

# History on a Bus

*USING SOCIODRAMA TO ADDRESS RACISM AND RECONCILIATION*

*HELEN KEARINS*

## *ABSTRACT*

In Sydney's Redfern Park on the 10<sup>th</sup> of December 1992, the launch of the International Year of Indigenous People, the then Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating delivered a ground breaking speech that gave great hope to people working for reconciliation with Aboriginal Australians. One of those inspired to continue this work, Helen Kearins developed a workshop that assists participants to own racism and move beyond it towards genuine reconciliation with Aboriginal people. In this article, adapted from her 2011 AANZPA Accreditation thesis, she demonstrates the efficacy of sociodrama in this work.

## *KEY WORDS*

Aboriginal Australians, racism, reconciliation, sociodrama, warm up, White Australians

## **Setting the Scene**

On my way to or from work in Sydney, I often drive past Redfern Park. Many Australians associate the suburb of Redfern with a stereotype of Aboriginal poverty and dysfunction. Apart from the fact that the stereotype is grossly inaccurate, I have a very different association with Redfern Park. It was here on the 10<sup>th</sup> December 1992 that Prime Minister Paul Keating gave a speech, often referred to now as the Redfern Park Speech, to launch the 1993 International Year of the World's Indigenous People. I was there.

The speech was significant because it was the first time that an Australian prime minister had acknowledged that, "...the problem starts with us non-Aboriginal Australians". He went on to say, "It begins I think with an act of recognition" and to name the elements in need of recognition. He emphasised the opportunity provided by this international year to address the injustices suffered by indigenous Australians and to continue working towards reconciliation.

As part of progressing reconciliation The Sisters of Mercy, for whom I was working at the time, decided to engage in 'a process of education' regarding entrenched White racism. I planned a series of workshops with Mercy groups and agencies around Australia titled, *Owning Our Own Racism and Moving Beyond It*. This article, related in the present tense, draws on workshop experiences to demonstrate the efficacy of sociodrama in enabling White Australians to take the first steps beyond racism towards reconciliation with the indigenous Aboriginal people.

## Warming Up to the Reconciliation Workshop

Prior to the workshop, I send invitations to leaders of Mercy congregations inviting them to host a workshop that includes Mercy communities, colleagues and others who share an interest in reconciliation. In bringing together people of a common vision, I hope that there will be reflection and the creation of new steps towards reconciliation. My intention is to warm participants up to the reality of 'restrictive solutions' where fear is already present and offer the possibility of moving beyond them to 'enabling solutions', where the progressive roles of *willing relater*, *value-based reflective practitioner*, *safe and open learner*, *effective change agent* and *respectful collaborative reconciler* might be present.

All the participants, some known to one another and some not, have an affiliation with the Sisters of Mercy so have a shared value base underpinned by compassion and a commitment to social justice. They include teachers, educational administrators, consultants, nurses, social workers, retirees, Sisters of Mercy and Guide Dog Association members. The latter have seen an increase in the number of Aboriginal people using their services due to diabetes related blindness.

At the beginning, I observe that the workshop focus on racism may hold some embarrassment and shame but that it also offers the hope that we can work together and find new ways to move beyond it. I invite the participants to share in twos and threes their purposes in being present. I observe that some have come from the same organisations with a diversity of intentions. The group members enact roles such as *delighted companion*, *welcoming group member*, *eager explorer* and *attentive learner* which indicate strong connections, good levels of spontaneity and a readiness to engage in the work. These all contribute to a healthy level of safety in the group.

I continue to build on this safety by outlining the overall process for the day. I observe that some participants are familiar with it and others by nods and positive murmurs indicate readiness. I notice people becoming more relaxed, especially when they hear my assurance that their experience can be shared but will not be judged. As we move forward, I hold a sociodramatic question in mind. Given our history of colonialism and racism in our relations with Aboriginal people, how can we move forward towards reconciliation?

## Warming Up to Sociodramatic Exploration with Stories of Racism

I invite participants to remember a time when they were affected by racism towards an Aboriginal person. This might be a direct experience or a reported account, because I recognise that many Australians have no direct encounters with Aboriginal people. Participants share in pairs and the stories are then shared in the group.

