

# **Constructing the national good: Howard and the rhetoric of benevolence**

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This paper represents an attempt at elaborating some of the complex ways in which the challenge that Indigenous sovereignty presents to the white Australian nation is managed through recourse to discourses of benevolence. I propose that enactments of benevolence evidence attempts at repressing white violence, and thus re-asserting a right to white belonging in this country, founded as it is upon what Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2004) terms 'the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty'. More specifically, I understand benevolence as the enactment of a 'white national good', its aim being to ward off accusations of racism, race privilege and histories of oppression and genocide. I thus follow Ranjana Khanna (2003) in her suggestion that the 'colonial past' manifests itself in the present – that the foundational violence of white belonging continues to be played out in the practices and policies of white Australia. This is particularly evident in political discourses, which work to reify the nation as being essentially white, thus lending authority to individual assertions of white privilege through the assumption of a national good (Rutherford 2002). In this way, political rhetoric may be seen as warranting a form of white belonging that is based on the disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty.

In order to demonstrate these points, I focus on the Menzies lecture delivered by prime minister John Howard in December 2000. Through an analysis of this lecture I suggest that discourses of 'practical reconciliation' provide examples of white benevolence in action. From this perspective, benevolence may be understood as a rhetorical tool that works to equate white and Indigenous belonging, and thus evidences an attempt at managing Indigenous sovereignty. Through an application of recent theorising on 'the gift' (e.g., Osteen 2002a, b), I suggest that examples of benevolence, such as those demonstrated by Howard, represent an attempt at equating alienable and inalienable rights, the outcome being that 'gifts' of white benevolence are seen as demanding reciprocity in the form of a recognition of white belonging. Yet, as will be elaborated throughout the analysis, such attempts at co-opting Indigenous people under the terms of white nationalism in fact demonstrate the instability of belonging that has exemplified our location as white people in this country since colonisation. Thus, rather than denying Indigenous sovereignty, such attempts to assimilate inalienable rights to land and belonging render visible<sup>1</sup> the limitations of the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty for legitimising white ownership, and as a result, contribute to a critique of the foundational violence that structures white belonging. Benevolence may thus be understood as demonstrating a vested interest in white self-management, rather than as an act of an always already 'good white nation'.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to point out here that whilst I use the term 'render visible' throughout this paper to refer to whiteness, it is only the case that whiteness must be rendered visible *for white people*. Whiteness and white privilege have always been seen critically by those people positioned as being 'outside' of whiteness (hooks 1992; Moreton-Robinson 2000).

## Managing Possessive Investments

Aileen Moreton-Robinson's (2004) work on the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty suggests three key aspects that demonstrate the investments that we as non-indigenous people<sup>2</sup> have in maintaining unequal social relations in Australia. First, the possessive logic 'works ideologically and discursively to naturalise the nation as a white possession', second, it is 'predicated on exclusion and what it does not own – the sovereignty of the Indigenous other', and finally, it 'promotes the idea of race neutrality on the premise that 'race' only belongs to the other and has little impact upon the distribution of society's resources' (5-6). In this section I will elaborate how these three points are evident in Howard's talk around reconciliation, and thus how such subjective investments in whiteness work to deny the violence of white belonging.

In regards to the first point, the construction of the nation as a white possession is central to managing the unsettling that Indigenous sovereignty produces. In her work on white nationalism, Jennifer Rutherford (2002) suggests that white belonging since colonisation has involved an ongoing struggle to assert the naturalness of our location as white people, and to thus negate the 'impossibility of signification' that continues to trouble white ownership. This point demonstrates the uncanniness of white belonging – that the construction of white ownership as an *a priori* fact is based on the fiction of terra nullius. As a result, the revealing of this fiction through (for example) Indigenous land claims works to render uncanny our belonging, and thus destabilises any foundational claim to white ownership or belonging (Riggs in-press). The possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty may thus be understood as one attempt at managing this uncanniness, by constructing the nation as a white possession.

