Can we reconcile? Understanding the multi-level challenges of conflict transformation

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Introduction

This article is concerned with the challenges and (im)possibilities of reconciliation. Framed around the question, ‘Can we reconcile?’, in what follows I consider the political challenges involved in attempting to restore broken relationships and find ways to live together, democratically and non-violently, with radical differences (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall 2011:246).

The article advances both a conceptual and an empirical argument. First, following the work of theorists such as Andrew Schaap (2005) and Adrian Little (2014), inter alia, I argue that we need to rethink the intrinsic and potentially productive role of non-violent conflict in reconciliation and conflict transformation work, accepting conflict as both enduring and necessary. This approach draws on theories of agonistic democracy, and makes a normative claim for the need to keep open political spaces in which conflict can be engaged. Second, I argue that reconciliation necessitates attention and effort across the multiple socio-political levels at which transformation is required, and that these transformations may never be complete but are in fact more complex and open-ended than is generally acknowledged. This latter argument is intended to counter some of the impatience that imbibes much discussion of reconciliation and conflict transformation, and the suggestion that people – and
countries – need to put both the politics and the traumas of the past behind them and ‘move on’ from their conflicts (Christodoulidis and Veitch 2007:1; Hirsch 2012:3). Counter to this I argue that simplicity and impatience in reconciliation politics is not only unrealistic, it is, as the first part of my argument would suggest, inherently dangerous, as it drives enduring social and political conflict underground from where it will inevitably surface in unpredictable and violent ways.

Reconciliation has become ‘a component part of our political vocabulary’ and a ‘regulative ideal in political discourse’ (Christodoulidis and Veitch 2007:3). Developing first in relation to ‘transitional’ societies emerging from periods of authoritarian rule or civil war, the politics of reconciliation has since expanded to include the efforts of ‘established’ or ‘consolidated’ democracies, notably settler colonial societies still grappling with historical wrongs such as Australia and Canada (Bashir and Kymlicka 2008:3-4). In recent decades the term has become increasingly used in the political arena, moving from ‘the seminary and the academy into public policy’ (Hamber and Kelly 2009:286). In response to this expansion of reconciliation discourse and practice, scholars of political science have engaged with reconciliation in both theory and empirical study. Despite their commitment however, there remains a significant lack of agreement about the meaning, content, staging, timing, and ability to measure reconciliation efforts by a range of political actors, including governments, civil society organisations, and donors (Daly and Sarkin 2007:xiii). High profile processes such as the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) have tended to narrow and dominate the field (Renner 2012:51), with such events receiving an unwarranted level of investigation in relation to other conflict transformation efforts. As Eric Doxtader has suggested, while the TRC was indeed ‘quite important’, reconciliation in South Africa neither began nor ended there,
and the institution itself displayed little in the way of ‘philosophical flair’ in either 
considering the practice of reconciliation or resisting ‘the legitimacy and identity 
politics that cut against inquiry into the concept’s complex roots’ (Doxtader 2012 
:28). As a result, high profile processes like the TRC have fostered the idea 
reconciliation as a widely-regarded normative good, deployed by a range of activists 
and civil society organisations to support their claims (Little 2014 :92), but with little 
in the way of analytical capacity that might assist such actors to understand the 
performance of these policies and processes (Renner 2012 :51).

Much research has attempted to further narrow and define the concept of 
reconciliation in an effort to ‘boil it down’ to an agreed policy framework (Renner 
2012 :55). As Erin Daly and Jeremy Sarkin suggest (2007: 4), however, the 
immediate appeal and widespread promotion of reconciliation has led to the neglect of 
key questions, with scant attention being paid to either the specifics or complexities of 
the paradigm with regard to the way it invokes a range of challenges associated with 
societies in transition, ‘such as the possibility of justice after “radical evil,” the 
redistribution of wealth, the creation of civil society, and the relevance of the past to 
the present and the future, among numerous others.’ Further, as some of the promise 
of post-conflict efforts in South Africa and elsewhere has faded in light of ongoing 
struggles and challenges, a more critical perspective on the meaning and possibility of 
reconciliation has emerged (Little 2014 :92). These debates continue, offering 
divergent and contradictory understandings of the concept. Nevertheless, Andrew 
Schaap contends that there are advantages to this conceptual ambiguity, as by 
‘accommodating multiple meanings’ the idea of reconciliation ‘provides a common 
vocabulary within which citizens may contest the terms and possibilities of their 
political association’ (Schaap 2005 :13). The alternative – pursuing a definitional
consensus – would have the effect of ‘policing the boundaries’ of reconciliation discourse’, thereby limiting ‘what we can hear.’ Rather, it seems important to focus on ‘the way in which the language of reconciliation can frame the space in which debates about conflict transformation can take place’ (Little 2012a :84). The following section draws on one strand of political theorising about reconciliation to develop a framing of the concept that draws on agonistic democracy theory.

