

## 4. Thoughts on a politics of whiteness in a (never quite post) colonial country: abolitionism, essentialism and incommensurability

---

*Jane Haggis*

In *Out of Whiteness*, Vron Ware and Les Back map out a political project they term 'New Abolitionism'. They define this project as critical whiteness studies which is 'an attack on the very notion of race and the obstinate resilience of racial identities — one of its most disastrous consequences'. New Abolitionism, they assert, 'means moving inexorably toward a place that lies beyond the homelands of color and the ghastly structures of "thinking white"' (2002:2, 9–14). This new place is envisaged in precisely the terms of postcolonial hybridity: a place of plural and cosmopolitan identities and cultures, where everyone is all mixed up. For Ware and Back, then, whiteness eventually disappears into an essentialism-free zone along with blackness. I was refreshed by their up-front call for a politics rather than a 'study' of whiteness, but began to trouble over the possibility of being a (white) abolitionist in Australia who could disappear into a colour-free zone. This essay is a preliminary attempt to think through my concerns for a politics of whiteness in Australia.

### **The dis-comforts of whiteness**

At certain forums in Australia today, most particularly academic conferences on matters of race, it is now common for non-Indigenous, as well as Indigenous, speakers to begin their talk by acknowledging the 'traditional owners' of the land the speaker stands upon. This extension of an ancient Indigenous protocol appears to mark one public manifestation of an emergent postcolonising space in contemporary Australian society. Having enacted such acknowledgements of Indigenous ownership on numerous occasions, I now experience a growing sense of ambivalence about my iteration of the protocol. I wonder what my words actually do? It seems to me that as I speak, I both reveal and disguise my complicity in a continuing colonising moment in the production of knowledge. Apart from paying respect to the prior and continuing presence of First Nations, I do not engage with the ways of

knowing and being embedded in that Indigenous presence. The academic institutional structures and bodies of knowledge within which I practise are starkly monocultural in contrast to the wider Australian society. Their self-definition and institutional status remain solidly built on a universalising Western claim to know. I am respectfully aware of the growing number of Indigenous scholars in Australia 'Talking Up' — as Aileen Moreton-Robinson's (2000) book title puts it — from within and outside the white academy I am part of. But this just makes my question more acute: how do I break my complicity in the colonising moves of knowledge production in terms of my own intellectual praxis?

My reflection on this quandary of colonising complicity was also stimulated by an awareness of the reception of the work Susanne Schech and I have presented on whiteness in various academic forums (Haggis & Schech 1999; Schech & Haggis 1998, 2000, 2001). We became aware of a curious 'colour' patterning in the responses. Constructive engagement with our work came almost entirely from people of colour in the audience, often from unlikely academic quarters not necessarily sympathetic to the broad post-structuralist underpinning, or political tenor, of our work. In contrast, 'white' academics much more rarely engaged with the work. Silence was the norm or — usually as informal asides — comments would be made to us about 'whiteness' not being useful, or about the potential dangers of focusing on whiteness. Rarely were such comments married with a critical commentary. On reflection, it seems to me, studying and naming whiteness caused uneasiness among our white colleagues rather than an active intellectual engagement with it. Speaking personally, I have also experienced unease about naming and focusing on 'whiteness'. What causes this unease? I suggest there are two aspects to it: one relates to the ways in which the vocabulary of anti-racism is challenged by certain conceptualisations of whiteness; the other relates to a fear of being essentialised.

### **Anti-racism and whiteness**

So why does a focus on 'whiteness' unsettle 'anti-racism'? Let me begin with an anecdote.

In a South Australian rural hospital in the early 1980s, a group of female ancillary workers were having a quick chat and cup of tea in the hospital kitchen. Judy, a British migrant, was not present at this informal gathering. It had recently become public knowledge that her

teenage daughter was going out with a young Aboriginal man from the town. Connie (a southern Italian migrant) commented on this: 'Ugh. I don't know how Judy can stand to allow it. They are so dirty and black [shudder].' Karen, a migrant from Germany, leaned over to Anne (another British migrant) and whispered, 'She doesn't realise, where I come from we think *she's* black', in reference to Connie.<sup>1</sup>

Is there a difference between the two expressions of derogatory difference (the Italian-Australian and the German-Australian)? One is directed to another European, the other refers to Australian Indigenous peoples. What of the German-Australian comment? The 'blackening' of the southern Italian seems somehow to produce an anti-racist position for the speaker to challenge the denigration of Aboriginal Australians. And, of course, 'black' circulates through the anecdote as the sign of abjectness (Young 1990:141–8).

