Encountering whiteness in an act of ‘reconciliation’ – the story of the common knobby club rush

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Abstract

The pace of the colonisation of Indigenous space seems to be increasing exponentially for Indigenous people in southern South Australia. Understanding the complexities of this new wave of settler colonialism is an everyday problem for Indigenous leadership. Whiteness theory can be useful at the ‘grassroots’ level in this political struggle.

We are interested in exposing the structures of power that construct the cultural and political landscape that Indigenous First Nations in South Australia find themselves in at the beginning of the twenty first century. The 2003 creation of a piece of public art memorialising the ‘historic’ encounter between Flinders, Baudin and the ‘local Indigenous inhabitants’ at Encounter Bay in South Australia exposes for us the politics of representation in what is described as a piece of public reconciliation art. Ngarrindjeri leaders attempted to enter the ‘white’ space of settler histories and mythologies to challenge the planned representations of historical and contemporary Indigeneity and the celebratory national histories. They had some success in their engagement with these white discursive regimes that shaped the event and limited the possibilities for Ngarrindjeri agency. In a powerful symbolic act Ngarrindjeri leaders exchanged flags with the British and French representatives at public ceremony. The Encounter event was at centre stage of public celebrations of Australian history – whiteness can help explain why their was no place for a Ngarrindjeri First Nation in this story of Australia and South Australia.