Such claims to possession are evident in Howard's talk around reconciliation, specifically, in his reference to the nation as being implicitly white. Thus he states that 'a great level of goodwill exists towards the Indigenous people of *our* nation' (2000, emphasis added). As Ghassan Hage (2002) suggests, this use of the first person plural in reference to 'our nation' works to construct the audience as white – that the category 'our' refers to non-Indigenous people (see also Lecouteur, Rapley and Augoustinos 2001). As a result, Indigenous people are positioned as objects, rather than subjects, of the white nation (Luke 1997). Howard also constructs the nation as being 'possessively white' in his suggestion that

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term 'we as non-indigenous people' throughout this paper to acknowledge the complexities that shape our privilege as a result of the dispossession and genocide of Indigenous people. Whilst I focus in this paper predominantly on white people (e.g., prime minister Howard), I believe it is important to recognise that all non-indigenous people benefit from the legacy of colonisation in this country. I thus use the term not to appease my own conscience, but rather to continually draw attention to the privilege that underpins the claims to belonging of all non-indigenous people, regardless of their political or personal positions. For a more in-depth discussion of these issues see Nicoll 2000, 2004; Riggs 2004.

*We can never feel satisfied, nor can we feel complete, until [Australia's social] cohesion is extended throughout all sections of the community and specifically until Indigenous Australians enjoy the same opportunities and the same plentiful lives as any other Australian (emphasis added).*

In this way, the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty works to construct 'social cohesion' as a white property that can be 'generously' extended to Indigenous Australians. This logic of possession thus locates the 'ability to give' as a moral property of the white nation, thus arrogating to the nation the power to define who will, and who will not, be included within its boundaries. Such constructions effectively secure the nation as a white possession, and thus manage the uncanny nature of white belonging through recourse to the privileged location that has been assumed by us as non-indigenous people since colonisation.

This point demonstrates Moreton-Robinson's (2004) suggestion that the possessive logic is based on exclusion – on the denial of Indigenous sovereignty. This denial is achieved in part through the prioritising of white ways of knowing. As a result, white values and the opinions of white people (such as Howard) are taken to be central in determining what counts as reconciliation. This continual assertion of a 'right to define' denies the incommensurable differences that shape Indigenous and non-indigenous experiences in this country, thus effectively undermining Indigenous sovereignty by implicitly calling for adherence to a white model of reconciliation. Thus as Howard states in his address:

On issues as complex and difficult as the call for some form of legal treaty or formal national apology [i.e., the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty] beyond expressions of personal sorrow and regret, people of genuine goodwill can and will legitimately hold different points of view.

Whilst Howard here purports to recognise 'different points of view', he does so by prefacing this with the statement that 'people of genuine goodwill *can and will*' have differing opinions. In doing so, he asserts that white people (presumably those who are of 'genuine goodwill') have an inherent right to 'hold different points of view' (i.e., they are 'legitimate'). This statement is thus contrasted with what by implication would be considered an 'illegitimate' view of these 'complex and difficult' issues – that white people have no right to a point of view that discounts Indigenous sovereignty. In this way, Howard effectively silences the voicing of Indigenous sovereignty *on the terms set by Indigenous people*, and instead recentres white ways of knowing as 'legitimate' (Moreton-Robinson 1998). As I will elaborate further in the next section, the 'goodwill' of 'benevolent white people' is thus one tool that is deployed to further marginalise the critiques and challenges raised by Indigenous people.

In regards to Moreton-Robinson's (2004) final point, and one that has been elaborated by George Lipsitz (1998) in the US context, is the way that 'race' is not conceptualised as mediating access to 'possessive investments'. This understanding of race as the 'cage of the other' has long been identified as a key rhetorical tool for discrediting calls for 'equal access' and for affirmative action policies (e.g., Hage 1998, Moreton-Robinson 2000). Yet as Lipsitz suggests, 'neither conservative "free market" policies nor liberal social welfare policies can solve the "white problem" ... because both reinforce the possessive investment in whiteness' (22). In this way, white privilege continues to go unexamined, even if race is recognised as a factor in relation to access to rights. This therefore becomes a useful tool for right wing politics, in that governments can claim to address 'minority issues', whilst perpetuating the notion that white people accumulate property and financial standing through 'individual merit', rather than as a result of unearned white privilege (Augoustinos, Tuffin and Rapley 1999, Lecouteur and Augoustinos 2001).

This framing of race as a 'non-issue' comes up in Howard's lecture when he talks about the 'gains' that have been made in Indigenous communities over the past 30 years through government policies. He suggests that:

[The] criticism, that nothing is getting better, is common to both extremes of the debate – those who would abolish all such *special programmes*, and to those who say that nothing less than a legally enforceable treaty and *special* Constitutional rights will 'solve the problem' (emphasis added).