Much could be done with this anecdote in terms of analysing the rhetorics of engagement over race in Australian contexts. Clearly, it illustrates the fluidity of constructions of whiteness and the differences across place and location. In this case, European variegations resonate awkwardly in the Australian patterning of race. Here, however, I want to focus on how the anecdote calls into question the binary racist/anti-racist. If Connie is racist, then Karen is more ambiguously positioned. Does she share the German attitude? Perhaps yes, in her use of 'we'. But she appears to deploy the German construction of southern Italian as black in order to undercut Connie's disparaging remarks about Indigenous Australians. In this sense, her intervention works in the anecdote as an anti-racist intervention. But where does this get us? Except we now have one — maybe — 'good' person and one 'bad' person. This illustrates how the racism/anti-racism couplet is a cosy binary because of the ways in which it allows race privilege to be elided by those who are able to read themselves into the anti-racist side of the couplet. Although, of course, in anti-racist discourse we talk of 'structural racism' and 'institutional racism', nevertheless, we still construct in the anti-racist position a moral space of no or less complicity.

What a focus on whiteness brings to all of this is its ability to name what is so invisible to contemporary 'white' majority societies: the racialised nature of power and privilege. Potentially at least, it does so without providing a moral haven of non-complicity for those who inhabit 'white' locations. This potential, however, depends on how whiteness itself is defined. As Ware and Back point out, much of the research from the USA that has dominated the new field of whiteness

studies is concerned to articulate a new anti-racist white identity that will fit benignly into a multicultural jigsaw (2002:6). 'White' becomes just another 'identity' that allows the white majority to play at a rights-based politics of multiculturalism with all those lucky others who had 'culture' already. The politics of white grievance often articulates this in terms of white lack or loss, vociferously articulated in some of One Nation's rhetoric (see Hage 1998, ch. 7). Perceiving whiteness as identity slides past the issue of white race privilege. More usefully, Ruth Frankenberg's layered definition of whiteness as discourse, structure and location, places issues of power and privilege at the centre of any study of how whiteness operates (1993:1).

'Colouring' racialised power and privilege, however, risks giving whiteness a fixed embodied form (those with 'white' skin) that belies the emphasis most analyses of whiteness place on whiteness as a fluid social construction (see Bonnett 1998; Brodtkin 1999; Frankenberg 1993; Hickman & Walter 1995). In *White Nation* (1998), Hage talks about the ability of migrant Australians, even 'third world looking' ones, to accumulate whiteness as indicative of a discourse of nationalism rather than race. It is a powerful and important argument, but one of the confronting things for me, about theorising whiteness, is precisely that its embodied form is a part of whiteness's 'facticity'. Who of Hage's 'third world looking' migrants are able to accumulate a full quota of 'whiteness'? Franz Fanon's powerful depiction of the limits to his colonised appropriation of 'whiteness' speaks to this when he describes the power of a little French boy's horrified gaze to sunder Fanon's sense of himself as an educated Frenchman: 'My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recoloured, clad in mourning in that white winter day' (1968:80). As Iris Marion Young observes, there is always a frisson around the (black/different) body in white majority spaces (1990:133).

Another quandary posed by using whiteness as an analytical concept is the fear of strengthening rather than displacing white race privilege. 'White' as a description of hegemonic racialised identity is too closely associated with the supremacist claims of the Ku Klux Klan and other such organisations. Will talking about whiteness give credence somehow to the supremacist claims of a biologically determined racial hierarchy? On the other hand, embedded in more liberal traditions of thinking is a 'colour blindness' that generates a deep reluctance to 'name' race-based power and privilege (Roediger 2002; Stratton 1998). Yet, as Frankenberg (1993) and Dyer (1993) identified, one of the ways

in which whiteness operates as a specific location of power and privilege is precisely through its invisibility as a taken-for-granted norm. This is a fear of entrenching essentialised difference that cuts across the liberal premise of equality as sameness.

### Essentialism and hybridity

Essentialism is trouble — big trouble, within the Western intellectual tradition. One of the important achievements of the social and intellectual movements of the last quarter of the twentieth century, notably feminism, post-structuralism and postcolonialism, was to reveal the essentialism at the heart of modern social theory. Essentialism was the tool through which the Other to the dominant white European bourgeois male was gendered, sexed and raced (Gilman 1985). The reductive categories of ‘woman’, ‘black’, and so on, attained a universal reach through the workings of imperial capitalism and colonialism. Indeed, this is how ‘whiteness’ became an unacknowledged, normative and therefore (to itself) invisible structure of privilege and power (Bonnett 1998). This critique of essentialism extended to the ‘reverse essentialism’ deployed in the identity politics of minority and marginal groups, including ‘race’-based collectivities. As Stuart Hall points out, neither reversal nor inversion dislodges the racialised regimes of representation underpinning marginalisation. He quotes Lerone Bennett’s acerbic critique of the reworking of African-American masculinity in the movie *Sweet Sweetback*: ‘nobody ever fucked his way to freedom’, to emphasise the limits of a politics of identity which reworks rather than disrupts the essentialism of racial hierarchies (Hall 1996:272).

