

Forum on whiteness

Whitening race: a critical engagement

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Indigenous lawyers have claimed the constitution is racially biased, but an Indigenous man from Bourke also perceived racism in the national anthem. 'What's this 'Advance Australia Fair' he said. 'Why should Australia be "fair" rather than "dark"?' Telling him that fair meant either 'just' or 'beautiful' only seemed to multiply his complaint. His sensitivity exemplifies the way people positioned differently in a racialised world can take different meanings from their social environment. Such a comment is a clue to the way whiteness invades the world. I will make some very simple points about the usefulness of 'whiteness studies'.

I welcomed the arrival of whiteness studies having long argued that it was time we turned the analytic gaze onto the powerful, onto the colonising cultures, onto us whitefellas. But whiteness studies does more than invite reflexivity and shift the ethnographic gaze to a different object. It also expands the way we think about race. Instead of race being a problem suffered by 'people of colour', which we anti-racist whitefellas have to fix on their behalf, race is now recognised as referring to a *relationship* between people with different kinds of heritage, both physical and cultural. That is, race is not simply something people have, a quality, but is a comparison, a relationship, a social identity, which contrasts with that of others.

Because we all belong to a 'race', we all need to take responsibility for the way racial categories play out in the world as a way of identifying and differentiating people. Just as men are gendered, so white people are raced.

Whiteness studies replaced an earlier anti-racist strategy of 'colour blindness'. This recommended ignoring differences in skin colour, which was the shorthand for racial categories. The argument went like this: racial categories are erroneous biological constructs, so we social scientists should ignore them, refuse to speak of race, and thus rid ourselves of these misleading and destructive ways of thinking. The fantasy was that if we get rid of racial categories, racism and racial inequality would disappear.

But, as we were once told: 'If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.' Not only is the strategy unrealistic (differences do not disappear if they are ignored), but it does away with the thing we value, different kinds of people living different kinds of ways.

My argument is that the problem of inequality is not *caused* by difference, as the colour blind strategy implies. Inequality and injustice may be built around physical, or perceived differences of various kinds. But to do away with these differences is to define our bodies as the problem rather than the social inequality and injustice, which come from quite different sources. Erasing differences, whether of skin colour or cultural practices, seems to me to be a major case of trying to throw the baby of difference out with the bathwater of inequality.

Fiona [Probyn in presentation prior to this one] has dealt with some issues in the theoretical debate within the academic world where we are privileged to be able to argue and challenge ideas freely. But, as becomes an ethnographer, I want to illustrate the significance of whiteness studies with some examples from the wider world.

What is known as 'terrorism' has emerged in a world where some people have become so angry and frustrated that their basic human impulses have been smothered. Some young men from Leeds in England, friends or acquaintances of the Pakistani men who planted the bombs in the London underground, were interviewed on TV recently. The men being interviewed were mostly born in England of Pakistan parents. They were horrified by the bombings and could not believe their friends had done such a thing. But when they were asked *why* someone from their community would want to attack and damage Londoners, they had no trouble in imagining their motivation. These men all shared a sense of being a subordinate population, and being despised or patronised by their fellow Englishmen. That is, they felt themselves to be disrespected and humiliated by the institutions and assumptions of the society they were born into. This humiliation they said, was on the basis of their religion or race. And it was 'white' people they saw as perpetrators of that humiliation. But the TV interview stopped, there, as if, well, now we know about that, let's move on. One aim of 'whiteness studies' would be to take this enquiry further, to examine how such people see whiteness, and what are the unrecognised injustices that lead to an ongoing sense of resentment and outrage against white people. George Bush's little homilies about the hatred of democracy, are hardly adequate to explain these things.

We have not experienced this kind of thing in Australia. Yet I believe there are hints of equivalent frustration and resentment in the so-called Redfern Riot, the Palm Island violence, and similarly the riot in Bourke (*Blackfellas Whitefellas and the Hidden Injuries of Race*, Cowlishaw, Blackwell). A major foundation of such resentment and anger is the unconfessed and taken for granted privileging of a realm of comfort and security we are all familiar with. The style of life represented in this room, is incredibly privileged, but without recognising itself as such. We — urban, home owning, employed, educated, and mostly, but not all, white people — we speak of the everyday social world in terms unimaginable to most people in the world, and to quite a number of people in Australia. And I do not want to label them the poor or the underprivileged, because I do not think the solution is not to make everyone equally privileged. In fact the racial minority I am most familiar with, Aboriginal people, do not want to emulate the urban middle class. Similarly, women do not want to overcome their inequality by becoming the same as men.

