

Tangled up in white: The perpetuation of whiteness in Australian national identity and the Northern Territory Intervention

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Abstract

The following work engages with the vexed question of whiteness in contemporary Australian society, delineating the entrenched yet invisible white supremacy embedded in Australian national identity. Beginning with a discussion of the way Australian national identity is commonly configured in “white” terms, the author problematises the notions of “Australian” and “un-Australian” in the context of contemporary Australian culture. An analysis of the ongoing governmental policies of embedded racism and assimilation in the Northern Territory Intervention highlight the powerful position of whiteness, and configure the Northern Territory as an “un-Australian” space of neo-colonial violence and dispossession.

Keywords

Australia, whiteness, indigenous, identity, nation.

Introduction

Australian academics have “taken up the challenge” of critical whiteness theory in the past fifteen to twenty years following its emergence in the United States ([McKay](#), 1999, p. 3; [Riggs](#), 2007). In an academic climate where the focus of race-based research is inevitably on the racialised “other” ([Said](#), 1995), critical whiteness theory attempts to redirect attention onto the white, naturalised self who occupies the discursive position of power (Riggs, 2007, p. 1). This privileged position must be acknowledged and shifted in order for any kind of racial equality to be achieved (McKay, 1999, p. 3). Attempts to do so have been made, both in academe and in politics; the Rudd government’s 2008 apology to Australia’s Indigenous peoples can be read as an attempt to reconfigure institutionalised white power. But clearly this attempt has failed – white dominance is still entrenched in Australian culture, and if anything has been made more invisible through the denial of its dominant position. The Northern Territory’s “National Emergency Response” (Intervention) illustrates that racial “othering” not only still takes place, but is rendered normative through the dominant position that whiteness occupies, and categorises specific bodies as “un-Australian”.

Unmasking the invisible whiteness of Australia’s national identity

In “exposing” whiteness and its prominence in Australian society, it is crucial to note that this is not a uniform exposition; whiteness is not invisible to all people. It should not be forgotten that Indigenous people are “...extremely knowledgeable about whites and whiteness,” ([Moreton-Robinson](#), 2002, p. 85). “Whiteness” as a subjective, non-normative, racialised category is generally only invisible to those that occupy this space of power: to white people themselves. In an attempt to make visible the position of power that whiteness

occupies in Australian society to those who are blind to it, much critical study has been conducted into the form and functions of whiteness.

One problem with making whiteness visible is that “whiteness”, as a concept, is quite hard to pin down. “Whiteness” often applies to different groups at different times according to changing (and often political) motivations ([O'Connell, 2008](#)). It is a concept that even academics who specialise in the field can lose control of when attempting to define, analyse and critique it – it is a category that attempts to evade examination ([Schlunke, 1999](#)). Consequently it is difficult to analyse and critique whiteness as a white person, with your own work potentially stifling a plethora of other voices and re-situating a white voice as authoritative and powerful ([Probyn, 2007](#)). Hence analyses and critiques of whiteness (although increasing in number) are problematic to conduct.

Despite this, the centrality of whiteness to Australian national identity is readily recognisable – [O'Dowd's](#) assertion that “Australianness [is] defined in racial terms as white” (2009, p. 804) is a succinct reflection of much academic opinion on the subject. [Birch](#) (2001) describes how under the Howard government Australia's national identity failed to incorporate multiple aspects of Indigenous history. Under the Howard-era narrative, the national sense of self is understood as emerging from the “noble sacrifice” of the ANZACs (Birch, 2001, p. 18). The history of Australia's Indigenous peoples is ignored, necessitating a “selective amnesia” of the massacre and dispossession of Indigenous peoples at the hands of their white colonisers. This violence must be ignored for a white Australian national identity to function – to acknowledge the violent legacy of colonisation would contradict the idea that our national self was forged through “mateship” and compassion, which would render the accepted and familiar (white) version of Australian history “absurd” (Birch, 2001, p. 20).

