COVER SHEET

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Sites of Benevolence

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On the television show *Backyard Blitz*, Australians judged as deserving by their families and friends receive the gift of surprise makeovers to their gardens; in Australian public hospitals, trainee surgeons hone their skills on willing patients; in literary travel narratives, non-Indigenous Australian writers attempt to forge a relationship with the land and its traditional owners; and in inner-city Brisbane, the City Council builds lockers and sleeping areas for the park's homeless occupants. In Australian courts, legislators create copyright laws attempt to protect Indigenous ownership of traditional narratives; the South Australian Museum mounts a new Aboriginal Cultures Gallery; Indigenous actors face the challenges of racism as they practice their craft; and the Queensland government of the early twentieth century enacts policies of 'Aboriginal Protection'.

At first, these instances seem to bear little meaningful relation to one another. However, as the articles in this special issue demonstrate, they all share a crucial common feature: all of these instances are moments or sites which are underpinned by benevolence. That is, each of these diverse instances is informed by one party's desire to 'do good' to another. Each involves the formation and negotiation of a specific kind of relationship between people or groups of people, a relationship driven by one party's desire to assist the other. This, then, is a special issue about good intentions, about gifts, and about the moral economies they articulate. As this issue reveals, benevolence is mobilised across a range of cultural sites and practices; the articles gathered in this issue explore the complexities of its diverse historical and contemporary manifestations.

What is particularly important about this issue is that its contributors are drawn from a variety of academic disciplines: benevolence here is refracted through a productive number of perspectives and approaches. The articles in this issue regard benevolence through the disciplinary lenses of media, legal, medical, historical, museological, theatrical, literary and urban planning studies. This disciplinary promiscuity is apposite and intentional: benevolence itself cuts across numerous fields— it is not confined to historical moments, legal decisions, or television shows—and as such, it demands a multidisciplinary approach. This issue's wide temporal range—from the eighteenth century to the present—allows for a charting of social relations and subjectivities across time, providing a complex genealogy of Australian benevolence. The disciplinary and temporal breadth of this issue, finally, allows for a usefully diverse set of responses to the questions on which the issue is founded: what role does benevolence play in the creation of Australian social relations; what subjectivities and beliefs does Australian benevolence sustain or produce; and what forms does Australian benevolence take?

Perhaps the most important question that the articles collectively address, however, is the nature of the ethical systems and logics underpinning acts of benevolence. This question is particularly complex given that benevolence, by its nature, suggests unequal power relations, unequal needs and unequal exchanges. Benevolence is,

essentially, a response to inequalities; attending to benevolence, then, allows for clear insights into the more abstract domain of ethics and subjectivities which motivate it. Some of the articles in this issue expose benevolence as a ruse of power, while others see it as a serious ethical attempt, albeit a problematic one, to engage with and to help others. As Alan Lester observes, using the analytical tools and perspectives of postcolonialism, we have become adept at readings of benevolence that view it as a mask for other agendas,[i] but this issue also draws attention to those moments, events or practices in which something more than just domination is going on, moments in which ethical relations are, however clumsily, being forged between the giver and the receiver. It is no coincidence, then, that the theme of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is a recurring one in the articles collected here. These relations are constituted by a mix of good will, bad faith, guilt and exploitation, and many of the articles explore belated benevolent attempts to redress historical injustices and the many challenges of their legacy.

Bruce Buchan's and Emily Wilson's articles provide historical grounding for the study of Australian benevolence: both attend to early white colonial discourses and policies of Indigenous 'protection' and 'improvement'. As both Buchan and Wilson demonstrate, ostensibly benevolent colonial projects such as 'training up' Indigenous people for assimilation into the lower ranks of white society were anchored in a racist logic of white superiority, and thus had devastating—rather than positive—consequences for Indigenous Australians. Buchan carefully traces the genealogy of the concept of 'society' in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Australia, observing its positioning of propertied European sociality as a marker of 'civilisation'. As Buchan notes, this exclusive and European definition of society directly informed government policies and programmes designed to 'civilise' Indigenous peoples to inhabit 'society'. Wilson also attends to the epistemological foundations of white colonial policies for Indigenous 'protection' and 'improvement'. Wilson analyses Queensland's Aboriginal Protection policies and practices between 1900 and 1950, demonstrating that because these policies were grounded in the supposition of the superiority of white society and white people, benevolent attempts to 'protect' and assist Indigenous peoples were in fact profoundly racist, paternalistic and damaging. As both authors argue, when benevolence stems from a racist epistemology, its effects are unlikely to be positive for its recipients.

