

BOOK REVIEW: POSITIONING AND DISRUPTING WHITENESS IN AUSTRALIAN RACE RELATIONS

MARYROSE CASEY

Aileen Moreton-Robinson (Ed), Essays in social and cultural criticism: Whitening Race, Aboriginal Studies Press 2004.

This book is an important and inspirational addition to the critical writings on race. Each chapter in the collection of critical essays examines an aspect of the racialised conditions that operate within the Australian context and their role in reproducing colonizing relations and practices through the theoretical framework of critical race and whiteness studies. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson points out in the preface, historically in Australian scholarship on race, the object for study has been the other, in particular the non-white other. The privileged subject position of the white Australian and the structural location and cultural practices of whiteness are rarely examined. The essays in this book address this imbalance by revealing and interrogating ways in which whiteness is socially and discursively constructed.

One of the stated aims of the collection is to disrupt the ways in which race is framed in Australia and extend the understanding of the variety of meanings that constitute whiteness. This disruption effectively creates a new intellectual space for understanding how whiteness operates in Australian society. The essays critically engage with the meanings of whiteness and the location of its social and discursive construction from a variety of disciplines such as philosophy, cultural studies, gender studies, education, social work, sociology and literary studies. Through different theoretical positions and research agendas these essays examine a broad range of different ways in which whiteness is a foundational construction within Australian cultural practices and knowledges.

The task of creating a new intellectual space is challenging. This challenge is one that is answered strongly by this collection in both the depth of intellectual inquiry within each essay and the breadth of fields

covered by the collection as a whole. Individually and cumulatively the essays reveal the inherent active role whiteness continues to perform within the frame of discussion and written record for Australia. The essays are written in an accessible style that is reinforced by the structure of the collection that divides the essays into two parts, each defined by the overriding areas of concern. The first part, Whiteness and Knowing, includes essays focused on the idea of knowing, subjectivity and knowledge production. The second part, Whiteness and Nation, interrogates whiteness as identity, institutional practices and discursive power that function to reproduce and reinforce the dominant notions of national belonging and nationhood. The strength of the structure is reinforced by the introductory framing material by Moreton-Robinson. The text is positioned as offering a different approach through its focus on Australia because it engages with relations between migration, Indigenous dispossession and whiteness. Moreton-Robinson argues that this focus on the Australian context and practices opens up the international approach to whiteness studies by revealing that 'historically, whiteness erupts and transforms itself depending on the colonising nature of its arrival and relationship to the British empire' (viii).

The first three essays in Part 1 focus on the ways whiteness dominates in the psychosocial and ontological realms of subjectivity to reproduce colonial paradigms in different contexts. Alison Ravenscroft raises questions about the ways in which race underpinned Australian rhetoric in relation to the war in Viet Nam. Her exploration demonstrates how denial of Indigenous dispossession is a critical component within anxieties about dispossession. In the process she reveals a different frame of reference for Australia's participation in the war in Viet Nam and potentially reveals a different frame for examination of Australia's commitment to many earlier wars.

Fiona Nicoll's essay aims at shifting the debate on race relations from the pros or cons of 'black armband perspectives' on race relations to an examination of the trope and practice of 'perspective' and its power to make Indigenous sovereignty invisible and unknowable (17). She grounds her discussion in her reflections on her experiences curating an exhibition based on the life of Nancy de Vries, a prominent Indigenous community figure and a member of the stolen generations. Nicoll reveals her experience of developing increasing awareness of her own expectations as a 'white know-all' and her discovery of aspects of Indigenous resistance and sovereignty that had previously been invisible. These aspects of both resistance and sovereignty are the power of reiteration of Indigenous stories and life histories and the physical existence presence of Indigenous Australians. Nicoll describes her journey as a shift from trying to find the correct perspective on Reconciliation to a process she calls "'falling out of perspective" into an embodied awareness of "being in Indigenous sovereignty"' (25). Nicoll argues that an abstract relationship with Indigenous people allows white Australians to deny Indigenous sovereignty but the embodied experience of negotiating concrete relationships provides the potential to 'fall' out of the known racialised perspective.

Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos explore the Australian subjectivity from the Hegelian concept of 'will to be' through ownership. From this frame of analysis these writers examine the ontological conditions that make possible distinctly white Australian constructions of whiteness. The exploration interrogates the use of migrants as foreigners within as part of the continuous negotiation between denial of Indigenous possession/dispossession and sovereignty and white Australia's claim to ownership of the land.

