

## WHITE NATION FANTASY AND THE NORTHERN TERRITORY 'INTERVENTION'

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### Abstract

This article, 'White Nation Fantasy and the Northern Territory 'Intervention'', looks at the term 'whiteness' and the notion of 'white blindness'. It seeks to illustrate how white blindness allows White Nation Fantasy to operate to the extent of becoming the real 'national emergency' at the heart of Australia's race relations. It draws on the recent Northern Territory Legislation (2007) as evidence of how White Nation Fantasy currently dominates Australia's socio-political landscape. It examines the ramifications of perpetuating colonialist narratives in relation to issues of identity, justice, paternalism and moral discourses as evident in the production of the National Emergency Response Bill 2007.

### Introduction

There is a popular children's story called *Where the Wild Things Are*. In this story a little white boy called Max dons an animal suit and travels across oceans to a land filled with wild things/monsters. He proceeds to not simply play with them but to conquer them:

And when he came to the place where the Wild Things are, they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws, till Max said be still and tamed them with a magic trick of staring into all their yellow eyes without blinking once [1963, 17 – 21].

He becomes king of all the Wild Things. He can even tell them when to stop causing a rumpus and go to bed. Then he gets lonely and hungry and returns home, stepping into his 'private boat' despite the pleas from the Wild

Things for Max to stay, coming back to his nice hot supper.

This is the story that many children in Australia have grown up with and loved. It has been critiqued for its colonial underpinnings – white boy who conquers a strange land of savages – and such texts are starting points to understanding what studies of whiteness mean, how colonial narratives slip into mainstream discourse and our psyche. Stories such as this may be seen as children's fantasies but what often goes unrealised is the extent to which fantasy can infiltrate adult realms and national identities with highly detrimental consequences.

This article looks at the term 'whiteness' and the notion of 'white blindness'. It then seeks to illustrate how white blindness allows White Nation Fantasy to operate to the extent of becoming the real 'national emergency' at the heart of Australia's race relations. It draws on the recent Northern Territory Legislation (2007) as evidence of how White Nation Fantasy currently dominates Australia's socio-political landscape.

'Whiteness' is not necessarily a biological fact of birth or physical marker, as this can be a misleading categorisation. 'Whiteness' is the 'location of experience' as bell hooks describes this racial positioning of subjects [hooks, 1996, 18]. This location of experience is generally invisible because as stated, whiteness is

perceived as 'natural, 'normal' and 'human' rather than constructed and oppressive.

Ruth Frankenberg in the influential text *White Women, Race Matters* specifies whiteness as follows:

'Whiteness...has a set of linked dimensions. First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a "standpoint", a place from which white people look at themselves, at others and at society. Third "whiteness" refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed [cited in Warren, 2003, 22].

Ghassan Hage defines whiteness as a 'fantasy position of cultural dominance borne out of the history of colonial expansion. Not an essence that one has or does not have' but an aspiration [1998, 20]. Hage argues that 'whiteness and Australianness – of which Whiteness remains a crucial component can be accumulated' and people can be said to be more or less white and Australian depending on the social attributes they possess such as looks, physical characteristics, accent, language, demeanour, taste, nationally valued social and cultural preferences and behaviour [53-54].

No matter how much it is maintained that multiculturalism reflects the reality of Australia, the visible and public side of power remains essentially Anglo White: politicians are mainly Anglo white, customs officers, police officers and judges. At the same time, Australian mythmakers and icons, old and new are largely Anglo white, from shearers to surfers to television and radio personalities ect. This creates a lasting impression that power, 'even if open for non-Anglos to accumulate whiteness within it, remains an Anglo looking phenomena [190- 191]

Richard Dyer also noted in his seminal text, *White* (1997), that identifying as universally human is the most powerful position one can inhabit. While there is this invisibility to whiteness in the sense of naming it as a race, its domination in terms of representation through media, advertising, literature, visual arts, social artifacts etc. is practically all

pervasive in the West. The term white blindness refers to this invisibility and inability to see whiteness as raced but rather normative and universal.

In August 2006 an event titled 'The White Blindfold Ritual' was held by ANTAR at the Melbourne Town Hall where legal and union leaders among others, literally put on white blindfolds. This was to symbolise the inability of white people to see, understand and acknowledge their own race as visible, the consequences of white blindness to Indigenous people and to mark a commitment to 'see things differently'.

Human Rights Lawyer Julian Burnside said at the ceremony that 'It's fair to say that my white blindfold only came off fairly recently and until that time I didn't know that I had it on. But perhaps that's the point' (ANTAR, 2007).

