many of us are enmeshed in tangled webs of interconnection” (Rose, 2004: 185). For reconciliation to occur, not only must the divide that many do experience due to past violence and continuing inequality and discrimination be acknowledged, but simultaneously “the entanglements of memory, connections and commitment” (Rose, 2004: 185) need to be explored.

The main personal relationship constructed in the speech is between PM Rudd and Nanna Nungala Fejo, a member of the Stolen Generations. This is described as one of neighbourly friendship, and appears to demonstrate the kind of relations ‘we’ can hope to achieve with reconciliation. An illusion of intimacy, friendliness and being on equal
terms is created as PM Rudd spontaneously “called around to see [Nanna Fejo] just a few days ago” (Rudd, 2008). Nanna Fejo’s account, as delivered through PM Rudd, is very forgiving, neither critical nor cynical about future relations, and provides an image of all Indigenous peoples willing to come together with non-Indigenous peoples if presented with the opportunity. This implied close relationship between PM Rudd and Nanna Fejo is presented as a model for relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians once reconciled. The wider interactions shown via the televised recording of the apology presented a variety of Australians sharing this momentous occasion together, united in joy (ABC, 2008). Both inside and outside the Parliamentary chamber the viewer sees cheering and celebrating after the delivery of the national apology from PM Rudd (ABC, 2008). A picture of unity on the lawn outside Parliament House is portrayed with Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples coming together for this event and showing their support and solidarity. The camera focuses on the many people crying, the tears primarily those of Indigenous people (ABC, 2008). Most of the overt emotion captured by the cameras is of Indigenous people, helping to convey the message of emotional release brought on by this moment. Encouraging people watching to interpret this emotion as a weight being lifted, of closure, of forgiveness and jubilation due to the successful apology.

The primary image of Aboriginality that the national apology has constructed and circulated has however constrained and restricted other more flexible notions of being and living as an Indigenous person in modern Australia. The one account, from Nanna Fejo, and presented through PM Rudd, reinforces the common imagery of a ‘traditional’ way of life “in a bush camp just outside Tennant Creek”, with “the love and warmth and the kinship of those days long ago, including traditional dancing around the camp fire at night” with “the male tribal elders” (Rudd, 2008). ‘We’ (non-Indigenous Australians) obtain a picture of this traditional way of life that has been destroyed and taken away from one static and homogenous Indigenous culture. The commonly constructed discourse ‘we’ are presented of the ‘normal’ Aborigine who dances and sings around campfires is not disputed. This reinforces the type of Aboriginal that is ‘real’ and ‘authentic’, who has not lost their ‘culture’ (Cowlishaw, 2008). PM Rudd also only identifies Indigenous peoples from rural and remote locations, reinforcing the notion that ‘they’ either do not live or belong in urban areas, or that ‘they’ are assimilated in urban areas and do not experience disadvantage and institutionalised racism. However, data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2008) indicates that one third of all Indigenous people live in major cities, while 43% live in regional areas and 25% live in remote areas. The televised recording also acts as a covert contradiction to the descriptions in the national apology of Indigenous Australians as a homogenous group. The diversity of people shown to be watching the speech alludes to the vast array of difference in both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, and their interactions.

The dominant Australian rhetoric describes a unified Aboriginal culture, and makes judgements about what is authentic. Limited consideration is given to varied and contrary ways of being Indigenous and relating to the category of ‘Aboriginal’ (Cowlishaw, 2008). Wanda Deifelt (2007) discusses Gilles Deleuze’s critique on “the tendency, particularly
in Western philosophy, to prioritise unity over multiplicity (the one over the many) and sameness over difference. The search for the abstract ‘essences’ of things falsifies the nature of experience, which consists of multiplicities rather than unities” (116). The national apology appears to perpetuate a particular view of Aboriginality as homogenous, traditional, spiritual and distant from ‘modern’ urban life. This is not accurate because it fails to consider the variety of ways of living as an Indigenous person in many contexts with complex interactions with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (Cowlishaw, 2008). The national apology has supported the image of Aboriginality that is included in the current national identity (Curthoys, 1999). The “unique, uninterrupted human thread linking our Australian continent to the most ancient prehistory of our plant” (Rudd, 2008) is what “allows Australia to claim cultural uniqueness and parade its forty thousand years of history in front of the world” (Barkan, 2000: 236).