This quote raises two notable points in relation to the supposed 'non-issue' of race. First, is the suggestion that programmes and policies directed at Indigenous people are 'special'. The implication of this is that such programmes represent an unearned privilege that Indigenous people hold. Obviously this is a laughable suggestion, yet it is one that is constantly used to undermine the right to reparation that Indigenous people are entitled to as a result of the recognition of the impact of genocide and dispossession. Thus, in effect, the construction of Indigenous programmes as 'special' works to deny the privileges that we as white people hold as a result of the entire political and welfare system being structured around and through white ways of knowing (Augoustinos, Lecouteur and Soyland 2001).

The second point here is that Howard juxtaposes those right wing groups who advocate for the abolishment of Indigenous programmes, against those groups of people (presumably he is referring primarily to Indigenous people) who are calling for a treaty and constitutional recognition. The offensive suggestion that this would constitute 'special constitutional rights' aside, the contrast that Howard provides effectively positions right wing and Indigenous groups as having equal access to voicing their opinions, and moreover, to expect that these opinions will be heard. In this way, race is put to one side as a primary marker of difference in Australia, and

Howard instead positions the political sphere as constituted through an 'equal playing field' – one which thus allows all people equal space within the nation.

As the brief exploration of these three points demonstrates, the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty underpins many of the ways in which we as non-Indigenous people talk about our claims to belonging and ownership in this country. What I have sought to illustrate are some of the complex rhetorical strategies that are employed to warrant white privilege, or more precisely, to discount white privilege as a factor to be considered. As a result, the investments that we as white people hold in regards to the status quo of racialised differences are founded upon the disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty. Yet, at the same time, the vast majority of white people (and we could tentatively place Howard in this category) purport to support Indigenous rights, and claim to recognise 'that the treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in earlier times represents the most blemished chapter in our history' (Howard 2000). In the following section, I thus look more closely at how such claims to benevolence are aimed at masking the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty, and may therefore be understood as yet another means through which Indigenous sovereignty is denied, and thus white violence perpetuated.

### **Power & Benevolence**

As I suggested in the previous section, practices of benevolence work to construct the white nation as inherently good. Thus as Ruthford (2002, 81) suggests, 'unseemly events that may have happened are [viewed as] the result of good intention gone awry' (see also Hage 2003). This focus on white benevolence thus works to manage the ongoing histories of white violence through recourse to the moral intent of the 'civilising mission' – we as non-Indigenous people can't *really* be blamed for our violence against Indigenous people as our intentions were/are good (Riggs 2004). Such constructions of benevolence are evident in Howard's talk, in the ways that he focuses on all of the 'good things' that he and his government are doing for Indigenous people. This works to ward off any accusations that white people benefit from race privilege, or that government policies are founded on racist assumptions. Instead, Howard is able to construct his policies as morally upstanding and as representing a 'fair go' for Indigenous people, a position that he again contrasts with those who would seek 'symbolic expressions of support' for Indigenous people – something opposed to the 'real meaning' that his policies supposedly represent (2000).

In this regard, Howard repeatedly draws on a construction of 'practical reconciliation' as representing a 'real' response to the issues faced by Indigenous people. Thus he states that:

A measure of the genuineness of the government's commitment to practical reconciliation is that the \$2.3 billion now annually spent on

Indigenous-specific programmes is, in *real* terms, a record for any government ... while no one denies that as a nation we need to do better than in the past, there are examples of *real* achievement in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (emphases added).

By constructing 'practical reconciliation' in this way, Howard is able to position his government as the most progressive of any in relation to 'Indigenous specific programmes'. This in effect works to claim an anti-racist position for the government, by focusing on all of the 'good things' that the government does for Indigenous people. Howard also puts forward the idea that the 'real achievements' made by Indigenous people are a direct result of 'Indigenous-specific programmes', rather than resulting from the agency of Indigenous people. Such a construction thus reinforces the notion of the 'civilising mission' – that Indigenous people are in need of help from white people, and that 'real achievements' result from the interventions of white government policies and programmes.

Howard also relies upon 'indisputable evidence' in regards to 'long-term improvement in many Aboriginal socio-economic indicators' in order to demonstrate that white benevolence has resulted in benefits for Indigenous people. Some of these suggested by Howard include:

The proportion of Indigenous Australians who own their own home has increased from 1 in 4 to 1 in 3 since the 1970s... Aboriginal enrolments in higher education increased by 60 percent in the 1990s... [and] at least 15 percent of the continent is now Aboriginal owned or controlled.