Working to remove what has been termed 'the white blindfold' counters the inability to see whiteness as a race but rather as the norm. One does not have to be 'white' in order to be 'white washed' for colonialist discourse is predominant, pervasive, internalised and often so integrated into the order of our society that it is invisible.

An awareness of white blindness enables an acknowledgement of how this racial dominance informs political strategies and events. This can be seen through examining as a case study the way in which the events in the Northern Territory unfolded. Looking at the production of the recent Northern Territory Legislation provides insight into how whiteness works as an ideological force shaping Australian society at every level of power and capital - from political

power and national identity formation to land rights and possession.

Here understanding and *seeing* 'whiteness' enables one to move beyond the misdirected emphasis on the 'other', the oft cited 'Aboriginal Problem' to realise what it reveals about white Australia - what can be learnt about how whiteness works, its constructions, conceptualisation, belief systems, how whiteness is produced, circulated, performed and reiterated to sustain its cultural power. Then one may determine that as Germaine Greer stated, there is no Aboriginal problem in Australia, there is a white problem [2004, 2].

The following study of the Northern Territory Intervention utilises the framework of 'White Nation Fantasy' as this exemplifies the impact of whiteness as a social construct and the ramifications of white blindness. White Nation Fantasy is a concept which has been critiqued and developed by numerous cultural and race theorists, a primary one of which is Ghassan Hage who wrote *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* [1998]. Hage provides the following definition:

White Nation Fantasy is where white racists and tolerant, white multiculturalists both see their nation structured around a white culture which they control, with Aboriginal people and migrants as exotic objects [48].

Hage notes that this fantasy, while socially and historically grounded in ideals of white dominance emerging from the history of white colonisation of Australia, has a great capacity for adaptation so is able to sustain itself and offers the subject 'a relatively stable and viable sense of themselves', so a 'credible and continuing sense of white dominance' [209]. In this landscape, white Australians

...share in a concept of themselves as nationalists and of the nation as a space structured around a white culture where Aboriginal people and non-white 'ethnics' are merely national objects to be moved or removed according to a white national

will' [18]. This belief in mastery over the nation is defined as White Nation Fantasy. 'Nationalist practices seem to be necessarily grounded in an image in which the nationalists construct themselves as spatially dominant' with 'managerial rights over racialised/ethnicised groups or persons which are consequently constructed as manageable objects [48].

Such a framework when applied to the Northern Territory Intervention allows an insight into why Australia accepts the intervention/invasion occurring and what this indicates about race relations in Australia. Here is a brief timeline of the events I am referring to:

-15 June 2007 - *Little Children Are Sacred Report: Report of the Northern Territory Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse 2007* is released.

-22 June - Federal Government declares a National Emergency as a result of report findings on child abuse and details of his plan begin to emerge

- 27- 28 June - Federal Government seizes control of the administration of Indigenous Communities in the Northern Territory. Troops move into Central Australian communities.

- 7 August - The Federal Government has introduced draft laws into parliament that allows it to intervene in Northern Territory Indigenous communities.

-16 August - The Northern Territory National Emergency Response Bill is put to vote in the Senate.

- 17 August -The Northern Territory National Emergency Response Bill is

passed in the Senate with no amendments.

Further, the effects of the legislation include:

- Permits will not be required to visit larger public townships and the roads that connect them.

- Widespread alcohol restrictions, creating a general ban on people having, selling, transporting and drinking alcohol in prescribed areas.

- Fines of \$75,000 and up to 18 month imprisonment could be imposed on people who try to smuggle alcohol into the remote communities.

- The government acquires five year leases over townships and takes over the town camps.

- bans on the possession of pornography for five years, and impose regular audits on publicly-funded computers to stop sexually explicit material being accessed through the internet.

- It becomes an offence for people in Aboriginal communities to possess pornographic material, or for the material to be sent into the areas. People caught in the prescribed communities with five or more pornographic videos or magazines will be considered "traffickers" and could face up to two years in prison.

- It allows heavier penalties to be imposed on anyone who supplies five or more pornographic items.

- Australian Federal Police officers are given the same powers as local NT police.

- The Federal and NT governments will retain ownership of buildings and infrastructure on Aboriginal land that are constructed or upgraded with government funding.

-The legislation also prohibits Northern Territory judges and magistrates taking Aboriginal law into account when sentencing or considering bail applications.

