

# **Confusing Epistemologies: Whiteness, Mimicry and Assimilation in David Unaipon's 'Confusion of Tongue'**<sup>1</sup>

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David Unaipon (1871-1969), Indigenous writer, philosopher, scientist, preacher and musician, was, and is, a figure that defies any attempt to 'know' him. The confusion surrounding Unaipon (where did his allegiances lie – with white 'progress' or black activism?) is heightened by his mimicry of whiteness. This paper posits that mimicry can be read as an art and a skill, a (second) nature that raises endless questions about identity. For example, is the mimic's identity consumed by what it models; is mimicry a skill that negotiates a space for hybrid identity; is mimicry another word for that policy which has recently reared its ugly head again – assimilation? This paper focuses on David Unaipon's relationship to whiteness as read through one of his short 'legendary tales', 'Confusion of Tongue' (c.1924). It will be shown that Unaipon appropriated and confronted aspects of whiteness in order to use it against itself in a mimetic performance that sought to break the humanist tradition of white universal 'knowing' of the Indigenous other. Unaipon provides, even today with his image on the fifty dollar note, a representation of Aboriginality that is hybridised and (to use a phrase that will become clearer as this essay unfolds) that confuses epistemologies. For the purposes of this paper, whiteness theory is combined with discussions of mimicry to provide an example of a reading framework for assimilationist literature that complicates simplistic notions of Aboriginal identity as either 'traditional' black or 'assimilated' white. This reading framework is aimed at highlighting the relevance of Indigenous art from the assimilation era to modern Australia, not simply because reconciliation has recently been criticised as being devastatingly similar to assimilation, but also because by understanding the complexities of mimicry the criticisms and pitfalls of Indigenous artists from then can speak to now – Unaipon's advice and criticism, for example, can speak directly to the predicament of today's unreconciled nation.

## **Whiteness and Mimicry**

To recognise that whiteness has shaped knowledge production means academia would have to accept that the dominant regime of knowledge is culturally and racially biased, socially situated and partial. Such recognition would not only challenge the universal humanist claim to possess impartial knowledge of the Indigenous other, it would also facilitate recognition of the subjects of other humanisms to whom whiteness has never been invisible or unknown.<sup>2</sup>

Whiteness critics are concerned with incorporating whiteness into racial studies; of examining white people whose actions, or lack of actions, result in their own institutional and social privilege. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (President of ACRAWSA – the Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association) has laid the foundations of this study in an Australian context. For Moreton-Robinson, whiteness is

‘an invisible regime of power that secures hegemony through discourse and has material effects in everyday life’ (75). Studies of whiteness seek to name and expose whiteness and its correlating privileges, analysing its centrality and thereby decentring, displacing, unmasking and racing whiteness (as various titles for studies on whiteness have attested).<sup>3</sup> This is done in an effort not to de-privilege whiteness, but to decentre race (and, in particular, white race – colour has long been the marker of privilege or disadvantage) as the defining requirement of privilege. The challenge, then, is to identify whiteness as masking its racial identity by parading as normality, and, perhaps more importantly, to find a way to destabilise the façade of universalism that accompanies white epistemologies.

Aileen Moreton-Robinson has recently argued that destabilising whiteness must also destabilise knowledge that is *assumed*, particularly by whitefellas, to be *universal*. Such assumed universal knowledge, she insists, is ‘whiteness assum[ing] the status of an epistemological *a priori*’.<sup>4</sup> The assumption of universality and inherent truthfulness for white-produced knowledge, especially when it is ‘knowledge’ about Indigenous people, masks the racial bias of such knowledge, hence contributing to the invisibility of whiteness. However, whiteness is not invisible to all. Ruth Frankenberg, an American scholar, states that ‘it is crucial to take into account the position in the racial order of the person viewing whiteness... communities of color frequently see and name whiteness clearly and critically’.<sup>5</sup> This is a point that bell hooks has expanded.

