

EDITORIAL: WHITENESS STUDIES IN THE AUSTRALIAN ACADEME IN 2009, SOME COMMENTS

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The articles in this issue all emerged out of the intellectual and political work that took place during the 2008 Re-Orienting Whiteness Conference in Melbourne.¹ First, then, we would like to thank all the presenters and participants who made the trip to Melbourne in early December. In many ways, the following articles attest to both the vitality of whiteness studies in Australia and the political challenges that currently shape the field. The conference itself represented the fusion of two nascent conference traditions: the annual ACRAWSA conference which has, without question, provided a focus and impetus for the solidification of the field in Australia, and the *Historicising Whiteness* conference held in 2006, which brought together historians interested in the study of whiteness. In 2006, the latter – perhaps to the convenors surprise – revealed just how much work Australian historians were producing in the field (Boucher, Carey and Ellinghaus 2007). Thus, while in keeping with the best traditions of whiteness studies this collection is certainly interdisciplinary, historical perspectives are well represented. Equally, the 2008 conference was an attempt to bring whiteness studies and postcolonial theory into more careful dialogue – in part because we would suggest that elements of postcolonial theory direct scholars to the material contexts of power and imperialism (see (Boucher, Carey and Ellinghaus 2008).

In one sense, then, this issue follows on from Sara Ahmed's (2008: 1) reflections in the 2008 edition of the ACRAWSA e-

Journal on the "politics of good feeling": how "certain bodies are seen as the origin of bad feeling, as getting in the way of public happiness". Here, Ahmed argued the continuing need for attention to "histories that hurt". Making links between the painful history of colonialism, the study of whiteness, and regimes of "productive" political feeling in the present, she explained, "The history of happiness is inseparable from the history of empire ... happiness was used to justify European imperialism as a moral project ... The civilising mission could be described as a happiness mission". She concluded, "We cannot let go of this history, we cannot give up labouring over its sore points ... [we cannot] cover over bad feelings and the pasts they keep alive ... We might need to hold on to histories of suffering, to stay as sore as our points" (Ahmed 2008: 12 & 14). History, then, as a series of stories we choose to tell about the past, is centrally implicated in the way we understand our present and the possibilities (and need) for change within it.

Historians at the 2006 and 2008 conferences – the editors of this edition amongst them – suggested that history has something specific to contribute to the field of whiteness studies; namely, an increased attention to the importance of time and place. As we (with Katherine Ellinghaus) have argued, whiteness needs to be more robustly historicized because the mechanisms that maintain its power and legitimacy are far too variable to the explained by any

straightforward Manichean binary. While historians have recently incorporated the terms “white” and “whiteness” into their analytic vocabulary, “the specificities of how, historically, white identity was formed and shaped are only starting to be examined” (Carey, Boucher and Ellinghaus 2007: vii). Although the vitality of whiteness studies has been produced, in part, by its interdisciplinarity – even as historians have produced some of its crucial US scholarship – an historicised approach to whiteness differs in substantive ways from much existing scholarship. Whilst whiteness studies (alongside, we would suggest, postcolonial theory) has produced a rich theoretical and political vocabulary to interrogate racial power and privilege, historians have expressed a little discomfort with the ways in which this vocabulary often effaces the impact on and experiences of historically embedded people. If whiteness studies fundamentally asks scholars to track the unevenly relational character of racialisation (whites and their various Others), then historians’ attention to empirical specificity raises a series of substantive questions. Whilst interrogating the “logics”, “grids”, and “structures” of whiteness is a crucial project, historical (or historicised) work suggests that the dynamic of racialisation and racial privilege are much more temporally variable than a single trans-historical theoretical vocabulary would imply. An historicized approach necessarily involves thinking about how the structures and dynamics of whiteness are always oriented by time and place. Historians thus tend to be less interested in “naming” the ways in which white racial identity has been normalised, and instead tend to track the relationship between racialising dynamics and specific historical and political processes and contexts. Thinking historically about whiteness, then, suggests that we might need to

embed our theoretical assumptions about racial privilege more carefully in times and places.