[From 'NT Indigenous intervention bills introduced to parliament', National Indigenous Times, 7/8/07]

### **How Does the Northern Territory Legislation relate to White Nation Fantasy?**

One of the key elements in viewing White Nation Fantasy in action and a key point I wish to draw from the case study, is that this fantasy depends on paternalism as this enables management and control to create a space structured around a white culture where 'Aboriginal people and non-white 'ethnics' are national objects to be moved or removed' [Hage, 1998, 18]. This legislation can be seen to fit into the definition of nationalist practices grounded in an image in which the nationalists construct themselves as spatially dominant with managerial rights over a racialised group 'consequently constructed as the manageable object' [48].

Elements of white fantasy can be seen in much of the Government policy on Indigenous Affairs. Robert Manne notes that Indigenous Australians have been long been subjected to policies and special laws in the name of protection which included 'controlled movement, marriage, sexual behaviour, children, employment, savings and the consumption of alcohol' [2007, 30].

When we look at this legislation and the way in which it was produced, there are three elements of

paternalism I wish to focus on to help appreciate the effects of such laws and actions. These are 1) observation/surveillance, 2) management and control, 3) lack of consultation,

In terms of surveillance, intensive scrutiny and monitoring is a necessary arm of paternalism as information on the movement of subordinated bodies is a vital mechanism for control of these bodies. Michel Foucault captured the effectiveness of surveillance and observation for disempowering and controlling subjects in his work *Discipline and Punish* [1977]. He drew on the example of the Panopticon to describe how this works. The Panopticon was a building designed for maximum surveillance of prisoners with the least deployment of resources.

The Pan-opticon has a tower in the centre surrounded by a ring shaped building composed of cells, each housing a prisoner. It allows for the continuous observation of inmates...Panopticism is the exemplary technique through which disciplinary power is able to function for it relies on surveillance...The major effect of the Pan-opticon; to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. [MacHoul & Grace, *Foucault Primer: Discourse, Power and the Subject*, 1995, 67]

The inmates never know when they are being watched so they start to watch themselves all the time. In effect, the Northern Territory legislation, dependant on audits and checks, the takeover of Aboriginal land, quarantining of welfare payments practices, widespread alcohol restrictions, controls over the use of computers, takeovers of the administration of Aboriginal councils, created a Panopticon. To put the laws into action require instruments of surveillance which ensure Indigenous subjects are rendered constantly visible. The effect of such surveillance is an erosion of liberty, esteem and self – empowerment. In itself, this panoptical observation is a form of violence, the violation of consistently being watched and monitored. The fact that this legislation targets a specific race and people to be

subject to such supervision exemplifies discrimination on racial grounds. With these mechanisms in place, disciplinary management and control are achieved with greater ease.

Another aspect of paternalism is lack of consultation – This can be seen in the haste with which the legislation was passed, the lack of consultation with Indigenous peoples and the failure to take into account any of the recommendations of *The Little Children are Sacred Report*.

Democrat Senator, Andrew Bartlett described the procedure thus:

I have also been informed that the government intends bringing the legislation on for debate in the Senate tomorrow, with the aim of having it voted on by Thursday. Efforts by myself and others to seek to ensure a Senate Committee can look at the new laws and give Aboriginal people and others from the Northern Territory the chance to have a say, seem set to be squashed by the government. [2007]

Along with Bartlett, others expressed concern about the lack of consultation and haste. Law Council of Australia President, Tim Bugg, said that “the ultra-speedy passage of these Bills is also clearly designed to avoid public scrutiny” [Law Council of Australia site, 2007]. Labor MP Warren Snowdon called the tactics an abuse of due process. [Snowdon Site, 2007] A delegation of Indigenous leaders from the NT condemned the rushed legislation, one of the whom, John Ah Kit, compared the legislation to genocide saying “What is being pushed through parliament in the next couple of days is something that will go down in history as one of the bleakest days in the history of the

country" ('Indigenous intervention laws genocide', *The Age*, 2007).

The justification for the haste was to quote Mal Brough "This is an emergency situation in the Northern Territory and we need to act quickly," Mr Brough said, "Each and every day, children are being abused. We need strong powers so that we are not weighed down by unnecessary red tape and talk-fests, and can focus on doing what needs to be done" (*National Indigenous Times*, 2007). Anyone who criticised the measures was either 'Not a parent or doesn't have a soul' ('Legislate in haste, repent at Leisure', *The Age*, 2007) Strong words to counter opposition – If you disagree, you are soulless.

It was the declaration of a National Emergency tied in with moral discourses which provided the avenue for radical paternalist action – the declaration by Howard that the time for talking is over [*ABC News Site*, 2007] and the subsequent surveillance, management and control manifest in the 'intervention'. White Nation Fantasy is built on desire for power which is ultimately ensured if one continues to advocate paternalism. While paternalism prevails there is always a limit on the power, responsibility, freedom and self-governance of those inhabiting the 'child' space in the paternalistic dynamic.