In an article that can have tremendous implications in an Australian context, bell hooks stated that for years she searched ‘the critical work of postcolonial critics’, finding ‘much writing that bespeaks the continued fascination with the way white minds... perceive blackness, and very little [that] expressed interest in representations of whiteness in the black imagination’.<sup>6</sup> In the ‘black imagination’, however, hooks found a representation of whiteness quite new to the field; it was whiteness as a terrorising force, by its very nature visible to those it traumatises. For hooks, the ‘black imagination’ holds a privileged insight into whiteness; her reasons for this are worth quoting at length:

Though systems of domination, imperialism, colonialism, racism, actively coerce black folks to internalize negative perceptions of blackness, to be self-hating, and many of us succumb, blacks who imitate whites (adopting their values, speech, habits of being, etc.) continue to regard whiteness with suspicion, fear, and even hatred. This contradictory longing to possess the reality of the Other, even though that reality is one that wounds and negates, is expressive of the desire to understand the mystery, to know intimately through imitation, as though such knowing worn like an amulet, a mask, will ward away the evil, the terror. (166)

The twist in hooks’ theory is that black folk learnt out of necessity to hide their knowledge of whiteness from white folk: ‘one mark of oppression was that black folks were compelled to assume the mantle of invisibility ... Safety resided in the pretence of

invisibility' (168). In other words, safety resided in a mimicry that masked difference, that hid blackness – this was, in many cases, achieved through an imitation of whiteness. Even though whiteness may never have been universally invisible, it was presented as a norm; and it was made invisible to whitefellas by their savage treatment of Others (for hooks the terror of this treatment is 'ward[ed] away' by the camouflage of mimicry). That is, the actions of whiteness ensured it would remain invisible *to itself*.<sup>7</sup> This idea complicates notions of Indigenous mimicry as a marker of subservience. Unaipon's mimicry can be read as a desire to understand whiteness (achieved undercover, through replication) in order to be protected by it, perhaps even so that he may criticise both the requirement for mimicry and whiteness itself.

Indigenous people, and Unaipon specifically, gained advantage through mimicry. Stephen Muecke, for example, recounts an intriguing expedition Unaipon and eleven other Ngarrindjeri people made to Hobart in 1910. According to Muecke, Unaipon's performance of whitefella styles and skills, exceeding [sic] them in his abilities; a way of dressing in three-piece suits, the white surplice (from L. *superpellicum*, an 'overskin') and his voice, often noted as 'refined,' dignified, sometimes with Scottish inflections, gentle but insistent, persuasive, as those who remember him recall[, was] self-created and motivated by his individual capacities. To the extent that it is always intended to prove the point that 'Aboriginal people can do it too', his cultivation becomes a culture brought out into battle against the primitivising and historicising tendencies to 'keep the natives in their place'.<sup>8</sup>

Whitefellas, controlling history and working to keep the natives in their place, are challenged by Unaipon's mastery of *their* styles and skills. Mimicry is a powerful tool for Indigenous people not only because it challenges assumptions of Indigenous inferiority, but also because it challenges assumptions of white superiority and white ownership over knowledge. That is, Unaipon's mimicry worked to decentre assumptions of white superiority by showing Indigenous culture to be equally, perhaps even more, spiritually, morally and epistemologically significant. Unaipon was, in many ways, a very early critic of whiteness (even though the critical language of this theory is only now beginning to emerge). It is vital to continue discussions of Unaipon's relationship to whiteness – was he consumed by it, did he consume it, did he admire it, or was it a tool that ensured survival and 'freedom' to criticise whiteness? Further, should his actions be discussed as mimicry at all, or does this reproduce the exclusivity of whiteness as something to be copied by its Others – rendering Indigenous identity 'suspect' or somehow inauthentic if it incorporates white elements (a suit and tie, or Christianity for example)? The moment Unaipon donned a suit and tie he became no less Aboriginal but furthered the bounds of Aboriginal identity to incorporate (and use if desired) elements of whiteness.

### **A Brief Biography**

David Unaipon has been described by people from Raukkan as a black Scotsman. He was known to dress in a suit and tie, with fob watch and chain. He rolled his r's, like a Scotsman, and practised a range of accents. He travelled second class (not third) by train. He was and still is as ambivalent a figure for some of the Ngarrindjeri community as for the whitefellas who used him as an example of the improving powers of Christianity and civilisation. *He remains an enigmatic symbol: the poor blackfella on the fifty dollar note – celebrated and overlooked.*<sup>9</sup>