Without wanting to detract from the importance of these gains, I wish to draw attention to that which is not said in these statements, and the ways in which these unmentioned aspects work to manage white privilege and white violence through the deployment of benevolence. Thus in citing these examples Howard employs a rhetorical ploy which glosses over the corollaries of these statistics: there is no mention of how many white Australians own their own homes, there is no contextualisation of Indigenous higher education enrolments (i.e., we have no way of gauging what this 60 percent increase means), and there is no recognition of what the '15 percent of the continent... now Aboriginal owned and controlled' actually represents (cf., Riggs and Selby 2003). In other words, there are no connections drawn between Indigenous ownership or dispossession (what about the other 75 percent?) and colonisation. Moreover, there is no acknowledgement of the immense struggles that underpin this control of '15 percent of the continent', nor the fact that the Howard government has actively sought to undermine Indigenous land rights claims (see Moreton-Robinson 1998). Instead, Howard focuses on these outcomes as arising from the benevolence of the white nation, thus discounting the resistances that Indigenous people have made since colonisation, and the gains that have been made *by* Indigenous people, *for* Indigenous people.

This demonstrates a point that Ghassan Hage (2002) makes in his work on the white nation – that acts of benevolence mask the power differentials that frame which groups are positioned as givers and receivers of benevolence (cf., Ryan 2000). Thus the ability to be benevolent is always already predicated upon the power to do so – it does not require the giving up or challenging of power, but rather is reliant upon an imbalance of power to instantiate the categories of giver and receiver. This understanding of benevolence thus demonstrates how Howard's 'benevolent practices' evidence an attempt at masking the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty: if benevolence is understood as an act of generosity that is seen to be unrelated to social disadvantage or histories of oppression, then it is possible for white privilege to remain unmarked, and for the possessive logic to be played off as the benevolent acts of 'good white people' (Riggs 2004). This masking of the power differentials underpinning benevolence is evident in Howard's constructions of reconciliation as being an issue of equity, rather than privilege, in his acknowledgement of:

... the fine work of the [Reconciliation] Council in general in promoting *the cause* of reconciliation throughout Australian society (emphasis added).

By constructing reconciliation as a 'cause', Howard is able to direct focus away from the systemic factors underlying the disadvantages faced by Indigenous people, and instead to construct it as a 'cause' that deserves attention by benevolent white people. Similarly, Howard consistently suggests that:

... rather than [having] a disproportionate focus on what is the preferred path [for reconciliation], our collective priority must be to strengthen support for the ongoing process and, most importantly, improve the lives of Indigenous Australians.

As I have already suggested, Howard's claim that 'we' need to focus on 'real change', rather than 'symbolic support', works to minimise the challenge that Indigenous sovereignty presents to the white nation, and instead constructs change as purely an economic matter – thus reflecting the white nation's possessive logic. In other words, in addition to deflecting attention away from the systemic functions of white privilege, Howard's focus on 'real' as opposed to 'symbolic' change exemplifies the logic of possession that informs the white nation's reading of reconciliation. This is not to suggest that financial reparation should not be an important aspect of reconciliation, but rather to draw attention to the ways in which such a focus may serve to recentre 'white benevolence', rather than critiquing white power. Thus Howard suggests that 'our collective priority' (and here we may read this 'our' as referring to non-indigenous people, as I have already outlined) must be to 'improve the lives of Indigenous Australians' – to continue the benevolent mission of

imperialism, rather than to question our rights to belonging and ownership, founded as they are upon 'illegal possession' (Moreton-Robinson 2003, 24).

Finally, this use of benevolence (in order to mask the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty) is evident in Howard's constructions of temporality within the lecture. Thus, whilst on the one hand he suggests that within Indigenous communities there are 'Australians who need our help', on the other hand he suggests that such communities are 'living, active... not a generation from the past'. Such understandings of Indigenous people work to construct Howard's policies as benevolent, by ignoring the reasons why Indigenous people experience disadvantage. By locating Indigenous communities as 'active', rather than as 'a generation from the past', Howard is able to discount the impact of colonisation, and instead construct Indigenous communities as 'a cause' or as in need of 'special programmes' (as previously discussed), thus effectively locating the blame for Indigenous disadvantage within Indigenous communities. (As he suggests, government policies need to focus on the 'symptoms of community disfunction (sic) such as substance abuse and violence' – a focus that denies the historical antecedents of these issues). Again, this allows for a construction of benevolence as the enactment of the 'good white nation', rather than as the legacy of colonisation.