Moreton-Robinson cites John Howard's reification of the digger Weary Dunlop as an example of the white configuration of Australian national identity, pointing out that Dunlop (as a figure) is "a white heterosexual male, [who] represents the core national values of mateship, egalitarianism and a fair go," ([2005](#), p. 22). If Weary Dunlop is the embodiment of Australian national identity, then this national identity is white at the exclusion of non-white and Indigenous people who, because of their non-whiteness and therefore non-Australianness, cannot hold core "Australian" values (Moreton-Robinson, 2005, p.22).

This discourse of white Australian history and identity is not unique to the Howard era (although it was re-invigorated at this time), but is an ideology that has been (re)presented to the Australian public over many years, eventually becoming embedded in the national subconscious (Birch, 2001, p. 20). As critical whiteness theory is a refutation of this dominant discourse of Australian national history and identity, it is unsurprising that it is often met with rejection, denial or rage when articulated to students and/or the general public. Because "whiteness", as propounded by Australia's national identity, is discursively intertwined with ideas of protection, beneficence and mateship, this white Australian national identity must deny anything that contradicts these positive notions, such as the legacy of violence and dispossession. Because whiteness forms the core of the Australian national ideal, everything "other" is excluded and posited as "un-Australian". Both historical and ongoing violence against non-whites in Australia are re-framed as a form of helping, protecting and saving the "other" ([Watson](#), 2009).

Affronts, anger and acknowledgement: the uncomfortable position of white power

This complex linkage is a construction that is often unrecognised by those (predominantly white people) who occupy positions of power. Because whiteness is normalised and rendered invisible within Australian national identity and culture, understanding and acknowledging this embedded power can be a difficult process, especially when white people are forced to confront the embodied privileges of the white superiority they own (O'Connell, 2008, p. 3). Australian national identity is steeped in whiteness, and yet Australian culture is proclaimed to be “multicultural” and “non-racist”, which makes it difficult to render whiteness visible and to demarcate a coherent, white identity ([Haggis & Schech](#), 1999, p. 50).

Critical whiteness theory shifts this national narrative in ways that may be uncomfortable – it highlights the violence and injustices perpetrated by white people against Indigenous populations, situating notions of mateship alongside histories of brutal dispossession (O'Dowd, 2009, pp. 808-809). The theory challenges the idea of white normativity by re-configuring “ordinary” (white) Australians as “un-Australian” through their discriminatory (rather than compassionate) actions (Birch, 2001, pp. 17-19). The concepts and demands of critical whiteness theory are confronting and challenging, particularly to white subjects who have freshly realised/acknowledged their position of power and are then confronted with the gravity of what that position signifies. As a result, the theory (and its implications) is often met with denial, defensiveness or anger ([Nicoll](#), 2007; [Standfield](#), 2007).

Nicoll (2007) and [Aveling](#) (2007) both describe the difficulties of teaching whiteness theory to students, particularly as white female lecturers. They report that white students

find the theory particularly challenging, and can interpret the criticisms of white superiority in Australian society as personal attacks, with some students going so far as charging the lecturers with “reverse-racism” (Nicoll, 2007, p. 25). Anger, denial and guilt can be brought out in the classroom (and in greater society) when the continued privilege of whiteness is described and people are suddenly aware that they are subjects at the center of a power matrix (Aveling, 2007, p. 39). It is easy to interpret criticisms of “white” as a category as disparaging, and if not properly contextualised, this realisation can make people dismissive, unempowered or angry at the ideas being presented (Nicoll, 2007, p. 26). It is crucial to understand that a critique of whiteness is not a personally directed insult, but rather a way of understanding the identity politics and power relations embedded in Australian society (Nicoll, 2007, p. 26). Arguably, these relations are most acutely visible in the current Northern Territory Intervention.