The next set of essays focus on subjectivity in terms of how it is constituted by knowing, what we know and how we know it. A notable feature of many of the essays in the book is the generosity of the writers' revelations about their own thoughts,

reservations and personal discoveries. Nicoll's essay, extending on her previous work engaging with expressing and owning the personal presence of the critical writer, is a model for engaging personal experience with critical inquiry. On a different level, Jane Haggis' essay reflects on her engagement with whiteness studies and politics in terms of the racialised nature of power and privilege. Under headings such as 'The Dis-comforts of whiteness', Haggis presents a preliminary attempt to think through her reservations about a politics of whiteness in Australia. Her conclusion is to support Nicoll's path of 'owning whiteness and, as a consequence, falling out of perspective into the space of Indigenous sovereignty' (58). Gillian Cowlshaw also draws on personal experience and observation to explore the complexities of engaging with race relations in an intellectually and emotionally meaningful way. She argues that in order to be engaged in a meaningful way in race debates we must begin by understanding that racial positioning and intersubjectivity are ambiguous, complex and contextual (61).

Moreton-Robinson's essay is the pivotal theoretical examination that explicates the focus and shape of the collection. At the same time this essay propounds an important basis for future examinations in Australian critical race studies. Moreton Robinson examines the relationship between knowledge, representation and whiteness. She cogently argues that whiteness as an epistemological *a priori* directly connects with colonisation in Australia and operates to shape knowledge production. Moreton-Robinson argues convincingly that this epistemological *a priori* is embedded in all representations of Aboriginal peoples and continues to inform racialised ways of knowing and colonising practices.

The last three essays in the first section take up issues of whiteness and subjectivity as constituted through various disciplinary knowledges. Sue Shore examines whiteness within Adult Education, Susan Young within social work practice and Bob Pease explores the relationship between masculinity studies and critical whiteness studies

The first three essays in Part II, *Whiteness and Nation*, interrogate discursive spaces in which identity positions reproduce narratives of white nationhood. These essays highlight the focus within these narratives on white men as the normative model. Kate Foord argues that Rod Jones' *Billy Sunday*, though supposedly a critique of the terms of Turner's frontier thesis concerning the narration of American nation building, functions as a recuperation of the frontier thesis within Australia's nation building. Belinda McKay demonstrates how whiteness informed the experience and writings of white women in Queensland 1859-1937. Maureen Perkins examines the narratives and associations linking blackness, theft of white children and social dislocation revealing how these discourses supported the removal of Indigenous children.

The next two essays examine some ways in which the unquestioned frame of whiteness operates to centre and authorise the white subject position and to marginalise others. Susanne Schech and Jane Haggis discuss the discoveries of their research with British migrants. The migrants perceive themselves as the norm and central in the white nation-space. This then reinforces their perceptions of Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers as out of place. Ben Wadham argues that the character of the Australian nation remains an area dominated by white and masculinist values and practices.

The last three essays focus on ways in which whiteness controls the borders of the nation through government policies, knowledges and practices. The contribution from Catriona Elder, Cath Ellis and Angela Pratt examines how white people maintain the centre of the white nation-space through discursive processes. Jon Stratton argues that the current government's response to asylum seekers is tied to the idea that Australia is part of the larger white border of the west, which serves to exclude the non-white other on both moral and racial grounds. Sonia Tascon examines how the exclusion and marginalisation of refugees is a product of the functions of a white border which was established as part of a colonial regime that served to contain Indigenous people.

As Moreton-Robinson points out in her Preface, this book is a timely intervention in the context of the current social and political climate in Australia (vii). Currently, the term 'mutual obligation' acts as a trope to deny race as a continuing issue and dominates debate and government policies. These essays engage directly with that denial, exposing the role of whiteness in the process. As well as an intervention in the current terms of political debate, this book is also an important contribution to the development of the field of critical whiteness studies. As Moreton-Robinson declares in the Preface, this collection offers new approaches to, and knowledges about, whiteness as central to the racial formation of Australian society (ix). The essays provide rigorous scholarly material that is accessible and useful for students coming freshly to whiteness studies and for researchers engaging with the fraught field of race relations. The collection extends existing material in the field and challenges and inspires everyone to rethink and reconsider.

Maryrose Casey is located in the Australian Studies Centre of University of Queensland