This construction of Indigenous communities as 'active' and 'in the present' allows Howard to position Indigenous people in what I would suggest is a strategically agentic position. As a result, Indigenous agency is recognised, but on specific terms set by the white nation. In the next section, I draw on recent theorising on 'the gift' to further elaborate how such constructions of Indigenous agency enable Howard to position white benevolence as a precursor to a recognition of white belonging – that white benevolence demonstrates an attempt at engendering a reciprocal relationship, whereby Indigenous people are expected to 'return the favour' of white benevolence.

### **Gift Relationships and the Rhetoric of Equality**

In his work on 'gift relationships', Mark Osteen (2002a) suggests a number of key points that I take to be applicable to understanding Howard's use of benevolence to frame his policies of practical reconciliation. First, is the notion that 'giving gifts involves bad faith... we lie to ourselves by choosing to ignore or forget our calculation of self-interest' (16). Second, is the suggestion that 'a desire to be recognised' is an important facet of gift giving relationships (17). And finally, he draws a point from Bourdieu's work on the gift, to suggest that 'gift exchange is a euphemism... that masks... an ugly economic truth' (25). Together, these three points draw attention to the rhetorical strategies that may be seen to underpin Howard's discourses of benevolence, aimed as they are at managing the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty.

The economics that inform Howard's 'practical reconciliation' policies thus evidence a logic that positions Indigenous people within a white frame of reference – as people that can and should negotiate the economic sphere so as to 'overcome disadvantage'. Thus Howard devotes a considerable portion of his lecture to outlining what he sees as 'a culture of dependency and victimhood' (2000). From this he is able to state that:

Through policy initiatives that will flow from perceptive investigations such as the McClure Report... [which examined] the links between economic and social engagement... we can develop new and better ways to empower individuals and promote self-reliance throughout [Indigenous] communities.

In this way, Howard is able to construct 'empowerment' and 'self-reliance' as a gift given to Indigenous communities by focusing on the 'new and better ways' that white 'policy initiatives' provide for managing reconciliation. Thus Howard implicitly suggests that by 'giving' Indigenous people 'empowerment' and 'self-reliance', the white nation may engender a 'fair go for all'.

This assumption is central to the gift relationship that Howard's benevolence generates – if Indigenous people are positioned as active agents within a gift relationship, then Howard is able to co-opt Indigenous people into an expectation of reciprocity. Thus, in the context of talking about 'policy initiatives' aimed at addressing the McClure report, Howard suggests that the 'core Australian values... of equity and a fair go' will enable the development of 'new and better ways to help all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous'. The question that this begs, then, is that if Howard does not pay attention to the need to challenge unearned white privilege, and if his policies are based on a possessive logic that discounts racism, then what is he referring to when he says that such policies will benefit 'non-Indigenous Australians'? I would suggest that this particular statement renders visible the gift logic that informs Howard's 'benevolence'. Thus the implicit assertion that practical reconciliation will create 'good, productive, autonomous' Indigenous citizens allows Howard to set the terms of national belonging as one that focuses on reciprocity. This assertion is evident in his closing remarks, where he states that:

We have come a long way in recent years... [we are] united in our values and united in the hopes we hold for the future. The way forward towards true reconciliation is surely to build upon this unity...

By drawing on a framework of unity, Howard is able to again construct national belonging as constituted through sameness – that Indigenous people share 'values and hopes' with non-indigenous people, and that this 'common goal approach' is the most productive for working towards 'true reconciliation' (cf., Johnson 2000). From this we can clearly see that Howard's definition of 'true reconciliation' relies upon a gift like relationship, whereby the white nation 'gives' Indigenous people equal

access, and in return Indigenous people recognise the need for 'shared values' and a common sense of belonging. Thus on Howard's terms, Indigenous people are strategically located as equal players, the aim being to promote the reciprocity that is required in order to legitimise white belonging as being 'just like' Indigenous belonging.

Yet, as I will now discuss, this attempt at placing Indigenous and non-indigenous people on the same footing is based upon a possessive logic that fails to recognise incommensurable differences, and which thus effectively negates Howard's attempts to co-opt Indigenous people into a gift relationship. Howard's implicit reliance upon reciprocity may instead be seen as an anxious attempt at warranting non-indigenous belonging in the face of Indigenous sovereignty.