**Conflictual reconciliation**

Much of the reconciliation literature continues to focus on the normative ambition of achieving ‘communitarian social harmony’ (Hirsch 2012 :1). In contrast, a fully political understanding of reconciliation recognises the futility of attempting to transcend conflict in this way, instead framing reconciliation as ‘a potentially agonistic clash of world views within the context of a community that is “not yet”’ (Schaap 2005 :4). In Andrew Schaap’s view, a ‘politically adequate conception of reconciliation’ would be alive to the inherent risk of politics, that is, ‘that community is not inevitable and that conflict may turn out to be irreconcilable’:

…if the ideal of reconciliation is to open up a space for politics between former enemies rather than cover over the conflicts that threaten their political association, reconciliation should be kept in view for being a potentiality of action in the present, which depends upon accepting the risk of politics (and the opportunity it presents) rather than eliding it (Schaap 2005 :21-2).

This is a profoundly pragmatic approach to conflict, which contests a normative aspiration to ‘peace’, instead recognising that a more realistic normative context, in which conflict is managed and potentially transformed, ‘is one where there is a
disorderly mixture of peace and conflict and where democratic politics co-exists with other forms of political expression’ (Little 2014 :138). Further, such an approach foregrounds the fact that in assuming that conflict is reconcilable, in the sense of achieving harmony and consensus, the politics of reconciliation become obscured (Schaap 2004 :524). An agonistic approach, by contrast, holds out the hope that, in spaces of irresolvable conflict, divided societies will expand their political capacities, embrace conflict without violence, and find new ways of respecting old adversaries.

A conflictual approach to reconciliation recognises that in many deeply divided societies, the capacity to ‘disagree respectfully’ may be the most that can be expected from conflict transformation efforts. (Daly and Sarkin 2007 :238). Conflict is, of course, ubiquitous. It has shaped, and continues to shape, all societies, not just those emerging from violent struggles, although it may be a more obvious structuring factor in deeply divided societies (Little 2014 :5, 11). Conflict does not necessarily cause violence, and conflict and violence should not be conflated (Mitchell 2011 :24) although they too often are. As a political dynamic, conflict derives from, and is inherent to, all social institutions, including in ‘economic differentiation, social change, cultural formation, psychological development and political organisation’ (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall 2011 : 7). Thus, while the desire to end or resolve conflict is common to many views of reconciliation and peacebuilding, this article instead contends that this is both unrealistic and undesirable. Instead, non-violent conflict is here conceived as a social good, or at least as potentially a social good, but one that requires institutional interventions if it is to harness its democratic potential rather than devolve into violence. The challenge, according to Charles Villa-Vicencio (2009 :62) is ‘to develop ways of engagement that allow for nonconformity, dissent, open debate, and orderly political change when necessary.’
This approach to social and political conflict takes seriously the insights of agonistic democracy theory to conceive of processes of reconciliation and conflict transformation as deeply political and involving ongoing non-violent conflict. Agonism can be understood as ‘a technique for managing conflict’ that recognises the fluid nature of political conflict and the resulting need for political responses that are context specific rather than attempts at a universal model (Little 2014 :7). Agonistic democrats affirm the central place of conflict in any democratic politics, a view that reflects the agonists’ concern that anything resembling consensus ‘too often become a way of coopting radical challenges to the dominant interests within a society’ (Schaap 2006 :257). Agonists instead foreground the inherent struggles that are constitutive of political life, promoting an ideal of democracy that is marked by an ‘epistemic openness’ to difference and conflicting points of view (Chakravarti 2012 :11). This understanding of political life has particular resonance for societies engaged in a politics of reconciliation, where the need to open – and to keep open – political spaces in which divided and opposing groups can engage is crucial. Conflict is thus understood not as a negative dynamic in reconciliation processes, but as an essential and ever-present political dynamic that allows opposing groups in divided societies to engage in passionate democratic contestation about their future ways of living together. Indeed, Paul Muldoon and Andrew Schaap contend that reconciliation processes are inevitably agonistic in nature precisely because they ‘open up a space of contestation and disagreement’ between opposing groups focused on claims and counter-claims about past wrongs (Muldoon and Schaap 2012 :182). Thus, rather than bracketing or avoiding conflict, the aim of an agonistic reconciliatory engagement is to ‘transform actually or potentially violent conflict into non-violent forms of social struggle and social change’ (Ramsbotham 2010 :53). As Ed Wingenbach (2011 :61)
has suggested, agonistic engagements provide ‘an outlet for passion and dissent’ that may in fact make the eruption of violent, antagonistic relations less likely.

