

## WHITE SUBJECTIVITY AND RACIAL TERROR: TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF RACIAL VIOLENCE

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### Abstract

This article seeks to understand the enactment of racial violence, here symbolised by the British Union flag, from the perspective of white subjectivity. Utilising David Theo Goldberg's conceptualisation of "identity-in-otherness", and Aileen Moreton-Robinson's concept of the "possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty", the article makes the claim that racial violence is the predictable outcome of a whiteness that must negate the 'other's' difference whilst preserving the integrity of racialised space.

The argument is illustrated with examples drawn from three sources: the author's personal experience; the fictive portrayal of racial violence in Hanif Kureishi's novel *The Black Album*; and the events of the Cronulla Beach pogrom in December 2005.

### Introduction

Racial violence and whiteness are the principal concerns of this paper. Using the fictive portrayal of racial violence in Hanif Kureishi's novel, *The Black Album* (1996), examples drawn from personal experience and the Cronulla Beach pogrom of December 2005, this paper will argue that racial assertion is central to racial violence. As such, the notion is advanced that racial violence should be seen less in terms of its supposed exceptionalism and irrationality, and more as the logical and predictable outcome of white racial subjectivity.

An alternate source of comfort to the idea that the Cronulla Beach pogrom was an aberration in the otherwise healthy narrative of Australian multiculturalism might be found in Shaun McGowan's characterization of a "white riot". McGowan, lead singer of the band The Pogues, was recently asked, on the twentieth anniversary of the punk band, The Clash, which was his favourite Clash single. He replied: "[a]ll the Clash singles come down to White Riot .... It was [about] a piss take of how pathetic white people are at standing up for their rights" (*The Observer*, October 26, 2006). One can reasonably infer from McGowan's comments that white people, in the British context at least, do not riot as effectively as black people; that whites rioting constitute a dubious spectacle for they lack the righteousness, anger and alienation that motivates black riots. This particular take on the Clash song reveals more, of course, about McGowan and his view of authenticity than it does about the supposed lack inhering in a "white riot". Yet there is a point to be made here about the way McGowan deprecates whiteness, which in turn has the effect of rendering whiteness harmless and transparent even when it has declared itself in violence.

The comedian Billy Connolly, commenting specifically upon the Cronulla episode in response to a question from host, Andrew Denton, on *Enough Rope* tried similarly to diffuse whiteness:

I didn't know what to do. I was kind of sad. I don't know, and I still don't think it was much to do with Islam. I mean the guys might be Lebanese and all that but I think it was people throwing their weight around, you know, trying to get their own way with girls and other people getting upset and all that kind of stuff. It didn't seem religiously or racially motivated to me. You know, I've never found the Australians to be, to be a racist community. I've always felt they were a bit like Alf Garnett. They were too honest about it to be racist you know? A racist is more covert than that like if somebody's going to tell a racist joke, you know how you can tell when somebody's going to tell a racist joke? They do that first (ABC, 2006).

It is a measure of the extent to which Australia has been naturalised as a white possession that Connelly could both place Lebanese Australians outside the body of the nation, and decline to specify which Australians he had in mind when rejecting the idea that Australians were racist. His reassuring assessment was undone, however, with the unflattering comparison to Alf Garnett: a white fictional character on the BBC television 'comedy' *Till Death Do Us Part*, who was notorious for his bigotry, racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism and misogyny. Garnett was often mimicked in the school playground, pubs, clubs and workplaces, with the intention of inducing fear in those who would typically be regarded as the focus of Garnett's rants. Garnett was certainly not harmless, and the Cronulla pogrom was just that: an organised, officially tolerated attack on a community. Personally, the racial terror visited upon the hapless was all too familiar, and the already nagging sense that I was not at home was confirmed.