A crisis or state of emergency which calls for a paternalist response is a crisis which self-perpetuates, bites its own tail and creates the destruction it supposedly responds to so diligently. This meets the criteria of fantasy as the solutions put forth are inevitably illusory - illusions of cleaning up, restoring order, containing chaos. To appreciate the complexity of fantasy is to become aware that fantasy needs this chaos to exist. It thrives upon representations of disorder and crisis to ensure its own survival as it is through the stimulus of fear and alarm that its own existence is validated as necessary and access to control and capital as the domain of the white paternalist figure remains protected.

The case study of the Northern Territory events demonstrates in luminous detail the current discourse of paternalism. What is worth noting here is that the climate in Australia is one where this is openly expressed, acknowledged, accepted by the proponents and now law in this country. Federal Health Minister, Tony Abbot, called for 'a new paternalism' to address problems of abuse in Indigenous communities [Grattan, 2007]. John Howard himself has openly declared these moves are interventionist, paternalistic and racially discriminatory. Noel Pearson, director of Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership and a strong influential voice in this debate stated: 'Ask the terrified kid huddling in the corner when there is a binge drinking party going on down the hall if they want a bit of paternalism'. Howard responded 'We are dealing with children of the tenderest age who have been exposed to the most terrible abuse...what matters more: the constitutional niceties, or the care and protection of young children' [Karvatas, 2007, 1].

It is Howard's emotive response to children of the tenderest age which allows the paradox of the constitution being made up of niceties, as opposed to safeguarding constitutional rights and laws. Thus the scene is set for a contravening of the constitution if need be. And in such a way that one would be either not a parent or soulless to disagree.

This overt paternalism and the call for a National Emergency is warranted through the literal reference to the child and the use of morality and child protection discourses. To analyse the tropes of child protection provides further insight into the justification for observation, control and

management and lack of consultation.

*The Little Children are Sacred Report* was the report of the Northern Territory enquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse 2007. It was this report which appeared to reveal the shocking epidemic of child abuse which galvanised a national emergency to be declared. The reaction was such that one would be forgiven for thinking this report had uncovered new truths. As writer and academic, Jennifer Martinello states, 1989,1991,1993,1997 and 2002 is a list of the years that reports were presented which told the government in detail about these problems and lobbied for proper resources in place of neglect ['Howard's new Tampa children overboard are our Aboriginal children', 2007]. In 1989, Judy Atkinson wrote a report for the 'National Inquiry on Violence' stating that sexual abuse was endemic and epidemic in Indigenous communities. Only a year ago, she says that it was one of Mal Brough's advisors who asked her if all the talk of child sexual abuse documented in these extensive reports was just 'false memory' syndrome [Chandler, 2007, 5]. It is after these years of inaction that Brough claims the legislation must be rushed because delays put children at risk.

Emotive language in the place of discussing practicalities, rights and due procedure was evident from the beginning of the events. Despite being the justification, none of the 97 recommendations in *The Little Children Are Sacred Report* were included in the intervention. As Pat Anderson, one of the writers of the report stated "There's not a single action that the Commonwealth has taken so far that corresponds with a single recommendation...There is no relationship between these emergency powers and what's in our report" ['Govt to push through Indigenous intervention laws', 2007]. Anderson also stated, 'I would appeal to the Prime Minister to stop. Please stop, don't proceed. Just stop so he can talk to more Aboriginal people, to talk to Aboriginal leaders' [ABC's Lateline transcript, 2007].

It is important to appreciate that White Nation Fantasy is extremely dangerous. As a fantasy it is not real. As it is predicated on race, it exists and is perpetuated by inequality and ignorance. From this base, no effective solutions can be found, no real dialogue performed, no acknowledgement of a situation can be represented and validated. The treatment of *The Little Children Are Sacred Report*, which supposedly galvanised Howard's National Emergency is an example of the disjuncture and anomalies which occur when fantasy is at play. While Howard claimed to have taken the report seriously enough to have sent in the troops, he is able to simultaneously ignore its recommendations and violate many of the major principles expounded in the report such as consultation. There is no need to draw on the studied and researched recommendations even if citing the report as the basis for radical action. Here paradox is married with contradiction – all elements of the fantastical.

The discourse of child protection echoes the 'For their Own Good' approach essential to the Stolen Generation tragedy. It was the rhetoric of child welfare that justified the removal of Aboriginal children from their families. Jennifer Rutherford highlights the link between morality and aggression in Australia's history, demonstrating in her work *The Gauche Intruder* [2000], that aggression has historically manifested itself at the very moments when white Australia has set out to do good. Rutherford notes that national fantasy is built on fantasised images of a good Australia. She draws on Lacan's *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* to explore the link between doing good and causing grief.