Moving On

“In the true spirit of reconciliation, to open a new chapter in the history of this great land, Australia” (Rudd, 2008)

According to the above quote, saying ‘sorry’ closes the book on the past, allowing a united future to proceed. The word ‘sorry’ appears to be seen as that which ends the “unfinished business” (Rudd, 2008) of the unjust and problematic past. This “blemished chapter in our nation’s history”, encompassing “the degradation and the sheer brutality of the act of physically separating a mother from her children”, “the forced extractions of children of so-called ‘mixed lineage’ .... dealing with ‘the problem of the Aboriginal population’” is resolved and completed, and ‘we’ can now “move forward together” (Rudd, 2008). ‘We’ (especially Indigenous Australians) can now ‘move on’. This implies the issue of the Stolen Generations no longer has legitimacy as a political pressure point, and further debate on this topic has been quelled. The focus is now on future socio-economic factors involved in “closing the gap” while the issue of the Stolen Generations has lost political currency. Racism, oppression and prejudice are elements of this ‘darkest chapter’, while the ‘new chapter’ we are writing together is a clean slate. Yin Paradies (2005: 2) states that “[r]acism against Indigenous Australians permeates the very fabric of contemporary Australian society occurring in the political domain, health system, academia, the law and criminal justice systems, and civil society as a whole”. Yet there is no indication in the national apology that current social structures which dis-empower and disadvantage Indigenous peoples need to change.

LeCouteur and Augoustinos (2001) conducted research on common argumentative forms, discursive practices and rhetorical forms used in emailed comments to an Australian newspaper website when debating the issue of apologising to the Stolen Generations. They found that those participants who supported an apology commonly used “a metaphor of forward or upward movement” (LeCouteur & Augoustinos, 2001: 56), describing it “as a prerequisite for personal and national advancement”. Similarly research conducted by Augoustinos et al. (1999: 359) identified a colonist historical narrative used by Australian university undergraduate students to explain current Aboriginal problems and to argue that focussing on “past injustices” was “not constructive” and that a focus on the future would be more beneficial. According to Rose
(2004: 18), this “[f]uture orientation has been a major tool in deflecting us from moral responsibility” that must be involved for meaningful reconciliation. The past regularly becomes a label attached to events and experiences “which we wish to finish and forget, or from which we wish to differentiate ourselves and thus to absolve ourselves from responsibility”.

Rose (2004) uses the work of Levinas to distinguish between responsibility and guilt. Guilt is the personal burden individuals’ carry for their specific actions, whereas responsibility is the burden for another person being vulnerable to suffering. The distinction made is between one’s own actions, and the human condition of living side by side with others. Responsibility is about human interactions; there is ‘no self without other’ because people cannot exist without others, and everyone is therefore always involved in relationships of mutual concern. Rose uses this distinction to reject the “concepts of collective guilt and descendents’ guilt” (Rose, 2004: 12), but not collective responsibility. Taking responsibility acknowledges the belated realisation that “actions and policies once thought right (or at least utilitarian) by government now are revealed to have been wrong” (Read, 1999: 186). In Australia the significance of saying ‘sorry’ and taking responsibility had been built up over time due to continued refusal from the previous Howard Liberal-National Coalition Government thus becoming such a momentous and important word, that it has been constructed in the national apology as being able to annul the legacy of colonisation and problematic race relations. However, reconciliation is a ‘process’, and an apology represents only part of this process of continued negotiation and dialogue (Barkan, 2000; Rose, 2004; Nicoll, 2004).

The completion of the past and ability to focus on the future presents a logical progression of past to present to future. Rose (2004) discusses the use of a ‘paradigm of progress’, which regards history as

“a process of conflict and change such that the present emerges from, and is differentiated from, the past, and such that the future will emerge from, and will be differentiated from, the present. It puts a positive value on change, and posits that history, or society, is moving towards the resolution of conflict and contradiction. There is thus held to be an ‘end’ in the sense of a goal: a future point towards which our lives are directed” (16).