David Unaipon was born in 1872, the fourth of nine children to James and Nymbulda Unaipon (an anglicised spelling of 'Ngunaitponi'), at Point McLeay Mission Station in South Australia. James Unaipon, himself a remarkable man, was both an initiated Ngarrindjeri man and the first Indigenous deacon in the area – converted by the influential missionary leader George Taplin. David, an incredibly intelligent young boy, began his schooling at the Mission and impressed a visiting ex-secretary of the Aborigines' Friends Association (AFA – the organisation in charge of the running and maintenance of Point McLeay Mission). The visiting ex-secretary, C.B Young, took Unaipon to continue his education whilst performing odd jobs on the Youngs' property. Upon his return from the Young household Unaipon was well-schooled in science, religion and philosophy, and was particularly interested in inventing. Muecke and Shoemaker state that between '1910 and 1944 he made ten separate [patent] applications for inventions as varied as an anti-gravitational device, a multi-radial wheel and a sheep-shearing handpiece'.<sup>10</sup> Also, Unaipon worked for his entire life on a machine that he believed would unravel the secret to perpetual motion. Due mainly to his scientific prowess, but also to his keen interest in music and philosophy, Unaipon received attention in South Australian, and later national, newspapers. He began lecturing around the country (including a sermon in Sydney's St Mary's Cathedral). Living much of his life in the public spotlight, Unaipon spent many years selling pamphlets and subscriptions door to door throughout Adelaide. For these pamphlets Unaipon wrote a number of Indigenous legends. Perhaps because of this, Unaipon was contracted to Angus and Robertson to produce a book-length manuscript of legends for publication. He travelled widely to fulfil this task, transcribing with creative license legends that fuse fairy tales, bible stories, and anthropological narratives with traditional Indigenous legends. However, Unaipon's manuscript was never to be published in its entirety under his name during his lifetime. Questions of literary appropriation and contracts gone awry (between Unaipon and his publishers) surround a 1930 publication, *Myths and Legends of the Australian Aborigines*. This publication, by Scottish anthropologist William Ramsay Smith and English publishers Harrap, contains twenty-eight stories edited from Unaipon's manuscript but no mention of Unaipon. Smith's changes to Unaipon's stories often alter the tone and meaning of the text. That the stories were originally Unaipon's is proven beyond doubt through an analysis of Unaipon's manuscripts, housed at Sydney's Mitchell Library since the 1920s. Moreover, correspondence between Unaipon and Angus and Robertson, and Smith and Angus and Robertson, show firstly, that Unaipon collected, transcribed and

was paid for the stories; secondly, that Angus and Robertson intended to publish the stories under Unaipon's name; and thirdly, Unaipon's manuscript was sold to Smith who edited it for publication with Harrap.<sup>11</sup> Unaipon's manuscript, a mixture of hand-written and typed stories, has recently been edited by Stephen Muecke and Adam Shoemaker and published under Unaipon's name and under its original title by Miegunyah Press as *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines* (2001).

It is possible that Unaipon utilised the camouflage of mimicry to ensure that he would not be treated in the appalling manner most Indigenous people were at the time, and that he remained distanced enough from whiteness to continue his close scrutiny of it. Whilst this confuses the ambivalence surrounding David Unaipon (by providing yet another possible reading of his mimicry, as opposed to the thought that Unaipon simply admired whiteness and therefore mimicked it), the Indigenous *agency* in mimicry must be recognised in order to avoid perpetuating assimilationist ideals – indeed, to avoid rendering Aboriginality as something existing now only as another brand of whiteness. This paper posits the thought that perhaps whiteness can actually exist as a brand of Aboriginality. For example, in one of his legends penned for the Angus and Robertson collection, 'Confusion of Tongue' (c. 1924), Unaipon uses whiteness in a unique way that challenges assumptions of the universality of white epistemologies.