Instead, postcolonial theorists claim hybridity as the motif of transgressive identities: the productive effect of colonialism, hence the prefix ‘post’: the postcolonial is ‘where cultural differences “contingently” and conflictually touch’ (Bhabha 1994:207). ‘Difference’ is rendered as a mutable space rather than a fixed axis of power, of claim and counter-claim. Much has been written for and against the notion of hybridity as a useful concept in exploring the politics of difference in contemporary contexts. Here I focus on Ien Ang’s *On Not Speaking Chinese*, in which she proposes a hybridity defined as entanglement as the basis for an effective cultural politics in a world ‘in which we no longer have the secure capacity to draw the line between us and them, between the different and the same, here and there, and indeed, between Asia and the West’ (2001:3). As Ang, drawing on Felski, observes, hybridity refers to a conception of identity that lives with and through difference in a

double 'in-betweenness'. On the one hand are the difference(s) constituting the subject as necessarily fractured and multiple; on the other are the relations *between* hybrid subjects (Ang 2001:193–4; Felski 1997).

It is this two-way 'in-betweenness' that Ang claims as 'a necessary condition for living together-in-difference'. The phrase 'living together-in-difference' encapsulates how Ang seeks to theorise a 'co-existence in a single world'. She envisages a coexistence that overcomes the plethora of particularist identity claims currently alive in the world, but avoids a cosy assumption of synthesis as the endpoint of hybridisation. Instead of the liberal vision of a happy hybridity, ultimately based on an image of melding, Ang draws on the more subversive lauding of hybridity in the work of Hall, Gilroy and other British postcolonial writers. Here hybridity works not to blend everyone together but to disrupt and decolonise the metropolitan (in this case English) sense of homology by insisting on the presence of the marginal in the hegemonic space of the nation in ways that reveal and insist on plurality. Such strategies blur boundaries of difference rather than reinforcing their binary distinction. Ang mounts a cogent argument against identity as the basis of a cultural politics of difference by revealing the instability of the global binary 'Asia and the West'. She posits herself: the banana — 'yellow outside, white inside' — to emphasise the porosity of identities and how they are constituted through interrelationships. Here, the 'in-betweenness' of the non-Chinese-speaking 'Asian Australian' demonstrates the hybridity of entanglement, of non-completeness, of always being (inter) related, of having no foundation. Moving from the assumption that hybridity (as entanglement) 'is everywhere', she convincingly demolishes diaspora and multiculturalism as pertaining to this notion of hybridity, revealing how they both remain caught in deploying ethnic identity to effect a 'living apart together' based on essentialism and closure (Ang 2001:94, 197, 199, 200).

Ang's book is an important and subtle contribution to a radical rethinking of the politics of difference, and I do not do justice to it here. I find her argument tantalising. I like the twist she gives to 'difference' by throwing the emphasis back on that simple question: how are 'we' all going to live together in one world? She articulates that challenge — to theorise togetherness — that I suspect many of us have shied away from naming even as we worry over the endlessness of 'difference'. But how does hybridity as entanglement and interrelationality speak to the Indigenous location or that of the white settler subject in Australian circumstances?

Ang is careful to point out that part of the plurality of hybridity is precisely its specificity in particular contexts and conditions (2001:196). She takes as an example Ian Anderson's explication of his Indigeneity. Anderson powerfully rejects hybridity as pertaining to his sense of being Aboriginal, proclaiming: 'My body is an Aboriginal body, and could not be otherwise' (1995:38). He thus refuses the invitation to acknowledge fragmentation and mixture, staking out instead a unitary Aboriginal identity. Ang takes his claim to Aboriginality and rejection of (happy) hybridity as specific to the Australian location, but still insists on the hybridity of entanglement as the spatial configuration productive of his refusal, a refusal, as Anderson asserts, based on history and memory, not biology (Ang 2001:196–7). Anderson's 'anti anti-essentialism' is not dismissed, but inserted into Ang's model of post-modern, postcolonial hybridity. But is this adequate to capture Australian specificities? Both Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Ghassan Hage question the application of 'post' colonial to the Australian circumstance but on somewhat different grounds.