- A radio report about an Aboriginal actor who was pulled up by police and interrogated roughly, apparently because he was black and driving a late model car.
- An Aboriginal woman who told her friend about the checkout person who always put the change on the counter, never into her hand.
- An Aboriginal woman who grew up in a mission related the way that Aboriginal women were obliged to walk fifty kilometres to the hospital when they were due to give birth and were put in a section of the hospital separate from White mothers.
- An Aboriginal man taken from his family related how as a little boy in Kinsela Boys Home, he and the other inmates were not provided with shoes. On freezing mornings as they brought the cows in for milking they would stand in the fresh cow dung to warm their feet.
- A White woman tells the story of a bus driver who made no apology to ten Aboriginal passengers and two other White passengers for keeping them waiting three hours, in the early hours of the morning, at a bus stop in Halls Creek, Western Australia.

During the telling of the stories, I observe that the pairs are very attentive and respectful. There is a growing softness in the group, observable in participants' body language and tone of voice. As the stories are shared in the whole group, I perceive with growing excitement the roles of *relieved truth teller*, *embarrassed sorrowful witness of racism*, *active listener*, *non-judgemental companion*, *purposeful contributor*, *anxious searcher for a better way of relating*, *open curious learner* and *secure explorer of new possibilities*. This tells me that the group is ready to move into an exploration of the restrictive system that may shed some light on the sociodramatic question.

## The Sociodramatic Enactment

### *Setting Out the System*

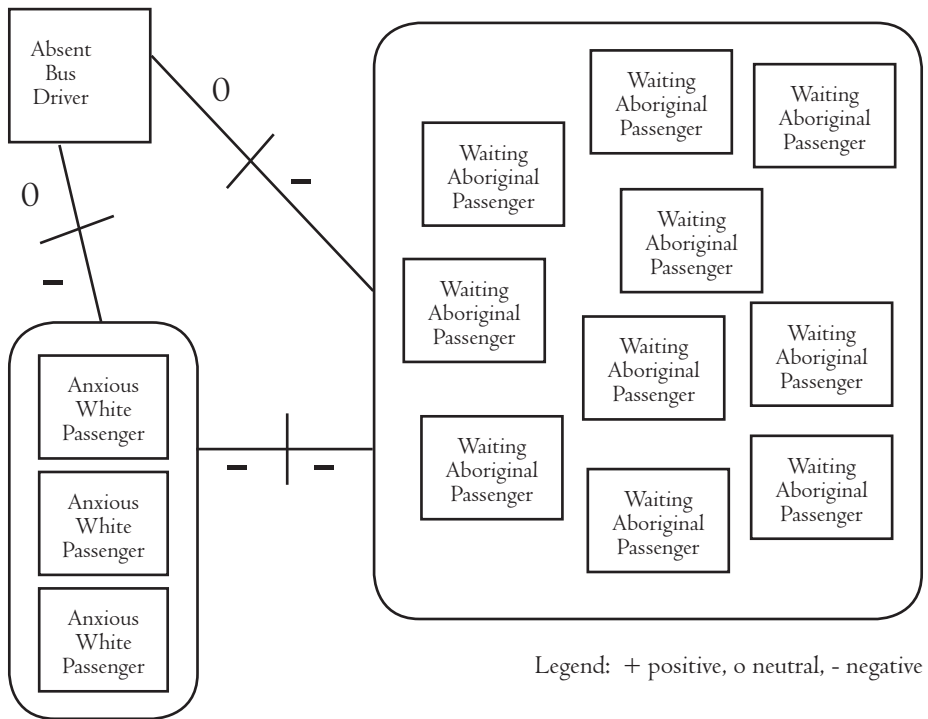
Based on its connection to other stories, the level of affect and the potential for displaying a broader social system, I select the story of Emily, the woman at the Halls Creek bus stop. My purpose in directing this sociodramatic enactment is to explore the restrictive social system that is created by racism. Emily promises to be a good protagonist for the group in this regard as she holds both the

motivating force and the reactive fear in her being. She describes the scenario thus:

*Emily: I have lived and worked with Aboriginal people in the Kimberley area of Western Australia for many years. On this occasion I was waiting at Halls Creek for a bus that was due at midnight but didn't arrive till 3.00am. Also waiting were two other White Australians and about ten Aborigines. Even though I knew several of the Aborigines, as the waiting time stretched into the early hours of the morning I became increasingly anxious.*

In my mind I see two separate groups, the White and the Aboriginal Australians, waiting at the bus stop. This helps me to name the system subgroups and orientate to the tele relationships between them, as illustrated in Diagram 1 below.