Andrew Schaap (2006:258) has argued that an agonistic approach to reconciliation and conflict transformation is important because it foregrounds what is at stake in the politics of these processes. Schaap contends that less critical accounts of reconciliation that emphasise ideas of ‘settling accounts’, ‘healing nations’ and ‘restoring community’ start from the presumption that unity is an unquestioned social good, thereby depoliticizing the terms in which the unity of the polity is constructed and represented. Indeed, as Paul Muldoon has suggested, an agonistic perspective ‘makes it possible to understand how reconciliation ever comes onto the political agenda.’ This does not happen because there is sudden agreement about past wrongs, but because marginalized groups politicise those past actions by renaming them as injustices (Muldoon 2008:127). One well-known formulation of agonism, advanced by leading theorist Chantal Mouffe (2007; 2005; 2000), asserts that the primary task of democracy is to convert antagonism into agonism and enemies into adversaries or, as William Connolly (1991:x) puts it, to ‘cultivate agonistic respect between interlocking and contending constituencies’. This, as Mouffe suggests, has consequences for how we imagine politics and the nature of the public sphere. Rather than eliminating passions, or attempting to contain them in the private sphere to better support a consensus, these passions can be ‘mobilised’ towards ‘the promotion of democratic designs.’ In this way, consensus can be seen as a result of a temporary stabilization of power – the kind of stabilization often pursued in divided societies – that inevitably entails some form of exclusion (Mouffe 2007:43). In an agonistic mode of reconciliation, such stabilisations of power may be acknowledged as sometimes necessary, but always to be resisted. Democracy is envisioned as a
'continual contest among incompatible visions, identities, and projects’ in which no view can dominate or assume hegemonic status for very long (Wingenbach 2011 :21).

Adrian Little points to the normative dimension in these formulations of agonism, suggesting that theorists such as Mouffe attempt to ‘domesticate’ political conflict by ‘broadening the spectrum of acceptability in the analytical framing of particular issues’ (Little 2014 :75). In this view, although agonists resist the reconciliatory drive to fabricate social and political consensus, and emphatically do not want to deligitimise disagreement, they do see the potential for politics to more effectively accommodate difference based on the nature of the interaction between conflictual actors (Little 2014 :75). In my view, this normative agonistic desire to foreground and yet domesticate conflict is no bad thing. An approach to reconciliation that recognises the central place of conflict is not without risks. As Charles Villa-Vicencio contends:

The complexities and dangers inherent to this process are huge. On the one hand this could result in a clash of interests that, if left unmanaged, might undermine the political climate needed to build a new political dispensation. On the other hand, the essence of the demands made by the different sectors of society could be so restrained and diluted that the political process would be undermined to the point that in the interests of compromise and consensus, critique would be closed down. The outcome would be a society built on soft mediocrity and compliance that would fail to provide the space and social structures through which people could give expression to their needs and promote their interests (Villa-Vicencio 2009 :43)
The challenge, according to Villa-Vicencio, is to ‘build a national consensus’ while still ‘encouraging a level of debate’ about longer term ideals (Villa-Vicencio 2009:43). From an agonistic perspective however, this recourse to ‘national consensus’ as the pathway through this challenging terrain is inadequate. What is required is the creation of spaces for agonistic engagement across all socio-political levels.

**Multi-level conflict transformation**

Empirically this article now proceeds to apply this conceptual approach to a framework that examines conflict transformation across three interlinked socio-political levels: the constitutional, the institutional, and the relational. Reconciliation efforts are here understood as a mode of political engagement and agonistic struggle across these three porous, overlapping and interlinked socio-political domains. This approach builds on earlier work in the field that drew attention to the complex dynamics and processes of reconciliation and peacebuilding, taking research well beyond a concern with elite agreement-making or models of a liberal peace, towards concern with local actors and the opening up of participatory political spaces (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall 2011:233-4). The framework of multi-level conflict transformation suggests that reconciliation and conflict transformation are far more complex and open-ended processes than is sometimes acknowledged, involving a diverse cluster of practices that, according to Schaap (2005:12) include (among others) ‘repenting, restoring, punishing, apologising, repairing, forgiving, redeeming, forgetting, remembering, promising and understanding.’ To these I would add recognising and redistributing, along the lines formulated by Nancy Fraser (1997). This approach also drives an understanding of the Janus-faced requirements of political reconciliation, paying attention to social structures as well as psychologies,
and encouraging the development of a shared vision that is broad enough to achieve change without demanding either agreement about the past or a singular, shared identity (Daly and Sarkin 2007:187).