Former Prime Minister John Howard demonstrated this typically conservative view in response to debates about apologising (Read, 1999; Markus, 2001). In Carmel Bird’s (1998) edited compilation of Stolen Children accounts and excerpts from politicians and public figures, she presents an excerpt from PM Howard in which he argued for embracing Australia’s ‘blemished’ past “without developing an approach to reconciliation that looks backwards rather than forward” (126). McIntosh (2000: 11) agrees that PM Howard’s view of reconciliation supported the “notion in which the oppressors stress ‘moving ahead with our lives’, without giving proper consideration to restorative measures or compensation”.
Building National Unity

Roy Brooks (1999: 1) describes apologies as “a matrix of guilt and mourning, atonement and national revival”, they have the ability to improve national relations and reinvigorate nationalism. Nationalism involves more than living together within the same physical and political boundaries, and includes the loyalties and identities of citizens (Kymlicka, 2002; Bennett, 1998). Nationhood includes a sense of belonging to an intergenerational society, having a common past and common future. Constructing a national identity is useful for social and political stability, national defence and development, cohesive institutions, and intergenerational support. Nationalism is about trying to convince citizens that they belong together in a political community, have special obligations to each other, irrespective of race, religion or class, and share a bond of solidarity that they do not share with other nations, even if their values and ideals are similar (Kymlicka, 2002; LeCouteur & Augoustinos, 2001). Nationalism is constructed and manipulated, it is a powerful mechanism that has come to be seen as an organic product, something inevitable and natural. On the other hand, it has become increasingly recognised by the public that a national identity is both fabricated and factual, combining various contested identities, and developing over time (Barkan, 2000). Will Kymlicka (2002) discusses some of the ways in which liberal democracies have attempted to form common national identities amongst the people permanently residing in their territory. Tools to shape this national identity include “compulsory education, national media, official language laws, naturalization policies, national holidays and symbols, compulsory military service” (Kymlicka, 2002:263). Drastic measures for nation-building have included “conquest, ethnic cleansing, colonial rule, and large-scale settlement” (ibid, p.264).

Individual and national identities are partly formed through history, including histories of successes and survival, as well as suffering and destruction. The composition of these can change and what was once celebrated can become something shameful (Barkan, 2000). As history is altered, it can be threatening to a well-established identity that places value on a certain presentation of events (Curthoys, 1999). Particular events are viewed as representing key psychological traits, characteristics and qualities that contribute to ‘feeling’ part of a community and identifying with other members. Barkan (2000) discusses how national self-reflexivity has become important for nations attempting to construct moral identities and images, describing this as the ‘new guilt of nations’. Switzerland provides an example of a nation that needed to rebuild its national self-perception and international image as moral after controversy that it had provided funding to Nazis and was not the neutral country it had asserted for centuries. So too it appeared that Australia was attempting to establish a new moral national identity and international image through the apology to the Stolen Generations. Barkan (2000: xxvi) describes how “indigenous peoples present a major challenge to the contemporary nation-state’s self-perception as a just society and a unified sovereign nation”. Drawing on Ann Curthoys, Rose (2004: 12) is reminded that debates around versions of history are also debates “about the moral basis of Australian society”, which urge the critical examination of the moral basis of ‘we’ (non-Indigenous Australians), complicit in oppression, death and dispossession.
The Stolen Generations have been constructed, by many Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, as *the* injustice to be recognized and apologized for and as the key divisive issue to be resolved before true reconciliation can begin. It has become “an enormously powerful symbol (along with Mabo and Deaths in Custody) of the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia” (Read, 1999: ix). Harmonious race relations within Australia were constructed in the national apology as having been hindered and overshadowed by this single issue of failing to acknowledge and accept *one* set of past injustices. The national apology presented itself as the catalyst for national unity, enabling these two separate and distinct groups to reconcile. However, this is not the only past injustice experienced by Indigenous peoples, yet it has been singled out among all other atrocities. The Stolen Generations is possibly the more palatable event compared to massacres, sexual abuse, and even genocide (Attwood, 2005; Reynolds, 2001). It is seen as possible to address whereas others are not. In addition, ‘we’ (non-indigenous Australians) can face the idea of past racist laws and policies but refuse to admit to racism and prejudice against Indigenous peoples within contemporary Australian society. The national apology has used the Stolen Generations to symbolically stand for all of these atrocities, as well as other past and present injustices. Therefore the national apology concentrates on the Stolen Generations and virtually ignores and reduces other Indigenous people and issues including the current Northern Territory intervention.