**DIAGRAM 1: THE SOCIAL SYSTEM OF PASSENGERS AT THE BUS STOP SHOWING SUBGROUPS AND TELE RELATIONSHIPS**



The role relations within each group are generally positive. The usually neutral or positive tele between the two groups shifts to negative as a result of the White

passengers' increasing anxiety, which turns to fear as the hours pass. As events later demonstrate, the bus driver was neutral towards both groups and both groups were negative towards him.

I invite Emily to step into the action space.

- Director Emily, step forward ... *Emily steps into the stage area* ... What happened when the bus arrived?
- Emily Well, when the bus finally arrived, almost three hours late, I scurried onto the bus and sat directly behind the driver, for safety. So did the other White passengers. As I settled into my seat I realised I had allowed my fear to overtake me. I knew most of these (Aboriginal) people! I don't usually act like that with them.
- Director What happened next?
- Emily When everyone was on the bus we headed off. But the bus driver made no apology or explanation for being so late!
- Director Set up the bus ... *Emily uses chairs to set out the driver's seat and passenger seats.*
- Director Choose someone to be the bus driver ... *She does so and the auxiliary, who is very warmed up, goes directly to the driver's seat.*
- Director *to the auxiliary playing the bus driver* ... You look as though you are well acquainted with this job.
- Driver Yeah. Been driving these things for twenty odd years.
- Director You're running a bit late tonight.
- Driver Yeah! Bus from Darwin was late getting to Kunnunurra.
- Director I noticed that you gave no explanation or apology to the passengers for arriving so late.
- Driver Yeah, well, most of 'em are 'blackfellas'.
- Director So, they don't need an explanation or apology?
- Driver No need to apologise. They don't matter.
- Director When do you think you learnt this approach to Aborigines?
- Driver Oh! Years ago! Me mother always told me never to play with them black kids.
- Director Why do you think she did that?
- Driver Well, you know. Couldn't be sure of them. Where they'd been. Usually a bit dirty. All that stuff.
- Director Choose someone to be your mother ... *An auxiliary is chosen and directed to stand in relationship to her son, the bus driver.*
- Director *to the auxiliary playing the bus driver's mother* ... Thank you for being here. I'm wondering if you can throw some light on this situation. I understand from speaking with your son that you used to tell him never to play with black kids.
- Mother Oh Yes. We all did. All the mothers. You just couldn't trust them.

And it probably sounds a bit racist, but they were usually a bit dirty you know. And living on the edge of town. Well that's why the police had to take the children away sometimes. The parents couldn't look after them properly.

Director Choose someone to be a policeman authorised to take the children away . . . *The auxiliary playing the mother chooses an auxiliary to be the policeman.*

Director Where is the policeman in relation to you?

Mother A bit away from me. I didn't really know the police were doing this, taking the children away, at the time but I knew there were homes for Aboriginal children. The police were just doing what they had to do.

At this point in the enactment I make a statement to the whole group, with the intention of bringing to life the historical social forces acting on the bus driver as set out in Diagram 2 opposite.

Director In this moment we are beginning to see the historical social forces that were impacting on the mother and through her, on the bus driver. We'll continue to build a picture of these historical and social forces. As we do, I invite you to contribute what you know about these forces. They may be particular people or groups of people or institutions. Let's continue building a picture of this social system. So, who or what gave the policeman authority to take Aboriginal children away from their families?

Group Member I (GMI) The Aboriginal Protection Board.