This insight has substantive implications for both the critical study of whiteness (as an identity and as an oppressive relation) and the field’s utility as a mechanism to interrogate our own contemporary academic context. As the accounts of pedagogy, university administration, knowledge production and university hiring in this edition confirm, the intellectually “possessive logic” of whiteness is manifesting in newly oppressive ways. On the other hand, histories of whiteness are not without their own political and theoretical problems; interrogating the operation of racial privilege in the past can, in some ways, smooth over the more politically and epistemologically challenging implications of whiteness studies in the present (and perhaps, many historians have been able to elide these implications because of the temporal distance of their subject). The recent histories of multiculturalism and racial and apology politics in Australia have, in many cases, re-oriented the power and privilege of whiteness in rhetorics of inclusion and empowerment that fail to address the normalising imperatives of white racial power. They have also, paradoxically, provided new ways to intellectually and institutionally quarantine both non-white scholars and the political implications of their work. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson remarked in the final session of the 2008 conference, historians of whiteness might similarly learn much from their disciplinary neighbours.

There is no question that scholars in the fields of sociology, political science, education and (contemporary) cultural studies have been much better at thinking about the ways in which the production of contemporary academic

knowledge needs to do more than simply “take aim” at whiteness. Taking the challenge of whiteness studies seriously in the academe requires significant epistemological and institutional transformation. We can't simply examine whiteness, add some Other subjects and “stir”. Rather, as Susan Micek suggests in her article, whiteness studies needs to question “what is knowledge, who has it, and what can be done with it?” As Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2008: 85-6) argues, the scene of academic knowledge production – as it echoes with the wider discourses of inclusion and empowerment – “obscure[s] the more complex way that white possession functions socio-discursively through subjectivity and knowledge production”. Whilst scholars in the US might look upon the continued production of whiteness studies scholarship in Australia with some envy (Roediger 2006), its apparent institutional security (indicated by the production of work, professional associations, conferences, and hiring) conceals a troubling resistance (whether intentional or patterned) to the epistemological and institutional implications of the field. As the political imperatives of whiteness studies and postcolonial theory challenge pedagogies, knowledges and institutions, the practices and patterns of the academe (and individuals within it) actively or unintentionally fail to do the necessary epistemological and structural work to address these critiques – even as, or perhaps because, rhetorics of white virtue and inclusion effectively dull the sharp edges of whiteness studies. Indeed, as Ron Hoenig's study of the representation of refugees suggests, one of the ways in which white practices and subjectivities maintain their authority is via a condescending tendency to offer incorporation to minorities. As Catriona Elder, Cath Ellis and Angela

Pratt (2004: 209) point out in relation to the national imaginary:

the management of non-white people in the white nation-space is ordered in terms of a relationship where white people assume that their place is at the centre or core of the nation, defined in relation to both internal non-white others and external non-white margins or periphery.

So too, the criticisms generated by whiteness studies in the academe, which are so frequently being left up to non-white interlocutors to articulate, are offered inclusion under the terms and parameters of the very white knowledge it purports to critique. A number of the papers in this collection attest to just how difficult securing substantive change can be – not least in the ways in which Indigenous academics and learners seem to be bearing the political and emotional weight of this transformation. As convenors of the 2008 conference, we are not unaware of the ways in which our own conference – at times – simultaneously failed to address the material, intellectual and organisational implications of two-way cross-cultural engagements (and thus marginalised non-white knowledges), demanded that non-white speakers perform the disruptive work of whiteness studies, and, perhaps, implicitly asked non-white informants to smooth white consciences. As white convenors and editors we would like to take this opportunity to recognise the emotional, political and intellectual work that non-white participants broadly and Indigenous speakers in particular performed at the 2008 conference, even as we acknowledge that our recognition will always fail to comprehend the experience and impact of this work. There are individual psychic and emotional costs to being

asked to continually articulate collective and individual histories of suffering and pain (even as we concur with Ahmed's call to maintain their disruptive presence); we need to find a way to distribute these costs more evenly.

The contributors to this issue take whiteness studies in some significant new directions. Vera Mackie's article makes a major new contribution to an under-explored area – how whiteness has operated in Asian contexts. Her work demonstrates how we need to think about “location” and “perspective” in our understanding of whiteness as both an historical and political endeavour. Western understandings of whiteness were not simply transported into this sphere. While some recent work has sought to “provincialise” the United States in area of whiteness (Boucher, Carey and Ellinghaus 2007 and 2009; Moreton-Robinson, Casey and Nicoll 2008), she argues “it is necessary to understand how whiteness has been seen by non-white observers, and that we need to be sensitive to local taxonomies of difference which are not always reducible to the white/non-white distinction which is hegemonic in the Euro-American centres”. Mackie's analysis of literary representations in early twentieth century Japan compellingly shows how speech and dress encoded whiteness for bodies that most gazes would place outside the boundaries of whiteness. The politics and poetics of location have a substantive impact on the ways in which this plays out. More comparative studies of whiteness outside the “Anglo-Saxon” world are needed.