### **Confusing Epistemology**

The only tribe which stood aloof and took no part in using insulting words, and which strove to bring about reconciliation, was the Lyre Bird, and no one would listen to his entreaties. That is why Animal, Bird, Reptile, and Insect tribes have adopted a language of their own, and that the Lyre Bird is able to imitate them all.<sup>12</sup>

'Confusion of Tongue' begins 'in the long ago' when all the animals could converse freely in one common language. Every year there is a great feast at which marriages are decided, but one year the Tortoise, Frog and Crow are against some of the proposed marriages. The three antagonists become engaged in a war against the other tribes to decide the matter. The Tortoise, Frog and Crow decide to rely on their minds (as opposed to the other animals' brute force) to outwit the others. They decide to make the other tribes hungry and angry to prevent the fulfilment of their 'silly ideas.' A performance is organised by the Tortoise, Frog and Crow, and all the tribes attend. In order to maintain the other tribes' interest, the Tortoise (who can't dance) is impersonated by the Frog (a great dancer and ventriloquist), and the tribes think it is the Tortoise dancing. Then the Tortoise pretends to sing, though really the singer is the Frog, who is a ventriloquist. The tribes are astounded by the performance of the 'Tortoise' which lasts three days and nights. The tribes, getting very hungry, decide to gather and prepare a feast, but the Crow prevents them from eating by enforcing tribal laws that prevent the eating of fish where they are caught. The hungry tribes begin to get aggressive. The Frog throws his voice to insult various animals and there is a great

inter-tribal war. To prevent this from happening again all the tribes adopt a separate language; but the lyre-bird tribe can speak all languages.

Mimicry is central to the story. The Frog imitates the Tortoise imitating in dance a Kangaroo and then a Swan; the Crow sings the song of the Kangaroo and then the Frog imitates the Tortoise singing the song of the Swan; and the Frog throws his voice, 'making it appear that it came from the Kangaroo in support of the Crow' (16). Mimicry is a dangerous art; in the Lyre Bird it is a marker of hybridity, an empowering symbol of possible reconciliation, whilst for the other tribes it is a marker of deception and a betrayal that leads to disunity. Mimicry is ambivalent, the cause of a great battle only moments after it is applauded by all. Just how this idea of mimicry (as a complex negotiation of hybridity, deception, agency and cultural practice) reads into a discussion of Aboriginality and Unaipon is as enigmatic as it is contentious.

The story itself is amazing, though not out of fashion with the time. Katie Langloh Parker, for example, had been collecting short myths at the same time Unaipon had. There was an interest in these kinds of legends, which were mainly consumed in white society as children's stories. The most amazing aspect of 'Confusion of Tongue' is the way Unaipon tells it, especially the manifestation of his theme in the language he uses. The story is presented in a hybridised voice, with Indigenous language and English in the same sentence. 'Confusion of Tongue' teaches that violence achieves nothing, and that *listening* and an open dialogue that respects all knowledges can bring about reconciliation (it must be noted here that Unaipon's understanding and use of the word 'reconciliation' is not the politically loaded understanding of reconciliation of today, this will be discussed more extensively in this paper's conclusion). Importantly, Unaipon's story takes place in a time of harmony – not only supported by the linking of all 'tribes' through common language, but extended by the calm setting. In fairy tale perfection, the sun shines, there 'was never a cloud of disappointment or sorrow, but eternal sunshine' and Creation itself smiled. The opening is anthropological in its legendary content, with a fairy tale tone and a biblical, 'Babylonian' atmosphere (situated at the onset of civilisation). Like the language, this is a deliberate confusion of style; a mimicry determined to understand the 'mysterious west', a challenge to the style Unaipon could easily mimic, and a traditional practice well known to Indigenous culture. At any rate, it was Unaipon's deliberate attempt to challenge the priority of Western language and thought in the description of his people. It was, further, a challenge to the objectification that Unaipon saw as destroying Indigenous knowledge as a valid way of knowing (and teaching) the world. The tragedy of the story is that the Lyre Bird is not heard and common understanding, language and knowledge is lost. The site of most devastation as a result of this tragedy is language.

As a result of William Ramsay Smith's (assimilationist) intervention, which drastically altered Unaipon's story, the incredibly advanced analysis of language that Unaipon provides is totally erased. The contrasting openings to the two versions of the story exemplify this point. Unaipon's version reads:

Kule thou oo (in the long ago) uoo goo nook (when) the coming of the many dawns and many sunrises, the sun shone on the sea and land, kuk koo loon distributing its life and energy to Animal, Bird, Reptile, and Insect, Noop eel itch nungee, the sun continued its journey across the trackless sky over Tolkamia (the mysterious west) there was never a cloud of disappointment or sorrow, but eternal sunshine. Creation smiled, and Animal, Bird, Reptile, and Insect were linked up by one common language. (14)