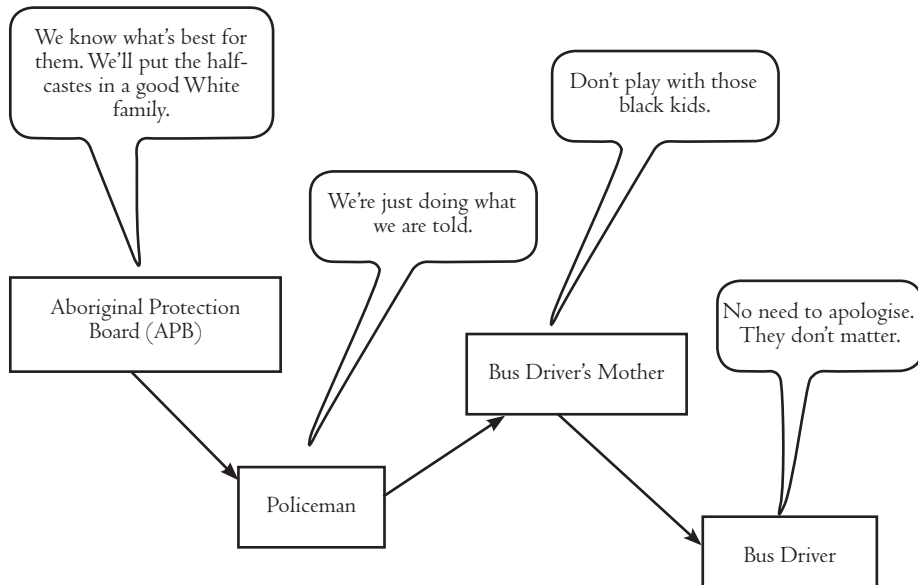
Director Come and be the Aboriginal Protection Board (APB). Place yourself in relationship to the policeman.

GMI *as the APB* . . . I'm behind him. I give the orders and tell him which children need to be taken.

Director And your purpose in doing this?

GMI *as the APB* . . . As the name says, we're here for their (Aborigines) own protection. We know what's best for them. They can't look after their own kids. So we take the half-castes and put them in a good White family and that way they'll become good Australians.

DIAGRAM 2: THE SYSTEM OF SOCIAL FORCES ACTING ON THE BUS DRIVER



### Expanding the System

This narrative sparks animated discussion. Group members conclude that Aboriginal women were often forced into relations with White men and left to look after the resulting children with no support from their White fathers.

Director *with curiosity* . . . Who are these White men? We need to make them real so we feel their lives.

Silent at first, group members then begin thoughtfully to name “these White men” variously as mission and reserve managers, squatters, farm labourers, drovers, ordinary men and government officials, any male colonist in fact who fancied ‘a bit of black velvet’.

Director Someone take up the role of the White fathers.

A group member (GM2) steps forward to take up the role of the White fathers. I interview him to fill out the socius, the values and the worldview, around this role. He had come from England but others like him hailed from Ireland and Scotland. Some had arrived as convicts and, having served their term, were now settled in the colony. Some had come as part of the military forces to keep the convicts under control while others landed as free settlers. All believed the land was empty, ‘terra nullius’ and theirs for the taking. There is a momentary silence

as the impact of this worldview sinks in and deepens the warm up of the participants.

Director Who else do we need here?  
Group Member 3 (GM3) *calling out* ... It all started with Captain Cook!  
Director Come out and be Captain Cook.  
GM3 *as Captain Cook* ... I discovered the Great South Land and I claimed New South Wales for the British Empire!

A group member (GM4) reminds the group that William Dampier had actually landed at Cygnet Bay on the west coast of Australia in 1682. Here he met some of the Aboriginal people and recorded his impressions in his journal.

Director *to GM4* ... Take up the role of William Dampier recording his observations in his journal. Speak them out aloud.  
GM4 *as William Dampier* ... The inhabitants of this country are the miserablest people in the world. Setting aside their humane shape, they differ but little from brutes.

The group warms up to rage and shame at the naked racism displayed by the explorers and colonisers in this drama. They are named the front line force of the urge to colonise. As superiority is the driver of racism, I realise that this touches on the core purpose of the workshop, owning our own racism and moving beyond it. One of the participants advances the story by pointing out that in 1901 all the colonies on the Australian continent united to form the Commonwealth of Australia. Another adds that its first Constitution excluded Aborigines from federal legislation and from the census. I invite an auxiliary to take up the role of The Constitution and knowing that this element of the system might well emerge I have a copy of the relevant parts<sup>1</sup>.