When a subject, a state, a nation sets out on the path of realising its good, what is inevitably in play is the logic of power. "The domain of the good is the birth of power...ie. to exercise control over one's goods is to have the right to deprive others of them" [citing Lacan]. This identification with the power to do good underpins the numerous attempts at social engineering that have characterised Australia's shady history of black/white relations: relations that have deprived Aboriginal Australians at every turn, of their good. The intent to do good is the alibi that is called upon whenever this history of deprivation momentarily registers in the national conscience. (2000, 26 – 27).

There is often an inevitable link between paternalism and the deployment of morality child centred discourses. To analyse tropes of child protection can provide insight into the manipulation of emotive imagery and representation of the most innocent and vulnerable to warrant political strategies which appear to become increasingly suspect in intention.

Instigating moral alarm works on ideological structures and belief systems rather than requiring much factual realities or truth. Emotions are engaged and heightened through drawing on the imagery of exploited innocence. These emotions can then be used to justify actions otherwise disallowed by law and publicly sanctioned systems. Once this occurs, stereotypes and bias representations fuelled by emotive language may gain power. On the basis of moral arguments comprising these complicating factors, the unacceptable becomes accepted, the unthinkable justified in the name of 'for the good of...' whichever group is being managed and controlled.

Paternalism therefore utilises moral discourse to great effect. The greater the moral crisis, the more paternalism may be not only permitted but desired and received with relief. Raimond Gaita in 'The Nation Reviewed' asks 'could such disrespect as the failure to consult be shown to any other community in this country? He felt no, because:

Aborigines and their culture are still seen from a racist, denigrating perspective. From that perspective, the (sincere) concern for children is concern for them as the children of a denigrated people, just as it was when children whom we now call the Stolen Generation were taken from their parents. [ 2007, 13]

In Oxfam's report, Prof. Jon Altman stated,

I could find no evidence of the proposed measures being connected in any way to child sex abuse, and concluded that there may even be some risk of exacerbating the situation if the permit system is relaxed ['Oxfam research: Land Rights Act changes detrimental and will not reduce child sex abuse', 2007]

He also noted that changes to the permit system are based on an ideological position rather than any factual basis, because there is no evidence that child abuse is more prevalent in areas where the system exists.

There are claims the intervention/invasion is to do with a broader push towards assimilation, mining uranium and with deals made with the US to provide land for uranium waste. One cartoon in *The Age*, captured this contradiction with the caption 'We believe the best way to protect your children is to take over your land and start mining uranium' [14/7/07, 7]. Suffice to say that as White Nation Fantasy is all about power, then uses of power to accumulate or designate resources is all part of what colluding in such a fantasy allows a nation to do. White blindness means that in Australia, this fantasy prevails.

White Nation Fantasy requires the power to act paternalistically through discourses of morality and crisis. Once these discourses are engaged, the power to oversee and manage and control a group of people excluded from the white nation such as Indigenous peoples, without consultation is achieved. As long as this power is utilised, the fantasy is self-perpetuated and any equity or fairness cannot be achieved. There can be no long term solution to problems created by dispossession and discrimination and thus no meaningful reconciliation. To shift this, we need to become aware of how white fantasy is indeed something Australians are fed as children in stories like *Where the Wild Things Are*.

This article began with the tale of *Where the Wild Things Are* as an example of the enculturation in childhood of colonialist ideology. White male contains and conquers savages and thus restores safety and order. As adults, we are not read children's stories anymore, but we do get told and continue to tell the same fantasies – the narration continues in the guise of the leader of the country telling us he is stepping in and taking control, the wild savagery at the heart of the country in the form of Indigeneity is contained. Hence this is met with some relief by the white majority. The narratives of colonialism lay the ground for such fantasy fulfilment. The need to wake up before continuing the cycle of harm is the *real* national emergency. If this was achieved, then the possibility of responding to the nation-wide epidemic of child abuse and alcohol related issues and violence could be addressed as 'National Emergencies' nation-wide.

In his famous Redfern Address, Paul Keating said 'We failed to ask the most basic questions. We failed to ask – What if it were done to us?' Martinello asks this same question now. What if the military seized control of white communities and placed them under military occupation?

This is not Israel and Palestine. The Northern Territory is not Gaza or the West Bank. This is

Australia – but is it the Australia you thought you lived in? Walk in our shoes, Aboriginal Australia's, and ask yourselves, what would it be like to have this done to us? And then, walk with us. [ 2007, 4]

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