Moreton-Robinson explores the notions of postcolonial and hybridity in terms of the specificities of Australia as a settler colony. As she points out, Australia is not 'postcolonial' in the same way as, say, India, because '[I]n Australia the colonials did not go home and "postcolonial" remains based on whiteness'. Her argument turns on the claim that there is an 'incommensurable difference between the situatedness of the Indigenous people . . . and those who have come here'. The basis of this incommensurability is the Indigenous ways of being *in* the land, 'the ontological relationship to country' as she terms it, which is quite different from the settler's claim to *possession* of the land (Moreton-Robinson 2002:7, 9).

At one level, this would seem to replicate Anderson's refusal of the liberal notion of hybridity, while nevertheless fitting into Ang's idea of hybridity as entanglement, which she sees as premised precisely on incommensurabilities as well as ambivalence. But whereas Ang's reading of Anderson's claim is that it is based in history and memory and hence is mutable and open to entanglement, the ontology of country resists such messiness. It claims a singular continuity (although not necessarily a fixity or authenticity). Here I want to view Moreton-Robinson's charge of incommensurability between the ontology of country and that of white possession of the land as one that challenges and contains any notion of 'essentialism' as a universally applicable category and bounces it back on to non-Indigenous, white knowledge making.

Moreton-Robinson pre-emptes the charge of essentialism levelled at the ontology of country by refuting the term's applicability to non-Western ways of thinking about self and identity. The ontology of country is an expression of being in place that sunders most of the Western knowledge bank's ways of conceiving the modern subject around binaries such as, for example, nature/culture. It does this not by blurring these boundaries or tangling them up, as Ang's model presumes, but by never recognising them in the first place. Even the dislocations of removal do not disturb this ontology, because 'through cultural protocols . . . we can be in place but away from our home country' (Moreton-Robinson 2002:10). The ontology of country is an expression of radical difference that precludes blending or entanglement, in Ang's sense of an always incompleteness. In other words, there is no sense of 'in-betweenness' inhering to 'being in country'. Hence, asserting the ontology of country is not a self-essentialising move, strategic or otherwise. It can only be perceived as such if the white Western construction of the subject is taken as the norm. The claim to the ontology of country does, however, 'essentialise' whiteness to itself, in a bouncing or mirroring effect.

How does it do this? By mirroring back whiteness as essence. The best way to explain this is by reference to a recent installation, *whitefella normal*, by the Indigenous artist, Vernon Ah Kee (2001). The installation consisted of a series of arranged posters — white paper with black text — varied in both paper and font size. One set of continuous paper wrapped along several walls, with print in tiny black type without word or line breaks, required the reader's nose almost to touch the paper in order to decipher what turned out to be an endless stream of words describing blackness. Other, larger print texts spoke directly to a presumed white viewer from a centred location of being black and Aboriginal, as the following extract illustrates:

. . . if you wish to remain in this country under conditions that would more honestly consider and respect notions of right and presence, then you must discard your own individual identity. You must discard any cultural markers you ascribe yourself. You must deny everything that you have ever known of yourself and your history in this land. And your God must be the one that we determine for you. (Ah Kee 2001)

I was struck at the time by the visual and textual rendering of whiteness as marginality, at the same time as the hegemonic centring of whiteness was made explicit. On reflection, my impression of the installation is precisely a mirror image of the 'doubleness' of incommensura-



bility described by Moreton-Robinson. On the one hand, Blackfellas (to follow Ah Kee's usage) are marginalised 'by colonialism and the proximity to whiteness', as Moreton-Robinson observes, but they are centred by 'the continuity of ontology and cultural protocols' (2002:10). The result for me, as a white Australian, is a confronting image of whiteness as an ontological fixity. There is no room here for 'whitenesses' as a plurality that might allow for an abolitionist position, neither is the invitation one that acknowledges an entangled hybridity. The invitation is to disappear. Unlike the disappearances orchestrated by the colonisers, however, this is a demand for voluntary self-destruction. My rendering here of Ah Kee's work hardly captures the powerful irony running through the installation as visual and textual art. But my point is that, from the Indigenous standpoint, whiteness is a foundational claim to identity, belonging and ownership that at no point connects with Indigenous ways of being in the land. Whereas the ontology of country is predicated on protocols to establish belonging or being in place, the white settler claim is to exclusive possession over place. Hence it is essentialist in ways the ontology of country is not, as well as incommensurable to it, thus precluding any possibility of hybrid entanglement.