While Buchan and Wilson attend to historical instances and impacts of white benevolence on Indigenous peoples and cultures, Christine Dauber's and Maryrose Casey and Liza-Mare Syron's articles trace the ongoing effects of this history into the present. Dauber examines the South Australian Museum's recent attempt to remedy Eurocentric curatorial practices in the presentation of Indigenous material in the museum's Aboriginal Cultures and Pacific Cultures Galleries. Dauber is critical of both displays, and concludes that both the nineteenth-century practice of 'salvaging' and displaying the material culture of a 'dying race', and the current practice of aestheticising Aboriginal material with what is known as a 'contemporary ethnographic' approach tend to promote and sustain views of Aboriginal cultures as primitive, while avoiding scrutiny of the upheavals wrought by colonialism on Aboriginal lives. Casey and Syron focus on the negative implications for Indigenous actors and playwrights of non-Indigenous theatrical

conventions and expectations. The best intentions of non-Indigenous playwrights, directors and theatre companies to include Indigenous actors and stories, as Casey and Syron assert, backfire at times, particularly when the non-Indigenous traditions, conventions and practices of theatre themselves go uninterrogated. As Casey and Syron's interviews with Indigenous actors confirm, Indigenous actors often find themselves condemned by non-Indigenous expectations of what constitutes 'good acting', and confronted by non-Indigenous notions of how Indigenous people and material should be performed. Benevolent 'sharing' of the stage by non-Indigenous companies, as Syron and Casey conclude, does not necessarily make the stage a just or a comfortable working space for Indigenous actors.

Australian literature is another key site in which the complex politics and ethics of benevolence are played out. Nancy Wright and Brooke Collins-Gearing's article considers the relationship between the rhetoric of benevolence used in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century children's literature and the legal recognition of Indigenous cultural rights. Despite the intentions of non-Indigenous authors to preserve and disseminate Indigenous culture, Wright and Collins-Gearing argue that these publications ultimately erode understandings of the relationship of Indigenous knowledges and narratives to the community. Wright and Collins-Gearing attend to recent legal theorisations of property rights in order to point out the limitations of current intellectual property law, and they elaborate on some of the consequences for Indigenous people and communities of the cultural appropriation and distortion of Indigenous oral narratives, and of Australian law's denial of Indigenous communities' collective ownership of their oral narratives.

Both Robert Clarke's and Paul Newman's articles consider more contemporary instances of literary good intentions, focusing specifically on questions of representation. Clarke considers four works of Australian travel literature and their relationship to white reconciliation discourses: *Reading the Country* by Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe (1984/1996), Barry Hill's *The Rock* (1994), Kim Mahood's *Craft for a Dry Lake* (2000) and Nicholas Jose's *Black Sheep* (2002). Clark detects a subtle shift in what he refers to as a 'semiotics of empathy' between the literature published prior to the publication of the *Bringing Them Home Report* (1997) and that which comes after; he argues that this change reflects shifts in the Australian public sphere regarding the politics and ethics of reconciliation. While all four works are concerned with the question of history, and particularly the entangled histories of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, Clarke finds in the latter works a shift towards more personal narratives that highlight questions of apology and the nature of personal responsibility. In the light of this shift, Clarke asks whether this approach is compromised by the mobilisation of discourses of therapy which might be read as seeking to absolve white guilt.