Tragically altered for publication in Smith's *Myths and Legends* (1930), Unaipon's original version of 'Confusion of Tongue' only appeared in print in 2001. Unaipon's Lyre-Bird-like ability to imitate (read mimic) different languages was silenced for over seventy years. Smith's edited opening to 'Confusion of Tongue' reads:

In the long ago, the time of the many dawns and many sunrises, the sun shone on sea and land, giving life and energy to animal, bird, and insect. The sun made its journey across the sky to the mysterious west. There was never a cloud of disappointment or sorrow; only eternal sunshine. Creation smiled, and animal, bird, reptile, and insect were bound together by one common language.<sup>13</sup>

Most obviously the Indigenous language is removed. Even though the translations remain, the one line ('Noop eel itch nungee') which Unaipon left untranslated is entirely removed. This removal especially reveals the respect Smith had for Indigenous language: none. Further, the removal of this language indicates that Smith had made little attempt to understand Unaipon's story and that he did not credit Unaipon as an individual (or even communal for that matter) creator of stories. The absence of Indigenous language in Smith's publication is next to complete. The only explanation for the removal of Indigenous language Smith hints at in his Preface is in stating

such changes as have been made in the narratives are few and slight, and do not go beyond what were considered to be necessary in order to make clear the meaning, or to give some degree of grammatical correctness to the text (8).

On the contrary, Smith, in the above instance at least, confuses the meaning of Unaipon's text and silences one aspect of Unaipon's story. Smith's alterations, to use the language of Bhabha from 'Of Mimicry and Men', show 'a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which "appropriates" the Other as it visualizes power'.<sup>14</sup> Appropriation, for Bhabha and as applies to Smith, has two aspects. Firstly, the text is appropriated in the sense that it is 'stolen' and the benefits (material and social) of its publication are the thief's.<sup>15</sup> Secondly, Smith reforms Unaipon's writing so that it 'appropriately' embodies the power relations that privilege both Smith and whiteness. Smith systematically regulated Indigenous language and knowledge in Unaipon's text in order to reinforce the supposition of universal white 'knowing' of the Indigenous Other, and to relegate Unaipon to the realms of invisible Other, incapable of criticising whiteness, of knowing and challenging it, or of gaining access to its privileges and freedom.

This is achieved through Smith's use of an anthropological narrative, where Unaipon is removed and Smith becomes anthropologist – the source of the text's knowledge. The text, though, has many slippages. Tom Griffiths, once a researcher at the Museum of Victoria, stated in 1996 that anthropologists 'disdained the native informant and preferred to work with mute "relics"'.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Smith silenced Unaipon and turned him from a storyteller with unique Indigenous knowledge into a mute relic to be explained and displayed. Smith adds a footnote to Unaipon's story that attempts to explain, but does little more than expose Smith's lack of knowledge about Indigenous culture. Smith footnotes the word 'corroberies [sic]' as 'nocturnal assemblies of aboriginals at which there would be revelling and dancing'.<sup>17</sup> Smith does not recognise the spiritual importance of Unaipon's story, and thus further relegates the story from passionate and meaningful to relic and trivial. To use Gelder and Jacobs' elaboration of Griffiths's point<sup>18</sup>, the removal of Indigenous knowledge to the footnotes removes the knowledge from the 'Aboriginal system' and places it in a 'museum system', thereby rendering it a relic.<sup>19</sup> This removal of Unaipon's work from an 'Aboriginal system' into a 'museum system' is heightened when the illustrations Smith adds to 'Confusion of Tongue' are considered. The three pictures – a 'corrobbery [sic] symbol from North-West Australia', a 'waddy from Tasmania', and 'boomerangs' – remove the important specificity of location from the story by presenting a generalized kind of Indigeneity, where custom is 'universal' and add to the sense that one is perusing a museum gallery with various mute relics on display.<sup>20</sup> The fact that the first two pictures are sourced to the 'British Museum', and the sourcing of the third picture to *Among Cannibals* by Carl Lumholtz, further adds to the irony of Smith's appropriation.<sup>21</sup> Smith's citations and footnotes locate the objects (be they boomerangs or narrative) in a de-animated, or archaic space – something collected that needs explanation and which no longer belongs to the 'Aboriginal system'. Smith's underlying narrative – of footnotes and pictures – serves to render Indigeneity, and indeed Unaipon himself, as an unspecified (dis-located) relic captured and bound in an all-encompassing, anthropological, preserving narrative.