This is not the first analysis to suggest that reconciliation and conflict transformation take place across several socio-political levels. Charles Villa-Vicencio (2004:5), for example, describes reconciliation as a process of ‘building relations’ across ‘neighbourhoods, communities, and the nation.’ Similarly, Arie Nadler contends that reconciliation requires structural, relational and identity-based transformation as a response to the ‘multicausal nature of intergroup conflict’ (Nadler 2012:293). Ernesto Verdeja (2009:3-4) describes reconciliation as a ‘complex, multileveled process’ that proceeds across the levels of political society, civil society, institutions and individuals, in a manner Verdeja describes as ‘disjunctured and uneven’ (emphasis in the original), and which directs attention to ‘the myriad ways in which reconciliatory efforts are manifested and develop.’ (Verdeja 2009:3). This recognition of the multi-leveled requirements of reconciliation efforts is not surprising given the complex, multifaceted nature of preceding periods of struggle, oppression and injustice. As Daly and Sarkin contend, these histories often mean that for many societies attempting to reckon with the past, it can be virtually impossible to ‘figure out which wrongs can or must be righted and how to go about righting them’ (Daly and Sarkin 2007:170). A multi-level framework such as the one outlined below at least provides an outline of the multiple spaces in which reconciliatory and transformative efforts must be directed.
Constitutional reconciliation

Societies emerging from civil war, engaged in a transition from authoritarianism to democracy, or still grappling with colonial and historical dispossession and injustice must all, in their own ways, confront the question of how they are constituted and in what ways they need to re-constitute themselves. The process of political reconciliation is driven by ‘the hope of establishing a new beginning’ that is ‘self-consciously enacted in the gap between past and future’ (Schaap 2005 :91). In contrast to a view of reconciliation that sees such a process initiated by a public acknowledgment of past wrongs, this view of political reconciliation sees it initiated in the act of constitution itself, in which that public, the ‘we’ of the society, is in fact instantiated. As Schaap argues, ‘the constitution of a space for politics makes possible a future collective remembrance’ (Schaap 2007 :15). Thus, the work of constitutionalism, in both its political and legal senses, provides a founding moment, a space for politics, which is inevitably a space for conflict and contestation. In the framework outlined here, the constitutional space for political reconciliation involves three elements: settlements and agreements, constitutional design and reform, and citizenship.

Firstly, while the architecture of an agreement or settlement is important, this alone will not predict the success of post-violent conflict transformation. Indeed, the ingrained nature of social and political conflict suggests that political agreements in isolation will rarely bring about substantive change (Little 2014). Instead, a promising settlement may (re)constitute a nation by recognising and bridging conflicting interests within a normative framework that represents the diversity of values to be found among the wider, conflictual society (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall
Ideally, a newly crafted settlement for a previously divided or violent society will open spaces in which common ground can be recognised while protecting from further oppression the identities, cultures, and interests of diverse citizens. However, a key factor at this level of analysis is the extent to which settlements and agreements are designed in ways that might transform or merely contain a conflict, how they might keep open or close off future political debate, and the wider cost to democratic participation when it is perceived that there is no viable political alternative to the agreement that is in place.

In spite of these aspirations towards openness, however, it is common for the drive to ‘settle’ a conflict, and bring an end to violence and repression, to result in consensus-based compromises that close down political space, with problematic long-term implications. For example, it is now generally accepted that many of the compromises reached in the years leading up to South Africa’s negotiated settlement between the major parties (and the eventual transition to democracy in 1994) were thought crucial to the nation’s future stability, and essential to avoiding a drawn out civil war. To move the negotiations forward the settlement between the African National Congress and the National Party came to rely on what was termed ‘sufficient consensus’ on the key issues of concern to both parties. Over time, however, it has become clear that in closing down spaces for further discussion about, for example, more radical economic restructuring, subduing important conflicts in favour of a desired consensus, South Africa, has in fact perpetuated deep social divisions. Further, rather than re-opening the terms of this settlement in light of considerable social unrest, South Africa seems intent on pursuing the neoliberal economic policies that underpinned the settlement. The 2012 violence at the Marikana mine make clear that these unresolved issues may yet see a return to state-sponsored violence on a large scale, undoing the very peace
the settlement was intended to bring about. To re-open the discussion about re/distribution in South Africa would, however, require a more agonistic approach to the engagement, a move away from the elite consensus that has seen a minority of influential South Africans benefit while the majority continues to suffer in extreme poverty. An agonistic approach would mean relinquishing the goal of short-term consensus or agreement, and embracing a more open ended, conflict-laden engagement.