What these resentful others want, I believe, and what is necessary, is that *we understand what WE are like*. We are specific, not universal human beings, with specific views and habits not shared by all our compatriots let alone those who live elsewhere. It is only when the peculiarity of the realm of whiteness is understood that proper recognition can be

accorded to difference. Then, instead of difference being deemed aberration or lack, its historical and cultural specificity can be recognised and respected.

An example from Australian history will reinforce that point and make another. You are all familiar with the stolen generation narrative, which has focused on the way Australian governments, in aiming to maintain racial separation, took many mixed race children from their parents. (The mixed race children were mainly from the north. Virtually all Aboriginal people in NSW were mixed race by the 1930s and a variety of other reasons were given for their removal). Less familiar is the law against any liaisons between black and white people. These were called 'consorting' as well as an array of nastier descriptive terms. The relationships that went unpunished were the most fleeting and exploitative, whereas true love affairs between Aboriginal and white people were treated as unnatural and were strongly discouraged. So I find great joy in exploring those relationships that did survive against the tide of disapproval. Three Aboriginal women I knew in the NT in the 1970s had married white men, who I deem to be local heroes because they had persevered through the humiliating experience of obtaining permits from the Native Affairs Branch to marry the women they loved.¹ One, Alma Gibbs described how the NAB officials, probably in the late 1950s, tried to make her choose 'a boy of her own colour' instead of her white stockman, Jimmy Gibbs, with whom she had been living and droving for years. She told the officials, 'You can't change my mind' and she and Jimmy eventually got a 'permit to marry'.

I think white scholars have an obligation to explain the thinking behind such peculiar rules. It is not sufficient to express our distaste and dismay at what our forebears did. What were the emotional impulses, the racial anxieties, which led to these kinds of policies? Historians and others have been so busy expressing horror at recently exposed racial laws and practices that they have not asked the harder questions. For instance when and how did the thinking behind these race based policies change? How is it that we can so easily disown our forebears? Who are the descendents of men like Neville and Cook and their many colleagues? And are the legacies of those policies still with us?

A third point is more of a caveat, a caution against too much optimism. Whiteness studies aims not merely to be a critical study of white people, but the study of a cultural realm that has its genesis in the colonising of large segments of the world by white settlers. We should not imagine our intellectual work is going to change that cultural heritage simply through enlightening white people to their/our sins. But further, it may not always be advantageous to Indigenous people or non-English speaking migrants to modify institutions and practices to benefit them. At least, questions about these matters are often ambiguous. For instance, some Indigenous students have complained that they were offered inferior courses when the attempt was to provide 'culturally appropriate' material. Noel Pearson has spoken of

¹ Details of these cases are in *Rednecks, Eggheads and Blackfellas: racial power and intimacy in northern Australia*. Blackwell 1999.

‘culturally appropriate’ as an alibi made by white professionals to not offer their best professional practice. I am suggesting that whiteness studies is no panacea for problems of entrenched and long-standing injustice.

Another caveat is that white academics can respond to scrutiny of their racial position with anger or defensiveness. Some practice self-censorship, fearful of inadvertently trespassing on Indigenous arenas. A historian, who was discovering letters from Indigenous inmates of Aboriginal missions and homes in the archives, was worried that this was not her business. Besides the need to be sensitive to living descendents, it seemed to me the exposure of this material was more important than who uncovered it. Further, a white heritage was also being explored; Aboriginal people were the victims, but white people were the perpetrators and their practices were also revealed in this material.

Finally, to avoid reinscribing unitary racial identities, the complexity of racial heritage should be confronted as well as the problem of reversing rather than removing racial injustice. I am thinking here of a white country woman who had left her family at sixteen because she had been forbidden to associate with her black friends. She married a tall, very black and very politically active man and lived much of her life on the Bourke reserve raising their nine large, lively and argumentative children. This woman remained white, as she emphasised herself, so that when she got old, and her husband died and her children had all left home, she was threatened with eviction because she no longer had any right to the two-bedroom house the family had been allocated by the Aboriginal housing company. This is perhaps a rare and extreme example, but shows that race privilege can work the other way. There is another more subtle sadness about this case, and that is that this woman’s family, who are active and powerful within Aboriginal organisations, do not boast about their mother or their white heritage. It would be difficult to do so, because loyalty to white friends or relations can be seen as disloyalty to the Indigenous domain. Such conditions affect us all. I would argue that this racialised world has made both white and black people part of processes which reproduce inequality. There is no innocent political position where we can be morally pure. But a constant reflexivity allows us to continually examine the world and try to SEE what is usually obscured.

Paper presented at a Gleebooks panel session, 3 August 2005. Co-panellists included Aileen Moreton-Robinson (editor of *Whitening race*), Fiona Probyn and Wendy Brady.