Joost Cote also considers Asian productions of whiteness (in comparative relation to Australia), but this time very much situated within the

frame of European imperialism. Focussing on education as a key colonial response to the perceived dangers of “miscegenation”, Cote seeks to develop “a comparative framework that links colonial settlements in Asia and Australia”. Across these diverse contexts he suggests that education was a crucial mechanism of colonial knowledge and management, and central both to securing whiteness and defining its boundaries: “Education ... evidently held the key to gaining the cultural capital in terms of which whiteness could be safeguarded and advanced”. Educational strategies were developed in direct relation to anxieties about whiteness. Cote thus argues for “the universality of a linked discourse of whiteness and class across [European] Imperial Asia”. Other work, however, has highlighted the multiple and often divergent tropes of whiteness in circulation throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (eg. Boucher, Carey and Ellinghaus 2007 and 2009; Carey and McLisky 2009). As Mackie suggests, “whiteness has a specific history in particular localised cultural and social contexts ... the concept cannot easily be generalised beyond these contexts”. These contrasting views exemplify two key currents of recent whiteness scholarship – one which emphasises the transnational dimensions of whiteness (see also Lake and Reynolds 2008) and the other which focuses on the importance of local dynamics.

Continuing the theme of “locating” whiteness, Sam Ritchie's article explores the “fluid” nature of nineteenth century conceptions of “race” in colonial Victoria, using the specific case study of the missionary Francis Tuckfield. He explicitly contrasts Tuckfield's extensive use of the term “Whites” to refer to the coloniser population with the work of Leigh Boucher and Claire McLisky, who

both found this term was rarely used by other nineteenth century Victorian missionaries and politicians. The uneven nature of this identification is intriguing. Ritchie's analysis, which focuses on Tuckfield's "sense of racial self" as a "white man", also provides a great example of the ways in which "good white men" are situated in times and places. This has consequences both for our understanding of nineteenth-century Australia, and the ways in which strategies of racialisation can ensure white privilege even as "care" is being offered.

Moving from the historical to the contemporary, Ron Hoenig continues the exploration of the "good white self", this time in the wider context of Australian political and cultural life. Examining media representation of asylum seekers, particularly in relation to the 2002 "lip sewing" protests at Woomera, he argues that they provide the cultural Other against which the text constructs an ideal audience and the reader a moral cultural self: "In both 'negative' and 'positive' representations of asylum seekers media workers and the media system construct the asylum seeker as a raced other in contrast to an 'invisible' good white Australian Self". His work provides a good example of how "well intentioned" engagements and representations of Others don't necessarily confront racial privilege. In this case, even as non-white people are represented/included, this inclusion functions to ease white conscience rather than address actual inequality.

Leora Farber's article provides a significant example of the kind of work white people need to do in order to deal with the kinds of histories, legacies and presents of the previous (and following) work. Proposing "tentative correlations" between her own position "as a white, English speaking, second-

generation Jewish female, living in post-apartheid, post-colonial South Africa and debates within South African whiteness studies around what Melissa Steyn (2006) identifies as a post-1994 sense of psychological "dislocation" which certain white South Africans are experiencing", she insists that challenging racial privilege must necessarily equate to loss for whites. Particularly, "for those 'White Africans', who staked much of their identity on their privileged whiteness". She uses the specific example of her own artwork depicting "immigrant" experiences to illustrate her "lived experience of post-colonial hybridity".

The final three articles deal with the important arenas of pedagogy, curriculum, knowledge production and university administration and hiring in relation to Indigenous knowledge, students and academics. Susan Mlcek, exploring the "whiteness behaviours" currently present in curriculum delivery, asks "which pedagogical framework is most effective for Indigenous learners?" She argues that challenging oppression requires both a transformation in pedagogy and a re-conceptualization of "the subject" of knowledge, which of course is not an easy task. Mlcek too reflects on narratives of "white good":

behaviours of good are also enacted from a deep sense of moral obligation that when we engage with Indigenous students, for example, we act from a position of thinking we know what is best for them rather than acknowledging that our benign benevolence comes rather from the "anxiety of whiteness" (Riggs and Augustinos 2004) accompanied by the need to belong, to validate, and to maintain a useful position in Australian society.