Beyond settlement, once an agreement is in place a country attempting to re-constitute itself must develop a new political ‘container’ in which to govern itself. Often this will take the form of a new or radically revised legal constitution that will allow former enemies to develop ways of governing together. A new constitution can form part of a new national narrative, with the ambition of reflecting the experiences of the diversity of citizens, and protecting their individual and group rights and cultures, ensuring freedom from future oppression, and, most importantly, contributing to reconciliation through the creation of legal frameworks and institutions within which these ambitions may be realised by diminishing the gulf between the powerful and the powerless (Daly and Sarkin 2007 :216, 218). But while Daly and Sarkin contend that a new government ‘needs the strong backing of an emphatic constitution and its support systems if it is to subdue the tensions that people may feel towards one another’ (Daly and Sarkin 2007:217), an agonistic view of these constitutional requirements would maintain that an ‘emphatic constitution’ should not seek to subdue social tensions, but to create political space in which such tensions can be engaged and contested.
Again, however, the promise of constitutionalism has clear limits. Schaap argues that it is the very indeterminacy of community that creates a space for political reconciliation; a space that is closed down through the regulation of community required in a founding legal document. As he suggests, ‘A legal constitution thus seems to be predicated on a necessary forgetting of the founding act that brings it into being, the moment of beginning which imparts an awareness of the frailty and contingency of community’ (Schaap 2007:24). Instead, Schaap contends that in the immediate wake of civil war or the end of a repressive regime, the ‘we’ that is imagined in a constitution can only belong in an imagined democratic future (Schaap 2007:26). It does not become real, and is not settled, by the creation of a legal founding. Instead, according to Schaap, ‘a legal constitution forecloses the opportunity to contest the terms within which such a relationship is determined’ (Schaap 2007:28)

This caution about the political shortcomings inherent to the framing of a legal constitution can be applied to a range of settings, from a nation like South Africa, which famously embraced the opportunity to produce a new constitution, to a settler state such as Australia, which has struggled to reform its constitution to reflect its colonial past and the place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as First Peoples within the nation. Indeed, Australia is currently engaged in a new process of constitutional reform that is attempting to provide a very modest form of recognition for Indigenous peoples. Interestingly, in the early part of the campaign and public debate, the loudest dissenting voices have come from Aboriginal people who insist that recognition within what they see as an illegitimate constitution does not address their claims upon the legitimacy of the nation. These groups instead seek a form of sovereignty or recognition through the making of a treaty or treaties between
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the Australian state. The ‘we’ that they constitute situates itself outside of the Australian nation-state. The insistence by political leaders, however, that Australia is constituted as a singular nation that cannot recognise the existence of Indigenous nations within its borders, invokes a ‘we’ that clearly does not yet exist, underscoring Schaap’s concerns in very real terms.

Finally, at the constitutional level, there is a need to focus on the reconstitution of the category of ‘citizen’ – who does or does not constitute the nation, who does and who does not belong in the post-violent conflict state. Political reconciliation has a central concern with the ways in which opposing groups in divided societies learn to live together and reckon with their own widespread participation in violence, as both victims and perpetrators who now must live and work with one another (Daly and Sarkin 2007 :9). For reconciliation to be political, citizens must hold a commitment to sharing a polity with their historical enemies or oppressors, not transcending former enmity but transforming it into a relation of civic friendship (Schaap 2007 :15). Indeed, Verdeja defines reconciliation as ‘a condition of mutual respect among former enemies, which requires the reciprocal recognition of the moral worth and dignity of others’ such that citizens are able to acquire new, post-violence identities that ‘cut across those earlier fault lines’ (Verdeja 2009 :3). Charles Villa-Vicencio goes further, suggesting that reconciliation implies that ‘people are incomplete to the extent that they are alienated from one another’ (Villa-Vicencio 2004 :4).

However, political reconciliation does not presuppose a prior community that requires restoration, but instead recognises the possibilities that may be revealed in political interactions between the many identity categories are invoked and contested (Schaap 2005 :84) – soldiers and ex-combatants, victims and survivors, indigenous and non-
indigenous, leaders of the old regime and the new. The challenge for reconciliation is to create a nation and a national identity able to contain all the groups and the contests among and between them, ‘not by forcing parties to move closer together but by providing a new conception of the state to which all parties are committed’ (Daly and Sarkin 2007 :188). Thus, in line with an agonistic view of political reconciliation, this level of analysis further challenges conflict transformation processes to retain the capacity to expand political spaces to enable the contestation and recontestation of ideas of belonging and citizenship. This concern is of particular relevance in historically divided societies like Australia, in which one or more group has experienced historical exclusion and marginalization. In these cases, as Bashir Bashir points out:

> Historically excluded social groups are skeptical of any conception of democratic inclusion that requires them to set aside memories of oppression and exclusion, and to enter the political process simply as undifferentiated citizens subject to generic and universal concepts of deliberation and justice. Such ahistorical conceptions of democratic inclusion ignore or downplay the specific and defining experiences of oppressed social groups (Bashir 2012 :132).