The official and unofficial processes of remembrance in Australia have been effective in developing the enduring victim narrative that helps to shape the Australian national identity (Curthoys, 1999). Rose (2004) believes “in many ways we fetishise the violence, glamorising the frontier and erecting hegemonic silences around the facts that are taken to be too demanding or too demeaning”(4). The powerful victim narrative has dominated the national identity, encompassing the mythology of the battler struggling with land, weather, and powerful governments (Read, 1999). Pioneers and explorers are celebrated for their heroic struggles of survival against adversity and misfortune (Lattas, 1997; Curthoys, 1999), a view supported in the Coalition apology address presented by then Opposition Leader Brendan Nelson: “in brutally harsh conditions, from the small number of early British settlers our non-Indigenous ancestors have given us a nation the envy of any in the world” (Nelson, 2008). The story of Gallipoli is another key to this entrenched victim narrative, celebrating bravery and camaraderie in the face of enormous odds and ultimate defeat (Curthoys, 1999). The Coalition apology address drew on this narrative, imploring ‘us’ to “Let no one forget that they sent their sons to war, shaping our identity and place in the world. One hundred thousand in two wars alone gave their lives in our name and our uniform, lying forever in distant lands; silent witnesses to the future they have given us” (Nelson, 2008).

The victim narrative is found in the dominant Australian vernacular with the use of ‘the underdog’ and ‘Aussie battler’. This wider Australian self-perception has made it difficult for non-Indigenous Australians to view themselves and their nation as oppressors of Indigenous peoples. Curthoys (1999) wants to emphasise that she is not contrasting one false and one true version of history, nor that the differences can be easily resolved, but “that the emphasis in white Australian popular historical mythology on the settler as victim works against substantial acknowledgement and understanding of a colonial past,
and informs and inflames white racial discourse” (4). Curthoys proposes that there is a fear in white Australia of losing legitimacy, as another version of the Australian history threatens this common and celebrated ‘Australian’ identity with its established values and ideals. The victim narrative was perpetuated by former PM Howard, who Bird (1998: 125) quotes describing himself in 1997 as

“an intensely proud Australian, along, I am sure, with all other Australians who have a balanced view of the history of this country, I am immensely proud of what we have achieved over the last two hundred years. I believe that the Australian achievement is something of which all of us should be proud. It has been a heroic achievement in the face of immense difficulties”.

This resistance from non-Indigenous Australians to consider themselves as descendents of invaders and beneficiaries of violence, has prevented the inclusion of Indigenous experiences into the national identity (Curthoys, 1999). A focus on being proud of the accomplishments of white settlers restricts concurrently viewing a history characterised by episodes of dispossession and destruction.

Decades of refusal to accept the version of history advocated by supporters of apologising for the Stolen Generations can be seen in part due to the concern that individual and national identities were based on misperceptions. The national apology was successful in not structuring the ‘new’ version of history by removing parts of the national identity developed from the pioneering past, but rather establishing a non-controversial version of history and identity that both victims and perpetrators could share. A “fair go for all” was reinforced as “a core value of our nation”, “a basic Aussie belief” that non-Indigenous Australians are ensured remains despite a history that would seem to deny this. The ‘fair go’ was reinvigorated as the value that has enabled this apology to occur, and allowed Australians to reconcile, because of the “deep and abiding belief in the Australian community that, for the Stolen Generations, there was no fair go at all” (Rudd, 2008).