Before I proceed I am aware of the need to locate myself in relation to this

'place', both in terms of *from* where I write in relation to Britain, and *in* which I write in relation to the Cronulla Beach pogrom. In neither case am I of this 'place', for this simply cannot be. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson has stated:

Non-white migrants' sense of belonging is tied to the fiction of Terra Nullius and the logic of capital because their legal right to belong is sanctioned by the law that enabled dispossession. (2003: 26)

The facticity of this statement serves to unsettle my already ambivalent relationship to Australia. In 1959 my father arrived in Brisbane from the Fiji Islands but was barred from settling because of the so called White Australia policy. He instead made his way to England, arriving one cold morning at Waterloo Station, along with dozens of other migrants from the Caribbean Islands and Eire. I arrived in Brisbane from London some forty years after my father, though this time I was deemed worthy of settlement by virtue of my 'skills'. The irony of my being here is not lost on us both, and I initially thought that I could bring my black British anti-racist activism to bear upon this 'place'. However, to read the work of Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2003, 2004), Damien Riggs (2006), Suvendrini Perera (2005, 2006), and Fiona Nicoll (2000) is to realise that this is not possible, for the terms of my political intelligibility (Riggs 2006) have been set by a normative Australian whiteness premised upon a disavowal of Indigenous sovereignties. Indeed, the more I research, write and speak about racism, the greater my collusion with this disavowal. My anti-racist philosophy, in this place, renders my blackness 'white'. So I now define myself by my non-Indigeneity and seek another place, outside 'nation', in which I may become intelligible. It is in the spirit of this search that this paper is written.

The Union flag, or the Union Jack as it is more affectionately known, has flown over all the places my family has resided. Synonymous with whiteness, it should be of no surprise that the flag has never welcomed us into its protective embrace; and nor for that matter has it been indifferent to our presence. On the contrary, the flag has had us under surveillance for as long as I can remember, and on more than one occasion has knocked upon our door in various guises. Watching the television images of the Cronulla pogrom, I was struck by the sight of the Australian flag. It was only later that I realised that it was in fact the sight of the Union flag, perched on the Australian flag, that had so affected me. The Australian flag here was transversal in that it spoke to a white racism found eleven thousand miles away in the British Isles - where the Union flag also serves as a symbol of unyielding whiteness and racist violence. For many years, especially during the late 1960s and early 1970s, white skinheads would engage in "paki bashing" (a distant cousin to "leb" and "wog bashing"), where anyone of Asian appearance was targeted (Hebdige 1979: 55-58). Crucial to the skinhead identity was the Union Jack badge, cloth patch or tattoo, the very sight of which was intended to induce terror in victims; the last thing you might catch a glimpse of before feeling the bone shattering pain of a steel toe capped, eighteen-hole, cherry red Dr. Marten boot. British racial terror, then, finds expression in an Australian variant: kith and kin, blood and bone.

In Australia the British flag spurred an ordinary violence which, in terms of scale, routine and cruelty, seems altogether of a different order to any that can be found in Britain. Of the seemingly countless and horrifying examples of racial violence, the so-called "death pudding" challenges

even scholarly comprehension. As the historian Raymond Evans writes, in relation to frontier violence in Queensland:

The act of poisoning whole communities of Aborigines (sic) with arsenic or strychnine-laced milk or rations - the so-called "death pudding"- may be regarded from one view point as the most sinister and brutal of atrocities in the "war of the races" (1993: 49).

Evans later quotes the "jovial way" a Harold Finch-Hatton reported upon how a squatter of his acquaintance gave the "niggers....something really startling to keep them quiet" (1993:49) in the shape of poisoned food:

The rations contained about as much strychnine as anything else and not one of the mob escaped. When they awoke in the morning they were all dead corpses. More than a hundred Blacks were stretched out by this ruse of the owner Long Lagoon. (quoted in Evans 1993: 49).

