Abortive Redemption? The Idea of Indigenous Tradition in Australian Reconciliation

Some anthropologists have concluded that, in understanding Indigenous Australians, myth and history are inextricably intertwined. This is true of discourses about both ‘traditional Aboriginal culture’ and the effects of invasion and colonisation on indigenous Australians, which are equally implicated in the negotiation of Australian national identity. This identity has recently been conditioned by a project of Reconciliation, which has been accompanied by a wave of official apologies and popular Reconciliation marches.

I examine the relationship between myth and history in Australian Reconciliation in the light of Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s (2000) argument that ‘collective historical apologies’, being based on the collective projection of ahistorical, liberal subjectivity, are ‘abortive rituals, whose very conditions of emergence deny the possibility of transformation’. This same idea is at the heart of the distinction between ‘practical’ and ‘symbolic’ reconciliation that has been made in Australian politics. Yet all sides of Australian politics turn to history for support, even as they employ transcendent images – ‘realistic’ and ‘romantic’ – to give their histories value. Trouillot’s thesis here aligns with ‘realism’, giving his writing an oddly conservative tone. But I argue that the efficacy of Reconciliation is underrated if it is not seen to be both assimilatory and a move towards rights based on ‘difference’. Trouillot misjudges the power of apologies to the extent that he occludes one side of an oppositional tension in liberal politics.