In most historically divided societies, these excluded and oppressed groups are still likely to experience marginalisation and discrimination in a range of social institutions.

**Institutional reconciliation**

The institutional level of the multi-level framework for conflict transformation, recognises that overcoming structural injustice will open spaces in which further
transformation can occur (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall 2011: 246). Beyond the space of political institutions reshaped by constitutionalism, such as parliaments and electoral systems, there are a number of institutional domains in which transformation is imperative if politics is to flourish. I include among these land reform and economic redistribution, policing and justice, health, housing, education, and the roles of civil society and religious institutions. Without institutional transformation, conflict is more likely to transmit to future generations, whose lives will remain unchanged by any tangible ‘peace dividend.’ For political reconciliation to be sustained, therefore, there must be visible, tangible progress in spaces of social transformation and reconstruction, without which, ‘any attempt to cooperate across old divisions is likely to give way to an escalation of social discontent, if not political collapse’ (Villa-Vicencio 2009:5). Indeed, the demands for transformation at the institutional level reveals what is at stake when spaces of agonistic political engagement are closed down.

International evidence confirms, however, that these spaces of material and institutional transformation are also spaces of conflict within which a great deal is at stake. Conflicts over institutional transformation are imbued with political power imbalances characterised by the resistance of those who have benefited from previously repressive regimes to any change in the status quo. This is particularly the case with regard to the transformation of economic structures and institutions in order to build more equitable relations between former enemies, despite arguments suggesting that, without economic justice, reconciliation is without meaning (Daly and Sarkin 2007:229). Economic transformation may involve the redistribution of wealth, land reform, or the payment of reparations. These reforms are, however, often resisted by those who have previously enjoyed great wealth – despite the fact that
continuing material deprivation is a persistent source of conflict that will impede reconciliation unless there is political space available through which to contest these inequities. As Daly and Sarkin contend, economic oppression ‘conduces to exhaustion, frustration, and ultimately violence. Desperately poor people have neither the time, the energy, nor the hope to participate in programs designed to foster democracy, reconciliation, or justice’ (Daly and Sarkin 2007:228–9). Structural, institutional reforms are most effective, they suggest, when sacrifice by those in privileged positions is recognised as being of common benefit as a contribution to reconciliation and greater social stability (Daly and Sarkin 2007:237).

Both the South African and Australian examples, discussed above, provide ample evidence of this type of resistance and contestation. Both cases also demonstrate the longevity of these contests, dating from invasion and colonisation and continuing until the present day. Australia, for example, has witnessed decades of struggle for the recognition of the prior and distinct nature of Indigenous landholding, including the 1963 bark petitions sent to the federal parliament by the Yolngu people of northeast Arnhem Land in protest over the mining of their land on the Gove peninsula. In August 1963 two ‘bark petitions’ were presented to Australia’s federal parliament. The typed text of the petitions, in both English and Gumatj languages, protested the excision of 300 square kilometres of the land of the Yolngu people of northeast Arnhem Land, to be leased to a bauxite mining company without their consent. The petitions were framed by paintings of sacred clan designs communicating ancestral narratives of creation and of the land and sea estates of the Yolngu, making them the first traditional documents to be recognised by the Commonwealth Parliament. Marcia Langton and Noel Loos, "Kara Ged: Homeland. the Dawn is at Hand," in
1971 Gove land rights case (established in response to Yolngu claims) it was accepted that the eleven claimant clans did indeed have a system of land ownership, but it was determined that the communal nature of that ownership, which bore little resemblance to western property law, meant it could not be recognised in law. This view was maintained until the 1992 *Mabo* case, where the High Court of Australia determined that the communal ownership of land by Aboriginal people did constitute a unique form of title to land that had existed prior to colonisation. The 1993 *Native Title Act*, the legislative response to the Mabo decision, created collective rights to land in the Australian legal system.