Lest I, a lately arrived migrant, think that such violence is confined to frontier relations of the past, the relatively recent events on Palm Island serve as a blunt corrective. Dinesh Wadiwel, examining governmental violence against Aboriginal people could almost be addressing me directly when he writes:

Consider the events of 19 November 2004, after an Aboriginal man died in a Palm Island police cell after sustaining a ruptured liver and portal vein and four broken ribs before death. After the release of the pathologist's report confirming these facts, and confirming the community suspicion that the man was beaten to death, a series of riots occurred, during which the police station was destroyed. In response the Queensland Government

announced a state of emergency.  
(Wadiwel 2007:150).

This sounded very much like a war zone. "Surely not", I heard myself saying, "I have come here voluntarily; migrated here in the hope of securing a better future for my family. This cannot be". Suvendrini Perera would doubtless recognise and perhaps even sympathise with my reaction, as in her essay *Who Will I Become?* she writes:

...this is something I didn't understand about Australia when I came here: that many of the places I have driven through, or casually hear about, are names in a war zone. And that the places and names of a people's imagination and being from which they have been violently displaced. (Perera, 2005:33).

Dinesh Wadiwel had not yet finished with me. Confirming that warfare is indeed being waged within Australia he states:

The warfare operates through interconnected spaces of exception, hotspots within a protracted and violent engagement of bodies. Many enjoy a life of peaceful civility, but this is quite literally bordered upon by spaces of absolute war. Bodies continue to be maimed, and lives extinguished in these spaces of exception; there is an unending war of attrition that occurs in basements and barracks, prisons and institutions, camps and frontiers (Wadiwel, 2007: 151).

Both Wadiwel and Perera worked to confirm the nagging suspicion that my brand of British anti-racism was not up to the task of deployment in a land of perennial warfare. Where to from here?

Britain is certainly not a 'war zone', though some beleaguered families may beg to differ, facing, as they do, nightly

campaigns of harassment involving arson, faeces and soiled sanitary items inserted through letterboxes, graffiti, verbal racist abuse and physical assault. In cases such as these the Union flag's stance is markedly one of repulsion: "you stink"; "they smell"; "go back to where you came from"; "I'd rather be a paki than a scouser". The extent of the blight on black and Asian lives was captured by a 1981 Home Office report which indicated that Asians were 50 times more likely, and African Caribbeans 36 times more likely than whites to be victims of racially motivated attacks<sup>1</sup>. In contrast to racial harassment, racial attack is usually marked by a high degree of violence and results in physical as well as psychological injury; and then, of course, there are racial murders: the final sanction. Particular murders, such as that of Anthony Walker in Liverpool in 2005 are considered heinous because of the level of violence involved (in Anthony's case, a mountaineer's ice axe was used); the seeming randomness of the attack and the complete lack of provocation (*The Observer*, August 7, 2005). The tragic, arbitrary and seemingly exceptional nature of the attack is captured by the popular rationalization of "being somewhere at the wrong time and at the wrong place".

As a multicultural policy advisor in an Australian municipal authority, I found a similar explanation put forward by the police and non-governmental

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<sup>1</sup> The 1981 Home Office report *Racial Attacks*, found that the rate of racially motivated victimisation was 1.4 per 100,000 population for whites; 51.2 per 100,000 for African-Caribbeans; 69.7 per 100,000 for South Asians. Hence, the study showed that South Asians were 50 times more likely than whites to be victims of racist incidents and African-Caribbeans 36 times more likely (quoted in Virdee, *Racial Violence and Harassment* 13).

organisations to explain the 'bashing' of a Sudanese man by two white males. At a meeting held to air the Sudanese community's concerns regarding attacks on their members, the police denied that there was a racial motive to the attack, although when quizzed as to their definition of a 'racial incident', it was admitted that there was not one. When then pressed as to how a racial motive could be discounted in the absence of an operational definition of the same, the Police responded by announcing that it was time that we discussed the criminality of young Sudanese males!

There are lamentably few dedicated studies of the phenomenon of racial violence and its connection to the formation and maintenance of white subjectivities. In the few British studies, there are hints of a connection between whiteness, racial violence and spatial claim. Thus, in Susan Smith's study of the emergence of racial segregation in Britain, she reads racial violence "as an expression of territoriality – as a popular means of asserting social identity, of defending material resources and of preserving social status" (1989:162). Barnor Hesse, in his study of racial violence in north-east London, extends Smith's reading by suggesting that a particular white identity, imperious in nature, is at work in the perpetration of racial violence (1992: 173).