The national apology delivered a message through the metaphor of a book that this one ‘chapter’ of history has been closed, “healing of the nation” is underway and “this new page in the history of our great continent can now be written” (Rudd, 2008). Now that ‘we’ (non-Indigenous Australians) have “come together to right a great wrong” and “remove[d] a great stain from the nation’s soul”, division and fraught relations have been resolved and the nation can be brought together to “begin a new chapter” (Rudd, 2008) in the nation’s future. Social harmony, solidarity and cohesion are immediate effects of ‘sorry’, enabling “First Australians, First Fleeters, and those who first took the oath of allegiance just a few weeks ago – let’s grasp this opportunity to craft a new future for this great land, Australia” (Rudd, 2008). Although successful apologies and restitution promote improved future relations, it is also necessary to provide mechanisms that enable the society to remember and recognize the continuing loss, suffering and responsibility (Barkan, 2000) through remembrance days, national holidays, minutes of silence and national monuments. Rose (2004: 14) argues that in the Australian context
“part of our moral burden is an injunction to hold the memory of violence within our texts. To write as if the suffering of those who were harmed never mattered would be to perpetuate violence in the present. A moral engagement of the past in the present thus resists closure, whether that closure aims to decree that the violence in the past (or even in the present) is finished, or whether it claims more specifically to outlaw or ridicule historians and others who seek to remember violence”.

Therefore in the act of ‘moving on’, without ensuring the pain that was denied for so long is not neglected again, Indigenous histories are being reinforced as nationally insignificant.

The ‘past’ shapes how we experience the ‘present’, “the dead are a powerful part of community” (Rose, 2004: 28). Without acts that encourage remembrance, “national histories that commemorate some deaths, but not others, rework monologue” (ibid, p.29) and fall short of successful reconciliation. Examples of global sites for remembrance include Holocaust and Jewish museums, Vietnam War museums, Khmer Rouge memorials, national war memorials and WWI & II cenotaphs. Sites of conflict, massacres and burial grounds are just some of the spaces developed for learning about and remembering the past. Processes of memorialisation in Australia are fostered officially and unofficially through government programs, political support, and public participation that includes: the ANZAC Day (25th April) public holiday with ceremonies, marches and wearing a sprig of rosemary on the lapel; observing a minute silence on Remembrance Day (11th November); the ‘Lest We Forget’ motto; the Australian War Memorial and Tomb of the Unknown Soldier; laying wreaths on graves; and travelling to the sites of conflicts such as Gallipoli and the Kokoda Trail (Curthoys, 1999). These are some of the ways in which Australian society remembers the past and is encouraged not to ‘move on’. Conflicts, deaths, wars, tragedy, and triumph are memorialised globally by both the victors and the defeated. And what is being memorialised is the fighting, the violence, the disasters, the tragedy, and sometimes victory but not solely the resolutions, the treaties, the end of the war or conflict. However, in the case of the national apology, it appears that, especially in subsequent discourses in the national print media, television and radio, and everyday conversations and informal discussions, what is being memorialised and commemorated is the apology itself (SMH, 2008; Jopson, 2008; Metherell, 2008). The focus is not on remembering the forced removal of children, the pain of separation, the abuse suffered in institutions, and the personal identity struggles, but on the saying of ‘sorry’, on the national apology delivered by PM Rudd. The apology itself has become what is important, taking on the symbolic significance of memorialisation rather than the injustices to the Stolen Generations.

Conclusion
Whilst acknowledging that the national apology did attempt to further social inclusiveness and address the “unfulfilled spirit of the 1967 referendum” (Rudd, 2008), this paper explores the political rhetoric in the national apology as perpetuating restrictive images of ‘authentic’ Aboriginality, creating new fictive relationships and artificially establishing national unity. Seamlessly joining competing and contested discourses the
apology attempted to establish a new moral identity that both worked against established settler victim narratives and was non-threatening to ‘core’ (hegemonic) national beliefs. Successful apologies enable life to proceed with improved social relations, but also provide mechanisms through which society is encouraged to remember and recognise the continuance of hurt and suffering of direct and indirect victims and the continuing responsibility of direct and indirect perpetrators. By memorialising the apology rather than the atrocities, the Australian nation is able to express the great Australian traits of fellow-feeling and “a fair go” for Indigenous victims whilst simultaneously shelving traits of racist discrimination and bigotry that allowed atrocities to occur in the past and may continue in the present. Without processes of memorialisation of the atrocities themselves the dialogue required for reconciliation will remain absent.

Bibliography
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