### **Inalienable Rights and the Challenge of Indigenous Sovereignty**

The above discussion of the gift can be further elaborated by exploring the distinction between alienable and inalienable rights. The former may be understood as representing commodity-based social relations, which 'involve *alienable* objects exchanged between reciprocally independent transactors that thereby establish *quantitative* relationships between the objects transacted', whilst inalienable objects are those 'exchanged by reciprocally dependant people that establish *qualitative* relationships between the transactors' (Osteen 2002b, 233, original emphases). Whilst this binary runs the risk of romanticising the latter category as being 'beyond commodity', it may still provide a useful distinction that can be applied to the gift relationship as exemplified in Howard's rhetoric. Thus I would suggest that Howard's attempt at engendering reciprocity through practical reconciliation is reliant upon the confusing of alienable and inalienable rights – he attempts to bring the two terms into metonymy so as to justify white belonging and simultaneously deny Indigenous sovereignty.

Yet, as the above points about inalienability demonstrate, there is an inherent impossibility to equating inalienable and alienable rights. Thus whilst Howard may seek to create a reciprocal relationship through the 'giving' of equal rights and 'special programmes' (which in itself is an interesting paradox), the relationship remains a fantasy of the white nation, rather than one that actually represents 'unity' between Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians (cf., Hage 1998). Instead, any attempt to co-opt the inalienable rights that Indigenous people hold to ownership of land demonstrates the 'need for recognition' that underpins attempts at white belonging in Australia. In their paper on white belonging, Vassilacopoulos and Nicolacopoulos (2003) suggest that white subjectivities demonstrate an 'ontological disturbance' – that any possibility for our belonging as colonising subjects is unsettled through the relationship we have (or deny) to Indigenous sovereignty. Thus attempts by the white nation to subsume Indigenous people within a white

framework of belonging-through-reciprocity effectively works to undermine claims to white belonging.

To elaborate: Vassilacopoulos and Nicolacopoulos (2003) suggest that in order for us as white people to belong, we require the recognition of our 'right to belong' at an ontological level. Yet if the sovereignty of Indigenous people is ignored, there can be no possibility of such recognition for white people. As a result, I would suggest that the violence that discourses of benevolence engender demonstrate one of the ways in which benevolence is an ongoing practice that is directed at managing this ontological disturbance, so as to erase or subsume Indigenous people to the extent that the white nation becomes its own point of recognition. Yet, if we are to understand white subjectivities as founded upon this lack of belonging, or more specifically, through a lack of any recognition of a 'right to belong', then the 'ontological disturbance' that our subjectivities represent prevents us being in any way other than through anxiety (Riggs in-press, Riggs 2003).

In these very complex ways, a focus on attempts at engendering reciprocity render visible the reliance that we as white people have upon Indigenous people in order to warrant our sense of self. Thus, whilst Howard attempts to construct his benevolence as initiating a gift relationship, it may instead be viewed as a response to the implicit gift that the presence of Indigenous people bestows – the binary construction of non-indigenous self/Indigenous other (problematically) allows for us as non-indigenous people to claim a form of self that is predicated on this distinction. As a result, and by this logic, it is not Indigenous people who 'owe' the white nation for its benevolence, but rather that the white nation owes Indigenous people for any sense of belonging (however fraught with tension).

It is important to point out that I am privileging a white model of reciprocity and gift giving here in order to examine how discourses of benevolence work to manage the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty. My previous suggestion that Indigenous people bestow a gift should not be read as a naïve reassertion of the centrality of white interpretations of being and belonging. Rather, my intention is to point out exactly how the logic of benevolence, reciprocity and possession is based upon a flawed understanding of rights. More specifically, the binaries of self and other that inform white belonging are neither universal nor ahistorical – they are the result of the ongoing practices of colonisation that prioritise white ways of knowing – much the same way as the denial of Indigenous sovereignty is rooted in ongoing histories of imperial and colonial governmental practices in Australia. What this logic fails to take into account, and which I would suggest the equation of alienable and inalienable rights attempts to manage, is the sovereignty of Indigenous people, a fact which neither the fiction of terra nullius, nor the assertion of white belonging can overwrite. Indigenous sovereignty thus exceeds white systems of representation – it refuses co-option into the binaries of whiteness and denies the legitimacy of the logic of possession. Thus as Fiona Nicoll (2000, 370) states; 'Indigenous sovereignty exists