David Theo Goldberg has highlighted "identity-in-otherness", where subjects recognise themselves in contrast to the other's difference, as being indelibly marked by violence. In *Racist Culture* (1994) he argues that the assertion of self determination, which necessarily precedes self-recognition, requires that the "other" be negated. Furthermore, where self-recognition is racially predicated, this negation requires that the "other" be cast as enemy and

engaged in relations of violence (1994: 60). I observed Goldberg's idea of "negation" at close quarters in 1989. An Asian taxi driver, Kuldip Singh Sekhon had been stabbed to death by a white passenger at the entrance to a predominantly white housing estate in west London. As someone who was employed to advocate on behalf of families who were being subjected to racial violence, I accompanied Malkit Sekhon, Kuldip's wife, and her five young daughters, to the funeral undertakers to view the body. It was two months after the murder, by which time the body had been subjected to two post-mortems. The undertaker, before allowing us into the room in which the body was kept, asked us to bear in mind that the body was no longer the man known in life, that he was now effectively "a piece of meat". As we stood around the body, Malkit asked that the children be held up to touch each stab wound. I balked at the suggestion and protested mildly. Malkit insisted and I yielded by holding her six year old daughter over the body. The child seemed unsure of what she was to do. Malkit then reached over, took the child's hand and placed it on one of the fifty-eight stab wounds.

Looking back I begin to understand what Malkit was attempting that day. Of course, Kuldip had been literally effaced, wiped away. Yet, Malkit inhabited a space beyond the material fact of her husband's death. By encouraging her family to ritually touch each of the wounds, she was attempting to infuse the body with emotion so as to reignite some life-force that perhaps lay dormant these past two months. Although she could not return him to life, she was effectively trying to restore Kuldip to himself and to his family. She was reinstating her husband's erased self.

An episode from Hanif Kureishi's *The*

*Black Album* (1996) is similarly illustrative of negation of the "other". The novel is set in London, 1989, where a student, Shahid Hasan, is trying to fashion for himself a "black British" identity. However, the skinheads who pursue him, and the religious fundamentalists who entreat him to join with them, consider him Pakistani. He observes the effects of forced essentialisation in a racially harassed Bengali family, a family that he, along with other students, has volunteered to protect:

The family had been harried – stared at, spat at, called 'paki scum'- for months, and finally attacked. The husband had been smashed over the head with a bottle and taken to hospital. The wife had been punched. Lighted matches had been pushed through the letter box. At all hours the bell had been rung and the culprits said they would return to slaughter the children. Chad reckoned the aggressors weren't neo-fascist skinheads. It was beneath the strutting lads to get involved in lowly harassment. These hooligans were twelve and thirteen years old (90).

Here it can be seen that harassment, without any effective intervention on the part of the municipal authority or the police, has escalated into two serious assaults against the husband and wife. There are threats also to kill the children, as well as attempts to murder the entire family in a single effort through arson. Chad's assessment of the likely perpetrators dispels the comforting notion that extremists are mostly responsible for racial violence. Instead, the suggestion is that on this occasion children as young as twelve might be responsible. Here Kureshi is stressing that racial violence cannot be dismissed as the exceptional activities of a few 'bad apples'. It has become a mainstream activity: a source of amusement for the young, along with other illicit but

common pleasures such as smoking and graffiti tagging.

What is also striking about this passage is that Kureshi does not name the family. They have been forcibly essentialised, reduced to the racist epithet "paki". They are also known only as "husband", "wife", "woman" and "children". Certainly, they serve as archetypes of the racially harassed family. Yet it is also the case that the harassment and violence have effaced their personal histories and trajectories, their hopes and aspirations: in short, their very humanity. This effacement is stressed in the following passage describing the arrival of Shahid and his friends at the besieged family's home:

Their driver whispered at the letterbox and the woman, after the rattling of many locks, opened the door. The flat, with its busted furniture, boarded windows and mauve view of the city below, was lit by only the TV and one shaded lamp. The woman wanted her enemies to think the family had fled (90).