Paragraph 51: *The parliament shall, subject to this constitution, have power to make laws for the peace, order and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to: the people of any race, other than the Aboriginal race, in any State, for whom it is deemed necessary to make special laws.*

Paragraph 127: *In reckoning the numbers of people in the Commonwealth or of a state or other part of the Commonwealth aboriginal natives shall not be counted.*

The auxiliary is moved to tears and at times struggles to speak the words. I notice bowed heads and sympathy with her grief. Group members are seeing with new clarity the mindset that framed Australia's constitution. They recognise 'institutional racism', the belief in White superiority that is embedded in the fabric of Australian institutions, laws and practices. This is an important step in their growing awareness



because it shifts the focus from an individual to a systemic analysis. Rather than addressing individual racism, questions are asked regarding one another's roles in benefiting from and contributing to institutional racism.

### *Enacting the Whole System*

The system of social forces acting on the bus driver, illustrated in Diagram 2 above, has now expanded to include many of the wider historical elements. I judge that it is sufficiently developed but note that something is missing. I immediately see that the Aboriginal people, on whom this system impacts, are not yet adequately present in the drama. I invite the remaining workshop participants to take up the roles of the Aboriginal passengers and "board the bus". When they are seated, I direct the other group members to take up their roles again and enact the timeline from the earliest scene of William Dampier up to the Halls Creek bus stop scenario (see Diagram 3 overleaf). As the timeline is enacted, the participants playing Aboriginal passengers sink down in their seats and as it progresses they sink ever lower.

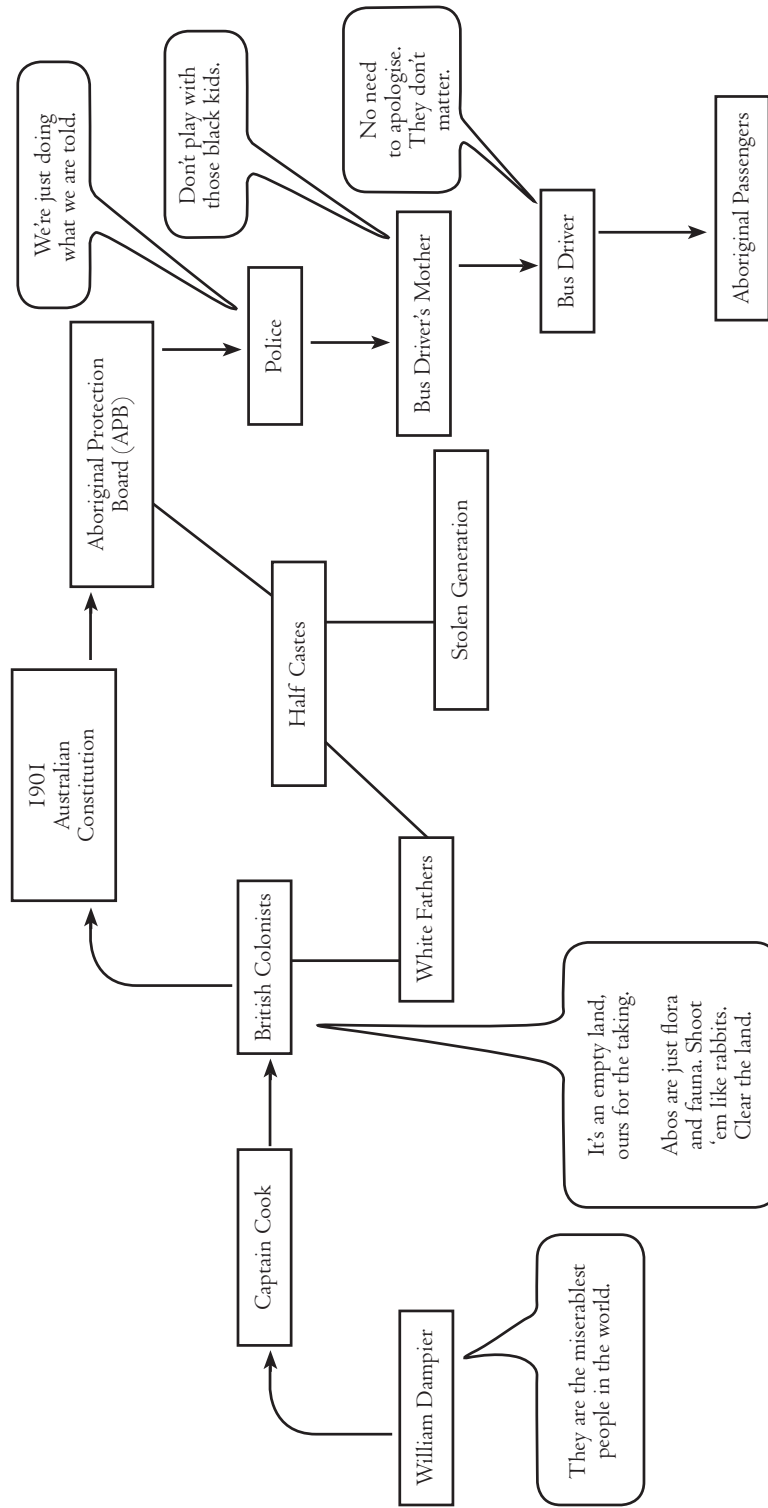
### *A Defining Moment in the Sociodrama*