*because I cannot know of what it consists; my epistemological artillery cannot penetrate it'.*

To return to the work of Moreton-Robinson (2004), the possessive logic of patriarchal whiteness that inheres to Howard's constructions of practical reconciliation (as a practice of white benevolence) is thus flawed in two ways. First, it denies Indigenous sovereignty, and in so doing, effectively denies any recognition of a right to white belonging. From this perspective, white benevolence is a thinly disguised attempt at overcoming this 'ontological disturbance' by engendering a gift relationship that overwrites Indigenous peoples' inalienable rights. Second, and as Moreton-Robinson suggests in her analysis of the outcomes of the Yorta Yorta land rights case, the possessive logic ignores the common law rights that Indigenous people hold *as subjects of the white nation* – rights that arise precisely because of colonisation and the appropriation of Indigenous land. Thus Howard's attempts to construct Indigenous rights and issues as being 'special interests' effectively ignores the 'possessive investments' that Indigenous people are entitled to, not only from their own inalienable rights as First Nations people, but also from their rights as citizens of the Australian nation.

This paradoxical denial of Indigenous sovereignty demonstrates the ambivalence that underpins the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty. As non-Indigenous people we are reliant on the category of the other in order to legitimate our selves and to warrant our investments in the white nation, yet such investments are always already founded on the disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty. As a result, the possessive logic may be understood as profoundly impossible – this is not to deny that this logic has very real effects in the lives of all people living in Australia, and in particular that it enables white ownership through the continued denial of the ongoing ownership of land by Indigenous people, but instead I have sought to demonstrate some of the impossibilities that structure non-Indigenous belonging, and how these are managed in Howard's rhetoric on practical reconciliation.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper I have sought to bring together a number of closely connected points in order to demonstrate some of the rhetorical strategies that are employed to manage subjective investments in whiteness. By looking at Howard's Menzies lecture, I have demonstrated how discourses of benevolence work to manage the possessive logic of patriarchal whiteness through recourse to the reciprocity that is supposedly engendered through gift relationships. In this way, Howard may be understood as attempting to manage the unsettling that Indigenous sovereignty produces by reasserting the normative status of white systems of representation. As a result, white privilege is positioned as being a 'natural right' of the white nation, the corollary being that the issues that Indigenous people raise in regards to rights are positioned as 'special interests'. Through discourses of equality and 'a fair go',

Howard is thus able to deny the racism that structures national space, and instead to implicitly suggest that the disadvantages faced by Indigenous people are the result of problems inherent to Indigenous people, thus legitimising the 'benevolent aims' of the 'civilising mission'.

Yet, at the same time, Howard's rhetoric evidences some of the foundational anxieties that shape white belonging in Australia (cf. Riggs and Augoustinos 2004). These include a reliance upon Indigenous people to construct the white self, the inalienable rights to ownership of Indigenous people, and the spectre of white violence that continues to inform white belonging (Clarke and Moran 2002). Together these factors undermine Howard's constructions of the 'good white nation', and instead draw attention to the impossibilities of representation that inform white belonging, founded as it is upon the fiction of *terra nullius*. The white nation may instead be seen as a space under contention that forever fails to truly signify white possession. Whilst Howard may attempt to deny Indigenous sovereignty, he thus in actuality only serves to reinforce the relationship that all non-Indigenous Australians have to Indigenous sovereignty *by very fact of its existence* (Nicoll 2004). Howard's speech thus demonstrates how the denial of Indigenous sovereignty continues to inform governmental policy just as explicitly as it did prior to the refutation of *terra nullius* in the Mabo decision, or indeed in earlier periods of white colonisation.

So in conclusion, the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty may be understood as founded upon a set of untenable distinctions. Whilst non-indigenous Australians such as prime minister Howard may attempt to overcome these foundations by co-opting Indigenous people into a reciprocal relationship, with the aim of equating alienable and inalienable rights, this fails to deny Indigenous sovereignty. Thus the possessive logic, whilst continuing to confer unearned privileges to us as non-indigenous people, represents an understanding of ownership that will always perpetuate the 'ontological disturbance' of white belonging. It thus may only be through challenging the assumptions surrounding discourses of benevolence and reciprocity that we as non-indigenous people may more respectfully engage with the sovereignty of Indigenous people.

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