Next, Andrew Gunstone charts the broad institutional scene of Indigenous studies in the Australian academe. Similarly to Mlcek, he argues that “practices of whiteness substantially restrict the ability of universities to genuinely address the education needs of Indigenous students, staff and community members”. Even as Indigenous studies centres and knowledge seem to have institutional support, Gunstone demonstrates how the material terms of this support continue to exclude Indigenous people, focussing the key areas of governance, anti-racist policies and training, Indigenous employment, research and curriculum. In all of these areas, Gunstone’s research has shown that universities have both failed to appoint Indigenous people, and failed to genuinely consult with Indigenous communities. Thus, Indigenous peoples’ presence in university decision-making is often as a general staff representative rather than Indigenous representative. Gunstone too notes that “Often the most substantial attacks on Indigenous cultural safety come from ‘well-meaning’ white university staff and students”.

The final article in this edition by Bronwyn Fredericks is perhaps the most powerful. Through sharing her personal experiences as a case study, Fredericks raises, and critically addresses, issues which have far-reaching implications. Her work demonstrates “how Indigenous Studies is controlled in some Australian universities in ways that witness Indigenous people being further marginalised, denigrated and exploited”. She recounts how one Australian university “invited” her to participate in a major review of their Indigenous Studies courses, but offered no payment in return for her services, knowledge and experience. They

assumed they had the right to access these resources without paying for them.

Fredericks thus draws out the strong links between Indigenous studies curricula and issues of power, especially institutional power: the ways in which the field of Indigenous Studies is caught between the unequal forces of the (white) academe and the critiques of its Indigenous practitioners. This article thus suggests a substantive failure by the academe to disrupt the institutional and material formations that continue to oppress Indigenous people. At present, junior Indigenous staff are doing too much of this disruptive work, and this is having concrete emotional, psychic and intellectual consequences for those practitioners. As Fredericks observes:

With all of this activity in universities in terms of official documents, one could be lead to believe that there has been a dramatic change in how Indigenous Studies, Indigenous epistemologies and Indigenous peoples are regarded. How is it then that, being an Indigenous person within the academy can be explained by Phillips 2003: 3) as an “on-going struggle against colonial domination” (and described by Miranda (2003: 344) as “a heartbreaking endeavour”?

Her personal case study demonstrates “how hard it can be to engage with the Academy when those within it are reproducing imperial attitudes and processes which marginalise and exclude us whilst proclaiming they want to include and involve us ... Universities are not the safe places we would like to think they are”. Returning to a recurrent theme in this edition, she describes the feelings of anger and surprise “when it is other academics who espouse notions of justice and equity with whom we

experience tension and conflict in asserting our rights and cultural values”.

Discussing the recent “affirmative turn” in critical scholarship (which has argued that “we have paid too much attention to melancholia, suffering and injury and that we need to be more affirmative”), Sara Ahmed (2008: 12) has expressed a concern that this “turn” has been based on a distinction that presumes “bad feelings are backward and conservative and good feelings are forward and progressive. Bad feelings are seen as orientated towards the past; as a kind of stubbornness that “stops” the subject from embracing the future”. Ahmed’s observations are particularly pertinent in the context of the recent shift towards recovering more “positive” moments of interracial exchanges both historically, on the colonial frontier, and within contemporary cultural studies. If there are some common conclusions that can be drawn from across the diverse contributions to this edition it is that dynamics of racial privilege are remarkably historically malleable, and a consistent motif in their mobilisation has been (and continues to be) an interdependence between oppressive structures and “good intentions”. Histories and examples of “care” and “support” all too compellingly reveal how dynamic the maintenance of racial power can be, even if they might offer neat affirmations for current day politics. So too, the (white) academe needs to acknowledge how the offer of political inclusion can simply re-orient the legacies of colonialism in newly oppressive ways.

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ⁱ The conference title was taken from a forthcoming book: Boucher, Carey and Ellinghaus, *Re-Orienting Whiteness*, 2009.