

through love
through colonisation

an introduction to a conversation with
Odette Kelada and Dianne Jones

Within a present day political terrain of national race relations frequently framed as ‘impossible’, love is often called upon implicitly though powerfully in the rhetoric of governance as well as activism as the only way to move forward. Love – under the form of tolerance, charity or solidarity – is persistently deployed as both the incentive and justification for many of the actions taken by White Australia. This works to construct ongoing colonial violence as not only necessary but justifiable – to the very extent that such actions are committed *in the name of love*. Drawing upon the work of Odette Kelada and Dianne Jones, we are able to sketch three possible figures of love’s construction and manipulation within national discourse. These different narratives of love all function to legitimate White Australia’s fantasy of innocence, benevolence and belonging – a love that inevitably conceals and violently displaces Indigenous voices, bodies and land.

Love of the couple

Within the language of reconciliation politics, the metaphor of two lovers is used to mask power imbalances in order to position Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians as different but *equal*. In many ways, this reconciliation rhetoric – or love as tolerance – can be seen to align itself with a narrative of a couple whose failed communication has led to estrangement from one another over past misunderstandings and abuses. Through this logic, it is assumed that the two parties would be able to overcome their differences and ‘get over’ the troubles of the past, if only they could *love each other enough*. Through the metaphor of the couple, Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians are urged to ‘kiss and make up’ and build a healthy, more tolerant relationship. Here, the nation is figured as the child (and so the object of *shared* emotional investment and *equal* responsibility) in whose name the two parties are called upon to secure a better, brighter future – together. This reduces the systemic, institutional and ongoing nature of colonial violence to a completed event in the past for which individuals today cannot and should not be held accountable.

Love of the self

These different narratives of love all ultimately collapse into a form of self-love – a desire to reflect and reproduce the white national subject as it wishes to be perceived – that is, as a fundamentally *loving* subject. When seen as acting out of love, or ‘good intentions’ (however misguided or damaging) a violent colonial history is rendered more palatable to a non-Indigenous audience. This not only structures a fantasy that love is deserved in return, but allows an idealised national self-image of innocence and benevolence to be maintained in the face of seemingly insurmountable contradictions. A rhetoric of compassionate solidarity allows the ‘progressive’ white subject to ‘feel good’ about itself – not simply a tolerant love *in spite of* difference, this proclaimed love *for* difference reinforces a form of narcissism, as an affirmation of the antiracist subject’s own ‘goodness’. Thus the attempts of White Australia to enact a ‘loving’ politics within national race relations not only potentially sanctions and conceals colonial violence, but also re-centres whiteness as a virtuous identity able to be loved – or perhaps, in this construction of dominant national identity, we could even say that whiteness comes to be figured *as* love.

Love of the family

Many interventionist policies of the White Australian government have been justified through representations of Aboriginal families as failing to reproduce a white ideal of parental love. Within, for example, the recent ‘Little Children Are Sacred’ Report of 2007, an alleged inability to protect children from abuse and neglect is used as evidence of a lack of love. This allows the State to forcefully enter the scene, concealing significant political and economic agendas behind an offer of protection and moral redemption. To facilitate the transferral of ‘love’ to the white authority figure, the love within Indigenous families is not only strategically represented as inferior, but the vulnerable body of the Indigenous child is often foregrounded. By extension, Aboriginal communities themselves are symbolically figured in the dependent role of the child, thereby requiring the active ‘parental’ governance of White Australia. This paternalistic love is constructed as the White Nation’s duty of care – a love that will be forced upon a community ‘for its own good.’ As the subject that gives love is also able to take that love away, the promise of love within national discourse (or threat of its withdrawal) functions as an important mechanism in maintaining the dominant subject’s control over the loved object – who is, precisely, objectified, unable to determine the conditions under which it is or is not loved.

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