Unlike Clarke, Newman considers the literary representation of white men's *refusal* to engage in the public acts of witnessing and recognition on which national processes of reconciliation in late twentieth-century Australia and South Africa depend. Through a consideration of the character David Lurie in J M Coetzee's *Disgrace*, and Ern Scat in Kim Scott's *Benang*, Newman questions the ethics of representing those who

remain outside reconciliation's politics of goodwill. Newman reads Scat and Lurie as metaphors for particular kinds of recalcitrant white male subjects who, unable to engage with social and political change, refuse to confront colonial violence and its contemporary effects. For Newman, Coetzee's benevolent attempt, as a white South African man, to avoid speaking for the other (both racial and sexual), and his complex portrayal of Lurie perhaps inadvertently become an endorsement of the obstinate white South African masculinity that the novel seems to critique. By contrast, Scat, for whom the reader is unlikely to feel sympathy or understanding, becomes increasingly irrelevant as the reality of colonial violence and the force of Indigenous renewal take centre stage. Newman concludes that well-intentioned literary attempts to represent refusal to engage in reconciliation may be caught up in the logic that they are seeking to challenge.

The remaining articles consider the ethics and practices of benevolence in a diverse range of contemporary cultural sites. Elizabeth Ferrier's article considers the complexities of gift-giving in Australian home makeover programs in which the climax of the narrative is the gift of the makeover to a deserving person. According to Ferrier, it is too simplistic to argue that the commercial media are driven merely by economic self-interest; she offers a more nuanced analysis which considers the way home makeover programs also ground gift-giving in meaningful social and national contexts. Taking the programme *Backyard Blitz* as a case study, Ferrier's article explores the affirmation of family and community values and the mythologising of benevolence as integral to Australian identity and the Australian way of life. Benevolence is presented as a desirable and 'natural' national characteristic, as Australian as the belief in 'a fair go'. For Ferrier, such shows provide valuable material for understanding social relations and the media's changing role in relation to them. While Ferrier acknowledges the conservative nature of the show, she also reveals that it portrays an ideal Australian society that is inclusive, tolerant and supportive of diversity. And while the programme values self-reliance, it also offers an implicit social critique in its exploration of uneven social relations.

Sally Wilde's article also considers the logic of the gift, but this time in the context of public hospitals. Rather than looking at the well-understood benevolence of surgeons, Wilde considers the rarely acknowledged gift that public patients give surgeons, that is, offering their bodies to be practised upon for the purposes of training. Wilde explores historical origins of this gift relation and the contemporary implications of the shifting nature of moral economy in a radically altered late twentieth-century Australian public health system, particularly with the increasing widespread acceptance of economic self-interest and concomitant commodification and marketing strategies in the sector. Wilde argues for a much more open debate of the complex moral issues involved in the public patient's benevolence.

Emma Felton's article focuses on attempts at benevolence at another site of cultural production: urban planning. For Felton, the city is a site of culture and an indication of the well being of the community of citizens of which it is comprised. Yet the city is also a site of diversity, and this diversity can often lead to modes of inclusion and exclusion, particularly as public spaces become privatised. Felton considers some of the ways in which Australian urban diversity is managed and the kinds of anxieties it

provokes through an investigation of two contemporary projects in Brisbane: the ongoing Footprints Along Kurilpa project in West End, and the ultimately unsuccessful Homeless Shelter Trial, an initiative set up by the Brisbane City Council in New Farm. Both inner-city projects target groups of homeless people for whom public spaces are a vital resource: Felton's analysis provides a positive way of looking at approaches to homelessness in contemporary Australia. Through these case studies, Felton explores attempts by governments and community organisations to deal with the complexities of urban homelessness in order to create a city that is inclusive of all its citizens.

This brief overview gives some sense of the range of ways notions of benevolence can be deployed and developed, and the complex ethical issues that are invariably at stake. This multidisciplinary volume provides a sense of the many cultural sites where benevolence in both theory and practice is central to the ways in which social relations are forged, power is exercised, injustices are redressed and subjectivities are formed.

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[i] Alan Lester, 'Obtaining the "due observance of justice": the geographies of colonial humanitarianism', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 20, 2002, p 277 & 290.