The ongoing legacy of white dominance in the Northern Territory Intervention

An account of the Northern Territory Intervention must begin with the colonial experience, in which white dominance was a central tenet (Riggs, 2007, p. 2). From this point onwards, Australia’s Indigenous peoples have been systematically and violently physically, emotionally and politically dispossessed and excluded. Historically, this has manifested itself in different ways: colonial policing repressed Indigenous Australians and resistances with militia tactics and massacres ([Cuneen](#), 2001); Indigenous peoples could be violated even after death, with their remains exhibited as colonial curios ([Anderson](#), 1994); and the removal of Indigenous peoples to reserves broke up communities, culture and connection to land while re-configuring them as “servants”, only valuable in their ability to be used by white masters

([Huggins & Huggins](#), 1994). The biopolitical control of the Indigenous population (the restriction/suppression of the Australia's (racial) minority for the benefit of the majority (white) population ([Foucault](#), 2003, pp. 254-255)) was enforced to ensure white superiority, and to entrench whiteness in Australian society.

From the late nineteenth century across Australia the majority of Indigenous peoples lived on reserves under the control of white managers and government-appointed missionaries ([Moreton-Robinson](#), 2009, p. 61). These reserves can be understood as 'un-Australian' spaces – constructed spaces, which, while physically located within Australia, are populated by residents who do not hold equal citizenship rights with the rest of the nation's peoples ([Perera](#), 2002). Within these "un-Australian" spaces Indigenous peoples were configured as biopolitical minorities, subjected to racist laws, regulations and policies that did not apply to white people (Moreton-Robinson, 2009, p. 62).

Although the obvious and widespread colonial displays of violence are not as apparent in contemporary Australian society, white power still remains at the centre of Australian race relations and culture. The current re-segregation of the Northern Territory configures it as a contemporary "un-Australian" space; the repealing of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth.) specifically targets Indigenous Australians, erasing their equal citizenship rights and demonstrating that the biopolitical control of Indigenous peoples is still exercised, and colonial violence has been continued into the present day in a multitude of ways (Watson, 2009).

After being announced by the Howard government in 2007, the Northern Territory Intervention suppressed the human and citizenship rights of Indigenous peoples through the combined use of military force and the control over all aspects of Indigenous life by the

Commonwealth government (Watson 2009, p. 45-46). As a reaction to the *Little Children are Sacred* Report into the sexual abuse of women and children in the Northern Territory ([Anderson & Wild](#), 2007), the Intervention was posited as a way of seizing back control of the area to put an end to inhumane degradation (Watson, 2009, p. 46). Critics have variously supported, been conflicted about or opposed the Intervention, and these views are voiced in both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. It is important to acknowledge this plurality of voices and opinions. Neither the pro- nor anti-Intervention camps is homogenous; nor can they be equated with the overarching “white” or “Indigenous” viewpoint respectively. Despite differences of opinion, however, the reality remains that the methods through which the Intervention has been conducted, and the underlying power relationships it perpetuates, clearly demonstrate the powerful position of whiteness in Australian national identity, as all Indigenous bodies in the Northern Territory are being targeted based on their (presumed) collective, inherent and inhumane (i.e. “un-Australian”) behaviours.

In a reconciliatory move, Kevin Rudd apologised to Australia’s Indigenous communities in 2008 for past wrongs inflicted by former governments – a major step forward for Indigenous rights in Australia, and a rebuttal to ongoing symbolic colonial violence. It was an affirming formal declaration that the government was wrong in removing children from families – creating the stolen generations – and eradicating many parts of Indigenous culture. The apology paved the way for a more democratic inclusion of Indigenous Australians in contemporary society (O’Dowd, 2009, p. 812). This apology, which had been advocated by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians alike, had “nation-building” potential to bring the two cultures together like never before (O’Dowd, 2009, p. 809).

However, despite good intentions, the apology was full of contradictions and limitations. It was offered by a blond-haired, blue-eyed, white male in one of the highest positions of power in Australian society (O'Dowd, 2009, p. 812). Far from reconciling Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, the lines of (in)equality were blurred by the simultaneous timing of the national apology and the Northern Territory Intervention (O'Dowd, 2009, p. 813; [Thill](#), 2009; Watson 2009). While the apology proclaimed the end to colonial violence by repairing the wrongs done to Indigenous populations by white people (O'Dowd 2009, p. 813), that same violence was being maintained via the Northern Territory Intervention. Despite the apology, the continuation of the Intervention ensured that colonial violence was perpetuated continually into the foreseeable future (Watson 2009, p. 46).

