

# *Settler Colonialism and (Re)conciliation: Frontier Violence, Affective Performances and Imaginative Refoundings*

by Penelope Edmonds

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‘What might an Indigenous-led emancipatory politics and a truly postcolonial sociality look like? What are its limits and possibilities within this fraught paradigm, the double bind of reconciliation?’ Penelope Edmonds poses these urgent questions in *Settler Colonialism and (Re)conciliation: Frontier Violence, Affective Performances and Imaginative Refoundings*. In recent months, her transnational study has become pressing reading as the ‘Uluru Statement from the Heart’<sup>1</sup> reignites perennial debates about the relationship between Indigenous people and the settler state.

Official reconciliation narratives derive from a utopian politics that often evades history’s atrocities, argues Edmonds. A surge of good feeling cannot simply wipe the slate clean, particularly in nations without a marked decolonisation moment. In addressing the role of performance and affect in the refounding of national identity, Edmonds contributes to a body of scholarship about reconciliation discourse that includes the work of Miranda Johnson and Glen Coulthard, and draws on ideas of the cultural life of emotions developed by Sara Ahmed.<sup>2</sup> Through a series of case studies, she takes us to reconciliation events in the United States, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, and threads these travels with discussions of the material artefacts created and used during contact moments and their aftermath (such as wampum belts, breast plates and ‘peace’ medals), and during the reconciliation events (such as Sorry Books, the black-and-white twine handed to participants at

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1 ‘Uluru Statement from the Heart’, Referendum Council, 26 May 2017, [www.referendumcouncil.org.au/event/uluru-statement-from-the-heart](http://www.referendumcouncil.org.au/event/uluru-statement-from-the-heart) (accessed 29 September 2017).

2 Johnson 2011; Coulthard 2014; Ahmed 2004.

a Tasmanian event and a peace pipe smoked in an official meeting between Sioux leaders and the Governor of South Dakota). Edmonds concludes that the most successful decolonising events stem from Indigenous-led grass-roots campaigns, work across cultures and carry an element of risk. They embrace history with all of its accommodations, frictions and horrors.

The book revisits a dizzying 400 years of colonial history – treaties, massacres and skin-of-the-teeth survival. We are reminded that the term ‘reconciliation’ itself ignores the lack of ‘conciliation’ at the heart of much early intercultural contact. Particular symbols recur across sites and times, especially the handshake. It gleams from commemorative medals and coins, its shadow-side revealed in the proclamation boards of Governor George Arthur of Van Diemen’s Land, which also depict a warning image of British redcoats hanging an Aboriginal man.

Edmonds begins in present-day New York state, where two treaties forged in 1613 and 1794 between the Haudenosaunee (also known as the Iroquois confederacy) and Dutch traders and the US Government respectively are mobilised for present-day actions, including a high-profile legal case for enforcement of the latter document. Elsewhere, activist groups rework the symbolism of the Two Row Wampum belt historically used in Iroquois diplomacy, as well as the idea of a ‘covenant chain’ that binds various Indigenous groups to each other and to settlers. In 2013, members of the confederacy and their supporters take to the Hudson River for a 13-day canoe trip known as the Two Row Wampum Renewal Campaign.

Turning to South Dakota, Edmonds focuses on a 2004 clash between members of a reenactment party celebrating the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804–06 and representatives of the Lakota, Dakota, Ponca, Kiowa and Diné Nations. She then circles back to defining historical moments, including the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 and the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890. Within a thicket of South Dakota reconciliation events, the gruelling Future Generations/Oomaka Tokatakiya Ride to Wounded Knee stands out as a potent reenactment that allows Indigenous participants and supporters to access the embodied suffering of massacre victims.

In New South Wales, Edmonds considers the People’s Walk for Reconciliation that surged across the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 2000, and the annual Myall Creek memorial service. Exploring the varied responses to the Bridge Walk, Edmonds assesses how what was, for many, a day filled with a sense of reconciliation and hope, rang hollow for some observers. By comparison, the annual Myall Creek service, created to commemorate the infamous 1838 massacre, succeeds because it emerges from an intimate connection to local history and will to conciliate by community members, who include descendants of both Indigenous victims and European aggressors.

Moving to Tasmania, Edmonds visits two ceremonies held in 2001 to commemorate early contact between British soldiers and Tasmanian Aboriginal people: the National Sorry Day reconciliation circle at Risdon Cove, and a cross-cultural ceremony held at

Three Thumbs Lookout to mark a stormy night in 1830 when a group of Aboriginal people broke through the 'Black Line' military cordon. The latter event in particular combined elements of both European and Aboriginal ritual. Edmonds argues that, unlike national reconciliation events, which run the risk of brushing away historical context and continuing structural inequalities, such local events are fundamentally decolonising because they position Indigenous experience at their heart.

The journey ends in Te Urewera, Aotearoa New Zealand, where members of the Treaty of Waitangi Tribunal arrive on a dray as part of a historical reenactment that opens a week of hearings. It is 2005. Standing before the tribunal members, Tūhoe man Tame Iti turns reenactment into activism when he fires a rifle at the national flag and spits on the soil in front of the Governor-General. Edmonds sets this action against the backdrop of the 1840 treaty's history and its subsequent role as a foundational document of biculturalism, despite the fact that some Māori *iwi* were not signatories, and that others contest its terms.

The book is sharpest when discussing moments of Indigenous refusal such as Iti's: an anger that Edmonds describes as often pathologised by the settler state. Such actions expose the fragile tissue of an official reconciliation discourse that, in striving for consensus, quivers at the slightest puff of conflict. Yet, alongside these examples of rejection of consensus politics, the book also brims with the work of figures such as Tasmanian Elder Ida West, who conceive commemoration and conciliation ceremonies full of complex emotions – embodied pain, reverence for ancestors, hope, friendship. Here hands are still shaken, but only once the past is acknowledged.

Contemporary Indigenous artists contribute new pieces to the catalogue of objects that Edmonds explores throughout the narrative, among them the shell-like shapes formed during a performance piece staged by Tasmanian Aboriginal artist Karen Casey in 2006. At the event in Adelaide, prominent Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders faced each other across a table. Between their clasped hands warm dollops of plaster hardened, to form casts, artefacts of what Casey terms 'the space in between' (p. 4). In its rich contemplation, *Settler Colonialism and (Re)conciliation* itself becomes a written trace of the affective contact space in which ideas of nation continue to be reworked.

## References

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- Coulthard, Glen 2014, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Johnson, Miranda 2011, 'Reconciliation, indigeneity, and postcolonial nationhood in settler states', *Journal of Postcolonial Studies* (14)2: 187–201.

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