Ghassan Hage's (2001b) reflections on what he calls the 'memory wars' in Australia examine incommensurability from a different angle. In a very clever unpacking of the white Australian positions on the colonial past, he argues that both the 'pro apology' and 'no apology' positions are caught within a continuing colonial moment because of the contradiction inherent in the idea of the Australian nation. His point is that, at this time, 'a national memory or a non contradictory plurality of memories of colonisation in Australia is impossible' because 'the very sides which have fought this colonial war have not melded together into one . . . there remain two separate communal identities with two separate memories trying to live together in one state'. Moreover, because these two identities, sets of memories, indeed sovereignties, are not of equal strength, Hage argues that Australia remains an 'unfinished Western colonial project as well as a land in a permanent state of decolonisation'. Thus, while a pro-apology position is admirable, even desirable, it is at best 'a repentant coloniser's take' on the past — an assumption of responsibility that is quite different from the colonised memories of the past that turn on survival and resistance, not recognition and repentance (Hage 2001b:347–8, 350, 351). While he does not use the term, Hage's argument reveals another dimension of

that incommensurability between Indigenous and white Australians that Moreton-Robinson and Ah Kee articulate. It is an incommensurability that marks the lack of a 'post' in the colonial for white Australians, as well as Indigenous Australians.

## Conclusion

So, how do I break my complicity in the colonising moves of knowledge production? First, by taking seriously the incommensurability claimed by Indigenous intellectuals such as Moreton-Robinson and Ah Kee for Indigenous ways of knowing and being that are not encompassed by the concept of 'essentialism'. This is not to advocate a simple relativism, however. Relativism, as Narayan (1997, 1998) argues, is a refusal of engagement and responsibility that throws the question of 'togetherness' back on the less powerful 'other'. Instead, I see that the challenge for how whiteness operates as an essentialism of the (white) self and settler possessiveness is to engage with the claim of incommensurability and its consequences while continuing to reveal, analyse and challenge the multiple ways in which whiteness is internally incoherent, differentiated, hyphenated. Here Hage's teasing out of the ways in which apparently opposing white stances on the past are similarly caught within a colonising moment serves as a model. He captures this doubleness of whiteness, as a plurality that is always already pulled together into a cohesive hegemony. My opening question is, therefore, in one sense redundant. Like it or not, my aspirations to avoid a colonising move are caught out by the lack of a 'post' in the Australian colonial.

In terms of a specific Australian version of 'the New Abolitionism' called for by Ware and Back, the very doubleness of whiteness allows for the possibility of transgressive practices that work against the invisibility of whiteness as an essentialist position — whether we couch this as 'race-traitor', 'abolitionist' or 'anti-racist'. Is this where whiteness connects to hybridity? Could such transgressive engagements be the entanglements Ang posits as a basis for 'togetherness in difference'? They are messy, uneasy and ambivalent, all characteristics of (unhappy) hybridity. However, such transgressions are not produced within, nor productive of, the kind of in-betweenness Ang describes, precisely because of the ways in which incommensurability works within the 'failed' colonial project that is Australia. How can you have a 'third space', an 'in-betweenness', in a situation where the settler claim 'to be' is constituted on the disavowal and dispossession of the Indigenous?

The lack of a formal treaty between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is one key component of the ‘unfinished project’ of colonialism in Australia, ensuring that sovereignty remains a quality of whiteness.<sup>2</sup> Ah Kee hits the nail on the head in the quotation cited earlier, when he suggests that, as presently configured, only the erasure of the ‘white settler’ will make the ‘whitefella normal’.

Is this Ware and Back’s ‘race’-free space? I am not sure. Their emphasis is on a politics of transgression. What this leaves out is the other side of the doubleness of whiteness: as we contest, we are also complicit. As I enunciate the acknowledgement of traditional owners, I both resist the erasure of that ownership and enact the colonising privilege of tolerance, in the sense that I allow the Indigenous protocol only to the extent that it bolsters my transgressive location within whiteness. Whiteness is not just an identity (as Ware and Back point out), it is also structure, location/space and discourse. Transgressive agency, while important, does not place the white subject outside of this matrix of power and privilege. It is telling, I think, that when you look at how hybridity is defined, not only by Ang but more generally in the post-colonial literature, it is usually the marginal subject that expresses hybridity: the banana, not the apple (rosy red/pink outside, white inside). Rather than a politics of abolition, I think a more fruitful path for Australian circumstances is the one Fiona Nicoll is beginning to chart as a ‘coming out’: of owning whiteness and, as a consequence, falling out of perspective into the space of Indigenous sovereignty (2000; see also Chapter 2). Such a space cannot be predicated upon, nor ‘entangled’ with, settler colony possessiveness. It is, therefore, not a ‘third space’. Instead, the white settler must negotiate the protocols of country in order to become ‘normal’ in the Indigenous space that is Australia.