I am struck by the potency of this moment. As the social forces are enacted, their impact on the Aboriginal passengers is felt and movingly displayed. It is the defining moment, happening right here, right now. We have reached the sociodrama's essence. At the end of the timeline enactment I invite the group members in the roles of Aboriginal passengers, still in their 'sunk down' positions, to comment on their experience of this enactment.

Group Members as *Aboriginal passengers* ... I have slid down in my seat.  
I'm trying to escape.  
Yes, escape the pain and burden of  
all that history.  
My head is bowed down.  
I feel very little.  
I'm trying to disappear.

All the participants in the sociodrama experience the full weight of the forces in this social system. The group members playing the various social forces have already been deeply affected by their roles, but now they become aware of the impact of these on the people to whom they are directed. As explorers, colonisers, lawmakers and law enforcement officers they experience firsthand the unassailable power of their position of authority and superiority. Most importantly, they witness and are moved by the effect of this power on the Aboriginal passengers and there are shocked looks and tears. Some experience the disjuncture and discomfort of reconciling this experience with their own worldviews and values. The participants playing Aboriginal passengers experience the belittling and totally

DIAGRAM 3: THE EXPANDED SYSTEM OF SOCIAL FORCES ACTING ON THE BUS DRIVER



demoralising effect on them of the social forces expressed by the White authority figures. Their spontaneous reaction of physically sinking down in their seats speaks louder than any words. I now close the enactment stage of the session.

## **The Integration Phase of the Sociodrama**

The integration phase includes the sharing of the enactment experience from both an individual and a systemic perspective.

### *Individual Sharing*

Group members express with some surprise and satisfaction that their experiences had been valued during the warm up. “What that did in the group experience for me was that I could actually present my own experience in a way that was totally honoured.” Others express relief at seeing that so much of the racism experienced by Aborigines is institutional. “Not that it lets me as an individual off the hook but I felt relieved that I wasn’t personally a racist.” The reading of extracts from the constitution has deeply affected the auxiliary playing that role and brought up feelings of shame for the whole group. Some refer to it as a “profound moment” and one says, “That’s when my heart started to spin”. The participant who played the role of the bus driver is a little shaken by her experience. “As the bus driver, I began by enjoying it then didn’t want to own that role. I was shocked that I so easily discovered my irrational feelings.” There are feelings of anger at the arrogance of the explorers and colonisers and the blatant mistreatment of other human beings. Some of the anger is also related to the shame of not knowing our own history and group members ask, “Why weren’t we told this at school?”