No personal mementoes appear to decorate the flat; nothing that would indicate that this was anything other than empty space. Indeed, the "woman" is keen to give the impression that the family have left. Any expression of presence, much less personal identity, is to invite further reprisals. Better, then, to strategically collude with your own effacement as a means of self preservation.

The family can only be restored to themselves if they move away to what is described as a "Bengali estate" (90). However, until that time, there is always the danger that their effacement will become permanent through an act of fatal violence. Shahid and his accomplices have therefore taken it

upon themselves to protect the family using an array of weapons that includes "cricket bats, clubs, knuckle dusters, carving knives and meat cleavers" (90). Here, we are left in no doubt that Shahid and friends are insisting not just on the family's tenure, but also their own. The family's protectors, therefore, represent a second generation that will not cower before racial terror.

Kureshi's treatment of racial violence is broadly in line with Smith and Hesse's reading of the phenomenon as the outcome of a racialised territorialism (Smith 1989: 162; Hesse 1992: 173). It would appear that where proprietorial claims to territory are bound up with racial subjectivity, the will to self determination appears to be especially ferocious. The whiteness that is consequently given expression in the name of space, place and self is one that must force the 'other' away or efface entirely: racial harassment or racial murder. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2004: 2) and Damien Riggs (2006: 95) have opened up Goldberg's notion of identity-in-otherness to include this significant territorial facet. Moreton-Robinson's conceptualisation of the "possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty" (2004: 2) highlights the ways in which white ownership *remains unmarked* as "part of commonsense knowledge, decision making, and socially produced conventions" (2004:2). Yet where racial violence occurs, it must be because this possessive logic has been decisively challenged. In this circumstance whiteness *declares itself* through violence. This, I would argue, is what happened at Cronulla in December 2005.

The drive to self-consciousness and the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty can clearly be discerned during the events at Cronulla. Take the placards, for instance, where identity is

sought through effacement of the other: "No Lebs"; "Free snags. No Tabouli"; "We grew here, you flew here". These Manichaean pairings, each stressing "self" and "other", tenure and trespass, function as white affirmations; techniques to ride out the pain of identity affirmation: the 'other' as midwife to ever more strident incarnations of white Australianess. In this context, violence is not exceptional; it is inevitable. As Goldberg states, "what begins to emerge from this racial subjectivizing is a subjection to violence" (1994: 59).

The subsequent rave and riot in whiteness was fuelled by the drug of choice: the "native-ised" essence, the hallucinative properties of which were comprehensively described by Suvendrini Perera in her paper *Race terror, Sydney 2005* (2006: 8). Whiteness with wild abandon, then; an orgy of whiteness whose collective climax had the orchestrating club DJs from the Ministry of Hate running to the "Chill Room".<sup>2</sup>

Given the line of the argument so far, it is difficult to entertain fully Goldberg's further claim that "the self-assertive drive to determine one's conscious identity reveals an ambiguity in the determination of subjectivity by racial discourse". As such, he continues, "the possibility of compatibility and solidarity beyond race may be entertained" (1994: 60). In the case of racial violence it is at not all clear how solidarity beyond race can possibly be entertained. To begin with, race is not symmetrically ascribed. As both Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2004: 2) and Damien Riggs (2006: 101) have cogently argued, the

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<sup>2</sup> The role of Sydney radio talk show hosts in possibly inciting the events at Cronulla will hopefully receive more critical attention in future.

