

Critical literacy

[Parts of the World](#), [Australia](#)



Comparison of " The Conciliation", 1840 and " The National Picture, 1985

Both ' The Conciliation' and ' The National Picture' represent different views of European and Aboriginal Australian relations. ' The Conciliation' depicts a white male in uniform in the centre of the frame. He is surrounded by 15 indigenous people, most of whom looking towards him. The indigenous people are of mixed gender, hold spears in their hands, some with beads around their necks and are all scantily clad. The painting itself is ' naturalistic' in nature and set in a natural environment (a grassy mound next to the ocean). It is dated 1840. In the foreground of the painting is a badger – a species introduced to Australia, a wallaby – a species native to Australia and a dog. The white man and one indigenous man shake hands – thus " the conciliation". ' The National Picture' reconstructs the same scene but with noticeable differences. The most prominent difference being a reversal in race, meaning that most of the indigenous Australians have now been replaced with white people and the white central figure has been replaced (apparently) by an Aboriginal person. However, a picture of Truganinni (often referred to as the " last" of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people) is superimposed over his or her face. The indigenous figures in the background of the scene, however, remain. There is no longer a ' natural environment'. This has been replaced by a photographic studio. The spears that were once in the hands of the indigenous people are survey staffs now in the hands of white Australians. The dog has been replaced by an esky and tripod and the wallaby is now only a wallaby skin. The badger appears to have come out more (more of it shown within the frame). There is also new additions; two white stones/eggs (it is impossible to tell) and a surveyor's bag to the left of

the frame and a corrugated iron fence acts as a divider. It is dated 1985. The indigenous person in the centre of the frame shakes hands with one of the white males dressed in a business suit. How historical context may have changed my reading of the pictures: Listening to the historical account gave the painting "The Conciliation" 'placement' both geographically and historically. We now know that this is Van Dieman's Land (Tasmania). The central white figure is Robinson, the appointed "Protector" of Aboriginal people in Tasmania at that time. Robinson was, by historical account, a kind individual who meant well and had good intentions for 'saving' the Aboriginal people. However, the bargain he struck with Aboriginal people worked in the long run against their interests. The account made me look at the picture in a different light. The spears Aboriginal people hold now appear as symbols of their independence as a nation. The beads they wear around their neck, understood by whites as tokens of friendship, seem to be nothing more than bribes. The artist's attempt to make this scene 'guilt free' to the white masses is also noted. In the painting we see Robinson alone and unarmed around a group of indigenous people, shaking the hand of one - symbolising peaceful agreement. The wallaby sitting calmly together with the dog and badger (species introduced to Australia) also represents this 'peaceful agreement'. The historical context of "The Conciliation" places "The National Picture" in some perspective. As the two pictures are set up in the same way (placement of figures) and there are many similarities I determine this to be a 'present' (term used lightly) take on the idea of conciliation or indeed reconciliation. Looking at this picture with this in mind, meaning can be extracted. In this picture there are now more white people

than black people. The face of Truganinni superimposed over the face of the black person suggests that Aboriginal people are today being offered the same bargain. The ghosts of their ancestors look on. However, the person striking the bargain is now shown as a very powerful person in a business suit. The surveying instruments and corrugated iron suggest what is at stake is ownership of land and independence. Discuss how each picture works: The specific placement of objects within the frame and the individual and collective symbolism of these objects allow these pictures to "work" – to put their message across in both subtle and loud detail. The title of 'The Conciliation' already sends a loud message about what is being depicted in this painting. Within this frame we see a white male surrounded by indigenous people. The placement indicates that he is the most important or 'superior' focus of this image. He is seen to be shaking the hand of one of the indigenous men -the handshake a symbol of conciliation or agreement. Though Robinson looks to the distance and not to whom he is shaking hands with; A false conciliation? Many people in the painting are pointing at the two people shaking hands, suggesting their support or confusion. The seriousness of the occasion is shown by the solemn facial expressions worn by all. The white male (Robinson) is typically English, with clothes that are clearly unsuited for the Australian climate and environment. The indigenous people wear skins, symbolising their primitive way of life. The clothes are also a device to decipher the period in history, although the date is noted (1840). Some of the indigenous people hold spears and some wear beads. This shows the mixture of bribery and force by which this 'conciliation' has come about. The picture is a long shot, showing the full length of all people

and includes a background to show physical context and set the scene. The surroundings in "The Conciliation" are that of the Australian bush – aboriginal land. The native wallaby represents the natural wildlife of Australia, while the dog and badger represent introduced species. The three animals sitting peacefully together symbolises the 'conciliation' of native and foreign people (Aboriginal Australians and European settlers). In "The National Picture" there are references back to the original picture that leaves us in no doubt that a specific comparison is being made. For example, it uses the same placement of objects and people within the frame as "The Conciliation". The face of Truganinni is superimposed and the Aboriginal people in the background remain. However, there are differences too, and this invites analysis of the differences. The backdrop has changed from a natural environment to a photographic studio. The corrugated iron represents a more man-made environment, which is what Australia has increasingly become over the years. The wallaby has been reduced to a skin. This makes reference to the reducing number of native wildlife in Australia. The tools the figures hold – measuring sticks, radios, etc. indicate how much technology has advanced and society has changed. The surveying/measuring equipment also makes reference to Aboriginal land rights claims (dividing up land). The fact that "Truganinni" is the focus of some positive attention yet is shaking hands with a powerful figure perhaps indicates that while some things haven't changed, there may have been a shift in societal views generally for the better; white Australians starting to recognise Aboriginal struggle. This idea is also aided by the Aboriginal flag on the side of the bag. Deconstruction of own picture: In the construction of

our own text we were asked to reconstruct this scene but with the theme of "Darwin youth". We aimed to portray the youth acting out towards authority. In this case the authority figure is Ms Labowitch, our teacher. We placed her in the centre of the frame as we wanted her to be the prime focus. She wears a smile upon her face and holds out her hand, as if to 'conciliate' with us, but she looks to the camera and not to me (the person's hand she intends to shake). This symbolises the way in which some authority figures "reach out" to the youth with nothing but a good publicity stunt and personal gain in mind. In the picture I am seen to pull my hand away, as if so say, "No, I will not buy into your false promises, or act as a tool to enhance your credibility and humanity in the eyes of others". Helen, David and Victoria make offensive gestures towards Ms Labowitch, clearly showing the attitude that most youth have towards authority figures. Lucy (though it cannot be clearly seen) even looks to harm Ms Labowitch, but she is held back. This tries to communicate that even though some youths act violently, most of us don't want violence, we just want to be respected and taken seriously. Rory, Nathan, Erin and Demo do not look at Ms Labowitch. These four figures represent different 'groups' within the youth of Darwin as a whole. Rory looks away, arms folded, refusing to acknowledge. Demo reads a book, too caught up in study to notice the world around him. Erin and Nathan gaze at their fine pieces of modern technology, totally absorbed in it. Some of us wear headphones – perhaps representative of the fact that youth are listening less and less to words of elders. There is a young person of aboriginal descent lying on the floor of this picture. He was not placed here intentionally for the shooting of this image, but it ties in nicely. The boy lies

there, as if dead, but no one stops what they are doing to help him or even notices his presence. We are all too swept up in our own lives, our own 'battles'. This is a fairly good representation of Darwin society. While individuals may have accepted and acknowledged aboriginal people and their struggle, society as a whole has not made them equal, has not apologised. We like to think of ourselves as 'multicultural', and we are, its just that we are not quite as accepting as we would like to think.