Feelings of sadness are also expressed, at what has been done to Aboriginal people, at the obduracy of the colonisers and the loss of so many opportunities to engage with the First Australians. There is also a heightened awareness, at a feeling level, of the effects of years and years of displacement and exclusion of Aborigines. This was especially experienced as the timeline was enacted and the years of cumulative oppression were observed to weigh down the Aboriginal passengers, poignantly symbolised by their sinking in their seats. Several group members ask, “If this short enactment can have that effect, what is it like for Aboriginal people who have been living with that history all their lives?” Another says, “People have carried all those little whispers of time right up to the present”.

### *Sharing about the System*

In the sharing from a systemic perspective, participants discuss aspects of the system revealed in the drama. One is forcibly struck by the attitude of total superiority and the fact that this attitude still pervades White Australians’ relations with Aborigines. Others comment and nod agreement. Some group

members name the dynamics of the system a clash of cultures, but the particularly insidious element in this clash is that Aboriginal culture is not recognised as a culture and therefore not respected. Others note that the exertion of power over people and the total control of their lives led to powerlessness and dependency. Several participants remark on the way that the sociodrama, in capturing the historical length and depth of impact on Aboriginal people, has highlighted the extent of colonial exploitation. Other group members observe that the display of the system has made them aware of a national consciousness, that racism is institutional and goes right through society.

When asked to name subgroups in the system, participants identify explorers and empire-builders and those displaced by colonial expansion. They also see depicted in the bus scene a parallel with contemporary society where there are Black and White, those who need an apology and those who do not, those who drive the bus and those who wait to be picked up. As one person observes, "The present is affected, maybe we should say, infected, by the past". Group members grapple with this issue asking, "How do we move on from this?" At this point I pose the sociodramatic question that I have been holding. Given our history of colonialism and racism in our relations with Aboriginal people, how can we move forward towards reconciliation? Participants agree, "This is the challenge". With sufficient personal sharing and systemic analysis completed and a connection made from the enactment to the present day, I conclude the integrative phase of the sociodrama.

## Reflections on the Sociodrama and Steps to Action

We have satisfactorily concluded the stages of a sociodrama, warm up, enactment and integration. The sharing from both personal and systemic perspectives has led to an 'experiential analysis' by the group of the presenting situation and its meaning. Several of the participants note that this analysis is different from what they usually undertake, in that it is "analysis with feeling!" The sociodrama has provided participants with the experience of deep feeling in conjunction with insight and many realise the significance of this way of working. They see the systems in which they are involved with a new clarity and are open to further learning and action.

Group members begin to question what they can do about reconciliation between Aboriginal people and non-indigenous Australians. I invite them to gather in groups related to their work places or common interests. My thinking is that action will be better planned and executed in collaboration with others rather than alone. I remind participants that they are still responding to the critical sociodramatic question posed earlier. Given our history of colonialism and racism in our relations with Aboriginal People, how can we move forward towards reconciliation?

I suggest that group members plan their actions using a basic guideline. What

actions, who will take them forward and when? I am also aware that most of the participants are professional people who are well able to plan in a strategic manner. I notice their eagerness to go to the next step. They are in touch with their own progressive roles in the world. The groups work enthusiastically and each comes up with practical actions. Some are personal actions relating to Aboriginal people they know and with whom they intend to continue building relationship. Others are institutional, such as plans to review or follow through on implementation of indigenous education policies, plans to celebrate reconciliation week in schools and plans for reconciliation events in local communities. As the plans are shared in the whole group, some participants name possible resources including people, books, videos and music. These resources are listed, others added and one group member undertakes to type the list and disseminate it to all participants.

As a closure, I invite everyone to stand in a circle and make a one word or phrase statement that expresses an element of the work they take with them. A sense of companionship is palpable as people speak. I realise that a satisfying sociodrama can effectively begin to address complex social issues such as racism.

## END NOTES

I. Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act, 1901. Chapter I: Powers of the Parliament, Section 51 (xxvi) and Chapter VII: Miscellaneous, Section 127.



Helen Kearins is a qualified sociodramatist working as a group facilitator in the social justice area. She noted the potential for sociodrama when she became involved in social justice education and has used it to deepen people's understanding of a variety of issues. When time allows Helen plays the guitar and writes songs. She can be contacted at <[helenkearins@gmail.com](mailto:helenkearins@gmail.com)>.