The Indigenous voices that the apology attempted to recognise and engage with were ignored in the instigation of the Intervention, which was initiated without any consultation with local Indigenous communities (Watson, 2009, p. 52). Indigenous voices have been silenced and white voices magnified in the criticisms and appraisals of the Intervention itself (Thill, 2009, p. 537). The deployment of the military represented a particularly strong-handed and repressive method of addressing the issues (Watson, 2009, p. 46), and is further complicated and problematised by the historical tensions between Indigenous peoples and the police/military (Cuneen, 2001). Legislative measures have been particularly blatant in their enforcement of racial segregation and suppression. The repealing of the *Racial Discrimination Act* (1975) (Cth.) in the Northern Territory (in direct contravention of several international charters including the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*), as well as the introduction of new and controlling Commonwealth legislation ([Vivian & Schokman](#), 2009) are obvious discriminatory measures that a colonial legal system has imposed onto Indigenous populations.

These legislative changes have physically, legally and symbolically excluded and suppressed Indigenous peoples. The Northern Territory itself has symbolically become a separate state, being segregated from the rest of the Commonwealth (O'Dowd, 2009). The entire Territory has become "un-Australia", a space where Indigenous peoples have become citizens without rights in their own land (Birch, 2001, p. 18). This "un-Australian" space of repression and segregation that has manifested itself through the Intervention is a continuation of colonial violence and of the discourses that accompanied it: those of paternalism, protectionism, salvation and the "rescuing" of brown women from brown men/culture by white men (Birch, 2001; Watson 2009, p. 48). The Intervention is an unnecessarily violent and biased reaction to a genuine problem.

Ways Forward?

In an environment where the knowledge and understanding of the power of whiteness in Australian society is widely known/available, how have events like this happened and why? Watson (2009) argues that "the state retains a vested interest in maintaining the founding order of things ... inequalities and iniquities ... are maintained against Aboriginal peoples for the purpose of maintaining the life and continuity of the state" (pp.45-46). Because white power and the myth of white benevolence is strongly and intricately intertwined with Australia's national identity, it is hard to render white supremacy visible, let alone shift it. This is how public anxiety and anger over an openly discriminatory event like the Northern Territory Intervention can be suppressed, and how many members of the public can even defend the act itself.

Although much research and analysis has been conducted into why whiteness is invisible in Australian society, there is no easy answer on how to render it visible to both Australia as a nation and white people as individuals. Within academic circles it is a contentious, problematic and frustrating issue and within wider society and institutions the examination of whiteness can lead to anger and/or denial. Reactions like these are understandable when we consider how tightly linked whiteness is with Australian national identity, power and belonging.

It will inevitably be difficult to shift relations of power and control between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians that began with colonisation and continue into the current day. As O'Dowd states "... every gesture of justice forces us to face our injustices," (2009, p. 814), which is never going to be an easy task. However it is a task that must be undertaken; white people must relinquish the control over/direction of the self-determination of Indigenous Australians, vacating a space of power within the (white) Australian political matrix, creating an arena where a heterogeneous multitude of Indigenous voices and knowledges can not only express themselves but can disassemble and reconfigure Australian national identity (Moreton-Robinson, 2002; Watson, 2009, p. 31). A full acknowledgement of Indigenous sovereignty – of the power and authority of Indigenous laws, land, culture and justice – would begin to disentangle our national identity from its white core, working on a much deeper level than the national apology by accepting that racial violence is entrenched and ongoing, not merely fixed in the past ([Watson, 2007](#)). Where to start this process is unclear, however through a willingness to change and experiment, the "impossible" moment of Indigenous sovereignty may be overcome (Watson, 2007, p. 26).

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