However, this push for reconciliatory land reform in Australia also underscores the conflict and dissent in this domain. The mining and pastoral industries – the Australian economic elite and the most significant stakeholders in issues of land use and ownership – have been politically highly influential, waging a major public relations campaign against the native title reforms of the 1990s (Short 2008:128), to the disadvantage of Aboriginal people. Indeed, the mining industry opposed the proposed *Native Title Act* during 1993 negotiations, and the compromises made to ensure the passage of the legislation severely limited its transformative potential, particularly in the southern states where Aboriginal people had borne the full brunt of invasion and dispossession. Ultimately, rather than keeping open the political space created by activism and transformative legal judgements such as Mabo, the space of agonistic engagement was closed off by compromise legislation, driving enduring

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conflicts over land justice in Australia out of the public domain for the time being. These conflicts are not, however, ‘resolved’, and are guaranteed to surface again at some future time to reclaim a place in Australian political reconciliation. In the meantime, however, the closing down of the nation’s engagement over questions of land justice have further weakened relations of trust between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians.

Relational reconciliation

The last level of analysis in this framework is the relational level, which concerns the transformation of relationships among people. This level is perhaps closest to the more popular understanding of reconciliation, pointing to the ways in which reconciliation addresses both historical wounds and their contemporary, relational manifestations. Indeed, the very concept of reconciliation is based on the idea that a stable future order, of the kind initiated in political reconciliation, is only possible if the psychological sources of conflict—‘the residues of violence and death that linger long after open hostilities have ceased’ (Hutchison and Bleiker 2013 :81) – are engaged alongside broader efforts at constitutional and institutional transformation. Scholars from a range of disciplines have stressed the importance of focusing on the underlying psychological and sociological needs that animate conflictual relations, including needs for recognition, acceptance, respect, security, and justice (Tropp 2012 :4). It is in practices of relational engagement that attempt to address these needs that we can most clearly see the requirements for agonistic processes able to support difficult, ongoing conversations about the past: conversations about truth and justice, about forgiveness, about identity, and about learning to live together without violence.
One key aspect of relational engagement concerns a community’s understanding of the past. Violent conflicts, of course, produce more than social division. Although many high profile commission have established themselves with the goal of seeking a singular ‘truth’, war and violence in fact produce different histories; different understandings of the past that can become the most contested aspect of any reconciliation process. As Brenna Bhandar (2007 :95) argues, many versions of reconciliation maintain a demand for one version of historical truth to be agreed in order for society to agree to restitution and move on. The reality, she contends, is that history is ‘a compilation of different threads of memory, threads that are intertwined but also in conflict’, meaning that the idea of a single, shared truth about the past is ‘nothing more than a fiction.’ An agonistic approach suggests that there will never be consensus on the past, there will always be multiple truths, multiple histories, that must somehow coexist.

An appreciation of this more contentious reality about the conflicting threads of history reveals much of what is at stake when reconciliation turns to consider the past. In Northern Ireland, for example, an inability to contend with this reality has stymied the political capacity to attend to questions of history and memory in any formalised way for fear that it will merely be a polarising process. The understandable desire to end the violence and create greater social stability led to an avoidance of the contentious issue of historical responsibility in the deliberations that produced the ‘fault neutral’ framework of the Belfast Agreement (Aiken 2010 :175). Thus, despite the fact that a formalised ‘peace’ has been in place since 1998, bolstered by the devolved power sharing arrangements in effect since 2007, Northern Ireland remains a deeply segregated society in which outbreaks of low-level violence between the two communities are not uncommon. Chief among the obstacles to further conflict
transformation and desegregation in Northern Ireland is continuing and profound disagreement about the past. While the necessity of peace is widely agreed and supported, there is no consensus about ‘the morality (or otherwise) of the use of violence during the Troubles or to who the “real” victims and perpetrators of past violence are’ (Aiken 2010 :175). There has been a persistent level of anxiety in Northern Ireland that ‘genuine reconciliation’ would require an unacceptable compromise involving the ‘rehumanisation of old enemies’ (Hamber and Kelly 2005: 11). Indeed, in a context where ongoing disagreement about the past remains such a volatile issue, Adrian Little (Little 2012b :76) shies away from even the language of reconciliation, suggesting that any focus on the history of the conflict is potentially dangerous, a likely a way in which ‘traditional divisions and conflicts are brought back to the fore of political discussion.’ Little contends that, despite the years that have passed since the Belfast Agreement, today many people prioritise the relative peace of the present over the risks of reconciliation, with its attendant requirement to face past conflicts and deal with the ways in which they continue to resonate in the present.