However, there is another narrative at work throughout the text – the biblical. Unaipon's 'Confusion of Tongue' contains many telling similarities to a biblical story from Chapter 11 of the book of Genesis, involving the sons of Noah and the beginnings of 'civilisation'. Genesis 11 is set when, in Christian belief, 'the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech'<sup>22</sup> – just after the great flood and upon Noah's sons' beginning to rebuild civilisation. Noah's sons plan to build a tower which is to be so high that it reaches the heavens. God, however, prevents Noah's sons from achieving their goal. The significance of this story for this paper comes in God's method for ensuring that his creation (man – the image of God) would not actually attain God's glorious heights:

And the Lord said, Behold, the people [are] one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord

scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.

God, fearing that his creations and devoted subjects would reach his own glorious heights, prevented Noah's sons from achieving their goal by confounding their language (sometimes translated as 'confuse their tongue'<sup>23</sup>) so that they could no longer understand each other. God had thus affirmed his own superiority by controlling language and the geographical location of his subjects. Unaipon (who wore the garb of preacher amongst his many other hats) possibly had Genesis 11 in his mind when he wrote 'Confusion of Tongue'. It is fascinating to read 'Confusion of Tongue' with reference to Genesis 11. Allegorically, Unaipon's tale becomes utterly subversive; Indigenous people can be read as the sons of Noah aspiring to the 'Godly'. The Godly can be read as whiteness, which was first presented to Indigenous people through the 'Godly' colonising missionaries. Unaipon's 'Confusion of Tongue' is a remarkable commentary on the relationship between language and colonial mimicry – and the subjugation of a people asked to mimic (read 'assimilate to') white Australia, but denied the privileges that are a correlative of whiteness. More empoweringly, 'Confusion of Tongue' marks as a genesis of reconciliation a confusion of knowledge (represented by language). Whilst William Ramsay Smith's is an ignorant response that leaves Unaipon in a similar position to the misunderstood Lyre Bird figure, Unaipon, it seems has spoken again with the republication of his manuscript. Aileen Moreton-Robinson's recent argument (through a very different genre of writing) that 'knowledge' about the Indigenous other is racially biased shows that Unaipon's writings have lost very little of their potency and relevance. Recognising the assumption of universality of white knowledge is a pivotal step, both for the academy and for whitefellas in everyday life, towards confusing epistemologies and opening the way for intercultural dialogues. Such dialogues are the foundations of a 'reconciled' society that Unaipon envisaged but saw destroyed in his own lifetime (in a 'life imitating art' moment) by naïve appropriations such as that by William Ramsay Smith. 'Confusion of Tongue' is *not* an example of what Moreton-Robinson calls the Western epistemological *a priori*; it is Unaipon at his elegant best. Indigenous language is presented *a priori*. Translations in English appear parenthesised, removed and secondary. The passion of this story was evoked by the loss of language that white missionaries and governments explicitly encouraged and forced; sadly Unaipon's story suffered the same fate. Smith's version of 'Confusion of Tongue' works to silence the threat Unaipon's reconciliation of languages provided to assumptions of a Western epistemological *a priori*.

### **Reconssimilation: Confusing Assimilation and Reconciliation**

Unaipon's stories are not simply records of a remarkable man's negotiations with the politics of assimilation. It is increasingly important to listen to Unaipon now as assimilation is, once again, entering discussion on Australian race-relations. There is

something about assimilation that strikes a chord of resonance with current Australian Government policy.

Assimilation was a policy that worked to ‘integrate’ Indigenous people into white society, often at the expense of Indigenous culture. It assumed white culture to be superior and thus the paramount attainment for Indigenous people (the height, the very tower of – or is it the heaven above? – civilisation). It was a policy that demanded Indigenous people imitate white culture, but only *to a point*. Whilst assimilation offered Indigenous people some of the privileges of white Australia, it proved to be a policy that systematically asserted white power over Indigenous people. For example, assimilation was to be achieved through such policies as the removal of Indigenous children so that they may be raised by white families, the promotion of inter-racial marriages in an effort to ‘breed out’ Indigeneity, and the forced integration of Indigenous children into white schools. The agency of the various governments in this policy, the way the governments used force, political pressure and the incentive of citizenship to achieve these outcomes, has led to comparisons between assimilation and the policies of practical reconciliation and mutual obligation now favoured by the Howard Government.<sup>24</sup> Irene Watson, an Indigenous lawyer and academic, has recently stated:

In the Australian government’s current policy shift to the idea of ‘mutual obligation’, that is, the idea of Aboriginal communities and government becoming mutually responsible for the future development of communities, I see more a concern with returning to assimilation practices of the past. At the dawning of this new century, the Australian government parades its return to assimilation under the name of ‘practical reconciliation’. But is it new or more of the same? Have the ghosts of assimilation returned? Did they ever leave us?<sup>25</sup>

According to Watson, assimilation continues in Australian race-relations, only now it parades under a different name. For Watson, ‘the words “Aboriginal sovereignty” have become the unspeakable’ (43), halting the way forward for Aboriginality and, through silence, leaving assumptions of Aboriginal land claims as threatening white lands in the public imagination. White Australia, through its silence (surrounding the theorising of Aboriginal state models<sup>26</sup> for example), shows a continuing desire to remain unchanged and to expect, even force, Indigenous people to reconcile *to*, rather than *with*, white Australia. As Fiona Nicoll has recently argued:

To reconcile ‘with’ conveys the meaning of ‘harmonising’, ‘healing’ or ‘making friendly after estrangement’. To reconcile ‘to’ is to ‘make [another] resigned or contentedly submissive’... As a consequence, reconciliation is conducive to parallel conversations conducted at cross-purposes that usually deliver power and resources to the colonial party.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, whilst reconciliation *with* Indigenous people might sound appealing to many non-Indigenous Australians, and vice-versa, this discourse is deliberately confused to continue, as did assimilation, the figuring of white culture and identity in a position

superior to Indigenous culture and identity. In many ways, whether it has been protectionism, assimilation, reconciliation or mutual obligation, white Australia has managed to conduct parallel conversations that pretend social change and justice but which assure power relations remain unchanged. The power to decide the future of Indigenous communities still lies with the predominantly white government (or a government that acts to ensure continued white privilege at any rate). This political reality is remarkably similar to the power to decide and know that William Ramsay Smith displayed in his appropriation of David Unaipon's manuscript. Yet Unaipon has, in a sense, overcome this. Perhaps the same sense of outrage over the treatment of David Unaipon's writings should be applied to modern contexts where non-Indigenous people, with white universal 'knowledge', still decide what is the appropriate future for Indigenous communities.

Assimilation certainly was not a great success. We should not, however, forget about it, move on, and insult with it. We should welcome the restoration of assimilation literature (such as Unaipon's manuscript, the recent digitisation of the film *Jedda* and of the NSW Aborigines Welfare Board's assimilationist magazine *Dawn*). It is vital, though, that this literature be approached with respect and contextual understanding. Many of the Indigenous artists from this era of Australian history endorsed assimilation, indeed practised it, in the same fashion that Unaipon practised all whitefella styles and skills – in a manner that provided camouflage and the right distance from whiteness to allow for insight and criticism of the terrors of whiteness and assimilation. I have proposed a reading strategy to unlock the power and agency of mimicry (not another brand of whiteness, but a skill used by an ever-changing and broadening Aboriginality) so that we can read challenges to assimilation and whiteness in Indigenous writing from the assimilation era. In this way assimilationist ideals of the *a priori* superiority of whiteness are not perpetuated; subtle entreaties (even though they are sometimes erased by a threatened and paranoid whiteness) of Indigenous writers, activists and academics are heard, white knowledge is not assumed to be universal, something Unaipon conformed to, or was consumed by, and historical periods and languages are confused. This reading strategy involves a confusion of tongue. After all, the messages and lessons of Indigenous artists from the assimilation period need not be lost in the context of modern Australia.

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<sup>2</sup> Moreton-Robinson, 'Whiteness, Epistemology and Indigenous Representation'. Moreton-Robinson, 2004: 75.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, *Displacing Whiteness, Whitening Race, Off White, and Unmasking Whiteness*.

<sup>4</sup> Moreton-Robinson. 'Whiteness, Epistemology and Indigenous Representation', 75.

<sup>5</sup> Frankenberg, Ruth (ed. and introduction). *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*. London: Duke University Press, 1997: 4.