“‘other’ is marked as ‘having race’, whilst the normative white self is not marked as raced” (Riggs 2006: 101). In moving beyond ‘race’, then, must the onus be on the ‘other’ to make the first move? Furthermore, when this invisibility is ruptured following territorial incursion, the whiteness at work through the enactment of racial violence is revealed to be of a particularly congealed kind. This ossification is a consequence of its previous transparency; resistant accretions of privilege over time. It is a whiteness that requires less effort to determine subjectivity, thus reducing the degree of ambiguity that would otherwise open up possibilities ‘beyond race’.

In this context, racial violence also has the paradoxical function of facilitating the return of whiteness to its unmarked status. Riggs takes Goldberg’s analysis further by revealing the way in which racialised difference is:

...actually constructed on the terms of the same - racialised difference is structured upon the incorporation of incommensurable difference into a logic of sameness, whereby the location of those who refute white hegemony (e.g. Indigenous people in Australia) is incorporated into the self/other split produced under colonialism. This insistence on incorporation is aimed at erasing the anxiety of that the racial other[...] produces (2006: 101).

Racial violence can also be read as the drive to restore the “fixity of mutually exclusive subject categories for the coloniser and colonised” (Riggs 2006: 101). “Incommensurable difference” (Riggs 2006: 101) is effaced in order to reinstitute an essentialisation or stereotype, thus allowing whiteness to be restored to its normative “self”. As Malkit Sekhon’s defiance demonstrates, there is a dialectical relationship at work

here between effacement and reinstatement that stifles the potential for solidarity.

To conclude, I have argued that racial violence is constitutive of white subjectivity: violent acts intended to efface the “other”, both literally and the “other’s” “incommensurable difference”. These acts also involve an insistence on a racialised proprietorship of space and place.

In the aftermath of racial murders, or racial ‘disturbances’, there is a need for an official explanation. The police investigation or official inquiry serves to neatly suture the episode; a healing wound on an otherwise unmarked body. Whiteness congeals with the balms of national and local golden age community discourses; a time before the “blacks”, “wogs”, “lebs” and “pakis” came. However, whiteness is always ready to break cover and assert itself, especially in the name of space and place: it will seep and finally pour forth, seeking out the ‘other’ against which it will once again rail, and then congeal. And so the cycle continues. Racial violence, therefore, is not so much exceptional as inevitable, and this shall remain the case so long as whiteness insists on rigid categories of ‘self’ and ‘other’.

Finally, Suvendrini Perera’s paper on the Cronulla race riot contains a remarkable passage which describes the “nameless space” out of which emerged her imperative for writing the paper (2006:13). This “nameless space” is familiar. It is a space dangerously close to the material realities of racist victimisation. As well as marked by terror, however, it is also a space of agency, where one may retrieve their dead and injured, be left to stare blankly, show fear without fear, establish meaning beyond juridical motive, reclaim self, scream,

shout and cry. From Britain I bring my dead and injured to this space. Malkit Sekhon accompanies me and I realise that it is perhaps I and not the Union flag that unites these places and experiences. The earlier question “where to from here?” might just be answerable: “nowhere in particular for I am a nexus, neither here or there. It is from this position that I ask to speak, and it from here that I will support Indigenous sovereignties.”

I have also brought with me Doreen Lawrence, the mother of Stephen Lawrence, to this nameless space. She too found the imperative to write, and in so doing, continued to insist on Stephen. I conclude with an excerpt from her biography, *And Still I Rise*:

Every year I have a small vigil for Stephen on the anniversary of his death. David Cruise, our former minister, always remembers the dates of Stephen's birthday and of his death, and makes an effort to come with me if I need him. We go to the exact place on Well Hall Road where my son died, sometimes just the two of us[...] and people seeing us standing at the spot and realising why we are there often come and join us. Some people driving past stop their cars and come onto the pavement; some toot their horns in respect. Others can be aggressive, jeering at us as we stand there. I bring flowers to lay on the plaque but I can't stay very long, because I am conscious of being watched and I don't feel safe there. The Brook Estate just opposite [.....] is still a bastion of white resentment. Black families do not feel comfortable in those streets, and until recently they were driven out if they went to live there (2006:218).

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