To engage with these concerns in a process of conflictual reconciliation will require a form of relational engagement that is intentionally agonistic. Dialogical engagement can, and does, take many forms including community relations work, story telling, single identity work, intra-community work and so on. This type of engagement is a form of political intervention designed to draw opposing groups into a process of listening to one another that can of itself function to expand political space. Many scholars note the importance of these micro level engagements to wider processes of conflict transformation as they create space for ‘the voices of the oppressed’ to be heard, in all their anger and pain, which is considered necessary ‘if the politics of
reconciliation is to avoid prejudging the very issues in dispute’ (Bashir 2012 :139). Schaap reminds us that political reconciliation does not require antagonists to agree about the significance or ‘truth’ of past events, only that they acknowledge that they are in fact talking about the same events. Through what Schaap describes as ‘engaging in incessant discourse about the world that lies between former enemies’ it is hoped that the capacity to share understanding about this world might become possible (Schaap 2005 :84). Designed within an agonistic framework, the goal of such processes is to expand understanding of other perspectives, increasing the social and political capacity for difference to coexist and inform a non-violent democracy.

**Conclusion**

In the wake of violence, societies attempting to transform violent conflict from annihilation to engagement must confront a plethora of demands, across multiple levels of society, some of which risk reopening old wounds or disrupting a fragile peace. The challenges involved in these processes are immense, but in most societies emerging from violent conflict there is also to be found considerable energy and enthusiasm being directed towards these efforts. In post-violent conflict societies around the globe it is possible to observe political actors of all kinds prepared to engage in a politics of reconciliation across the multiple socio-political levels outlined here, with all the risks and complexities that this implies. Thus, to return to the question framing this article: Can we reconcile? My answer is yes, but only if we rethink the concept of reconciliation itself, and understand it as a complex, multi-level, process of constitutional, institutional and relational transformation, in which conflict will always be present, and has potential to be both creative and democratic.
An understanding of these challenges may help defray the frustration experienced by actors on the ground, who infrequently experience political reconciliation as ‘success.’

The framework that this article has mapped out makes clear that the process of transforming conflict is indeed challenging. It is not just multi-level, it is likely also multi-generational, engaging the temporal dimensions that Adrian Little addresses in his article in this issue. It is rarely linear, and the levels themselves are porous and overlapping. Reconciliation may not be able to meet all of these demands, either in the short or the long term; there may be no end to human efforts to right past wrongs. These limitations should not, however, ‘excuse inaction, naïve idealism, or undue delay’ (Villa-Vicencio and Doxtader 2004 :ix). Crucially, these efforts at reconciliation will not, and should not, do away with conflict, but instead retain a focus on harnessing conflict’s powerful, democratic potential. As Charles Villa-Vicencio argues:

Never easy, reconciliation does not presuppose agreement on all solutions to all such issues. It does presuppose a willingness to address these concerns politically rather than in blood. This requires a willingness to think new thoughts and imagine new solutions (Villa-Vicencio 2009 :155).

The approach to reconciliation suggested here acknowledges that meaningful conflict transformation requires patience, persistence, creativity, risk, tolerance of conflict, and substantial government backing and investment over a long period of time. As a process, reconciliation will not ‘end with a flourish’, but it may be hoped that over time a political emphasis on reconciliation may give way to ‘the day-to-day stuff of
normal politics’ (Daly and Sarkin 2007:254). Caution is needed however. Even a country like Australia, where it might be said that day-to-day politics now takes precedence over the politics of reconciliation, cannot be said to ‘be reconciled’. There have been many moments in which Australians have sought to put the process of reconciliation in the past, most recently on the occasion of the 2008 Apology to the Stolen Generations. As Schaap reminds us however, political reconciliation is forever confronted by the risk of politics, as ‘the will to forgive is confronted by the prospect of the unforgiveable’, such that the new beginning we believe we have created does not come to pass, and old hurt and divisions come back to the fore (Schaap 2005:151). Thus a nation may find itself engaged in the politics of reconciliation once more, perhaps at a different level – in Australia the register has shifted from apology to constitutional reform – often avoiding the underlying institutional transformations that would address historical disadvantage and dispossession, in the name of contemporary economic prosperity. These contests, this ever-conflictual

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2 Coined by historian Peter Read in the 1980s, the term ‘stolen generation’ has, according to Robert Manne, taken on a similar significance for Indigenous Australians as the term ‘the Holocaust’ has for Jews (Manne 2001: 82). A key recommendation of the report Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families was that all Australian governments should officially and publicly apologise to the ‘Stolen Generations’ for the harms done by past policies. This recommendation was rejected by the government of the day, but taken up by the newly elected Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd in 2008, who made good on his election promise that he would make a formal apology to the stolen generations. During the first sitting of the new parliament Rudd made a moving speech of apology in the House of Representatives that produced an outpouring of emotion around the country.
reconciliation, is the stuff of politics, and a nation’s best efforts are required to ensure that space is always retained for the political contestation required to transform society in order that citizens might live together without violence.

Bibliography