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<sup>6</sup> hooks, bell. 'Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination'. Frankenberg, 1997: 166. Further references are included within the text.

<sup>7</sup> To claim, as is less fashionable now than in the earlier criticisms on whiteness, that whiteness was *universally* invisible is to repeat the silencing that made it invisible to whitefellas in the first place. Such a standing reproduces an epistemological *a priori* (the universal white viewpoint) within whiteness studies that whiteness studies seeks to expose.

<sup>8</sup> Muecke, Stephen. "'Between the Church and the Stage": David Unaipon at the Hobart Carnival, 1910'. *UTS Review*. 6.1 (2000): 17.

<sup>9</sup> Hosking, Sue. 'Introducing David Unaipon'. Bierbaum et al., 2003: 9. My italics.

<sup>10</sup> Muecke, Stephen and Adam Shoemaker. 'Repatriating the Story'. Introduction. Unaipon, 2001: xvi.

<sup>11</sup> See the 'Angus and Robertson Papers' in the Mitchell Library, Sydney (MSS 314, Ramsay Smith, v76 [1925-28]; and MSS 314, Unaipon, v85 [1925-27]), and also Muecke and Shoemaker, 'Repatriating the Story', 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Unaipon, David. *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines* (1924-5). Ed. Muecke, Stephen and Adam Shoemaker. Carlton South, Victoria: Melbourne University Press and Miegunyah Press, 2001: 16. Further references are within the text.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, William Ramsay. *Myths and Legends of the Australian Aborigines*. London: Harrap, 1930: 62-63.

<sup>14</sup> Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994: 86.

<sup>15</sup> This is a contentious issue. As Angus and Robertson bought the rights to the manuscript in a manner that was not irregular for the time they, legally, had the right to sell the stories to Smith. As Smith paid for the stories, can he be described as a thief, or an appropriator, or as morally and ethically suspect? In any case, Unaipon was not recognised as author, collector or contributor. At the very least, the publication of *Myths and Legends of the Australian Aborigines* marks the appropriation of Unaipon's identity – and William Ramsay Smith plays the role of appropriator and thief.

<sup>16</sup> Griffiths, Tom. *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996: 42.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, *Myths and Legends*: 63.

<sup>18</sup> Gelder, Ken and Jane Jacobs. *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*. Carlton South, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Gelder and Jacobs. See chapter 5: 'The Return of the Sacred'.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, *Myths and Legends*: 63, 64, 66.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, *Myths and Legends*: 66. Also, Lumholtz's book is sourced for many pictures throughout Smith's book.

<sup>22</sup> Biblical quotes are taken from the King James Bible, which can be found online at <<http://www.blueletterbible.org/kjv/Gen/Gen011.html#top>>

<sup>23</sup> 'Blueletterbible.org' also provides many other versions of the Bible. See previous endnote.

<sup>24</sup> John Howard now describes Reconciliation in two senses – practical Reconciliation and symbolic Reconciliation. Symbolic Reconciliation are those reconciliatory *gestures* that display a desire for reconciliation but which have no *real* consequence (this is where Howard positions saying 'sorry'). Under the heading of practical Reconciliation are policies that have 'real' consequences, such as mutual obligation policies. For example, Aboriginal children of school-going age may be denied admission to the local swimming pool if school attendance is poor, or if personal hygiene is not judged to be satisfactory; or petrol is not sold to parents unless their child's face is judged to be sufficiently clean. Similarly, welfare payments may be denied if they are spent on alcohol or gambling, or may be replaced by food vouchers and rental receipts. Policies such as these are being trialled to varying degrees in many communities throughout Australia.

<sup>25</sup> Watson, Irene. 'Settled and Unsettled Spaces: Are We Free to Roam?'. *Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association Journal*. 1.1 (2005): 42. Further references are within the text.

<sup>26</sup> Watson states that 'Aboriginal sovereignty is different from state sovereignty because it embraces diversity, and inclusivity rather than exclusivity. Aboriginal sovereignty poses a solution to white supremacy in its deflation of power' (43).

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<sup>27</sup> Nicoll, Fiona. 'Reconciliation In and Out of Perspective: White Knowing, Seeing, Curating and Being at Home In and Against Indigenous Sovereignty'. Moreton-Robinson, 2004: 18.