

On Whiteness: Current Debates in Australian Studies

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Whiteness Studies in Australia emerged in part as a critical reflection on the worry, concern and fear of 'ordinary' Australians about the issue of border control. While this ideological fantasy was orchestrated during the 1990s by the Hansonites (subsequently becoming an intrinsic part of the national agenda when adopted by the then Liberal PM, John Howard), its historical roots lie in the White Australia Policy. The re-irruption of the nation and its borders in Australian Studies (here understood in the broadest of senses) since the 1990s has led to examinations of how the capacity to elevate the myths of freedom and security to the status of absolute truths in order to create internal consensus lies on the bedrock of representation (Ashcroft).

According to Benedict Anderson's watershed book on national identity formation, *Imagined Communities*, a modern nation is a community imagined as limited, sovereign and 'fraternal' (15). This model of "community" achieves solidarity, equality, fraternity and liberty on "an essentially imagined basis" (74). Anderson's study arguably resonates with the "fair go" and more generally the putative egalitarian ethos of Australian society. However, as Homi Bhabha's critique of Anderson suggests, Anderson pays too little attention to the ways in which the idea of community is premised on the existence of others who do not qualify as members of the community and whose presence may be constructed as a threat to the cohesiveness of the nation. In the case of Australia this perceived threat engenders the promotion of a set of Australian 'common values' in order to de-centralize the political authority of asylum seekers, refugees and Indigenous land claims (Papastergiadis, 9).¹ The apology of the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to the descendants of the Stolen Generations (February 13, 2008) and the same government's somewhat contradictory Intervention and income management of Indigenous Australian communities which are treated as dangerous "states of exception" (Agamben), are consistent with the imaginary egalitarianism of the Australian nation. So is the recent population debate, and the hard-line approach of the Rudd government (for example his reference to people smugglers as 'the scum of the earth') and the Gillard government (for example the continued bungled efforts to set up off-shore detention centres) to refugees, where the representation of refugees and the rhetoric about them continues in the vein of John Howard.

The discursive construction of the Australian nation-state and the fear of foreign contamination and the necessity of regulating Australian shores, as in the case of the Tampa affair or of the Cronulla Beach riots, is subtended by the white disavowal of Indigenous Sovereignty (Hage 2003, 98-99). As Ghassan Hage argues, the Australian nation-state is disrupted by the "polluting memory" of Australia's migrant origins and by the continuance of Indigenous Sovereignty, both of which lie within its borders as an

enduring contamination (Hage 2003, 98-99).

As Brewster and Probyn-Rapsey noted, Whiteness Studies in Australia have been strongly intersected by indigenous studies and minority group studies, (indeed the backlash against the multicultural society of the 1990s also gave birth to Asian-Australian Studies). They have contributed to the defamiliarisation of white Australian sovereignty which has instituted a regime of governmentality and surveillance, what Giorgio Agamben defines as a 'state of exception'. Agamben's definition is useful, although arguably in a limited sense in Australia, since it seems to imply there is no possibility of competing sovereignties. Since its first appearance in 1998, Ghassan Hage's *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*, has arguably drawn the Australian debate on multiculturalism away from a discussion about how migrants adapt to Australian society and towards an examination of the ways in which formulations of Australian national identity work actively to racialise minority peoples. A year later Aileen Moreton-Robinson's book *Talkin' Up to the White Woman* (1999) demonstrated how whiteness is constituted in forms of epistemic privilege and in the asymmetrical access to visibility and voice. The Australian feminist debate had already been shaken by Rita Huggins's address to white scholars such as Diane Bell, and by her highly relevant engagement with the work of her American counterpart bell hooks. Yet drawing upon Ruth Frankenberg's sociological framework, Moreton-Robinson conducted a series of interviews with white women scholars, to demonstrate that,

Whiteness is both the measure and the marker of normality in Australian society, yet it remains invisible for most white women and men, and they do not associate it with conferring dominance and privilege. [...] But Indigenous women do see, analyse and have knowledge about whiteness – knowledge that is usually dismissed, ignored or rebuffed by whites upon whom we cast our gaze and about whom we write. (Moreton-Robinson, 2003, 66)

As Anne Brewster notes whiteness studies have resulted in a refreshing, self-reflective personal turn in the work of white Australian academics

Recent writing in Australia and elsewhere on whiteness has been characterised by the turn to a personalized or autobiographical narrative mode... Concomitantly, it is possible to read the appearance of the personalized turn in some Australian women's writing on whiteness and postcoloniality as a reciprocal interlocutory engagement with the personalized modes – specifically life story and personalized essay – which dominated Australian Indigenous women's literary production in the 1980s. This is not to invoke a communicational model of reading and imply a direct intentional exchange between the writer and reader...My interest lies in the intertextual imbrications and ethical reciprocity of the personal turn in

whiteness writing. The personal address of whiteness writing seems to me in part predicated rhetorically upon the ethical imperative to reply. (Brewster, 2005)

Several recent studies have emphasised that the recent shift of Indigenous Studies towards practices of “self-reflective” reading and Whiteness Studies can be regarded as a first sign of listening after years of deafness and as a precondition of textual dialogue, ‘reconciliation’ and collaboration. However, there is also an ongoing and insistent call to listen and to consider Indigenous sovereignty and intellectual property in the recent work of Indigenous Australian writers and academics. This call, far from signifying an encompassing ‘deafness’, might signify a need to create a body of critical theory and literature which may redress the naturalisation of Western epistemological assumptions regarding orality² and writing as “invisible, unmarked and uninterrogated” (Moreton-Robinson [1999] 2003, 67).

At its best, “the critique of whiteness... attempts to displace the normativity of the white position by seeing it as a strategy of authority rather than an authentic or essential ‘identity’ (Bhabha, 21). Hence whiteness exists only as a discursive strategy although the desire for whiteness is often violent in its attempt to constitute itself and its borders. A second wave of whiteness studies is now taking place, with scholars engaging in a deeper discussion of its premises and about the relationality of its borders. We hope this issue may be a significant part of this second wave of whiteness studies.

Notes

¹ See also Suvendrini Perera (ed.). *Our Patch: Enacting Australian Sovereignty post-2001*. Perth: Network Books, 2007 and Suvendrini Perera. *Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats and Bodies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

² We use the term orality to refer to the Western binary opposition of orality and writing as most famously theorised by Walter J. Ong (1982).

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