

Politics of Identity

The Uses of Whiteness Theory in Critical Discourses of Race

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One of the final moves of conquerors after conquest is the dividing up of territories, creating unnatural boundaries and thus ushering in perpetual struggle over space and place. In that context, invasions take on complex meaning.

(Davies 16)

This paper found itself, to its surprise, in a session called 'Post Colonial Australia' – a category that has been responded to with considerable bemusement by many indigenous commentators. Arthur Corunna in Morgan's *My Place* observes that 'the trouble is, colonialism isn't over yet', while Ruby Langford has commented: 'we're still affected by the stuff that the colonists brought to this country, all that shit' (118). Gayatri Spivak has been heard to say: 'When we began using the word "postcolonial" we used it ironically' (qtd in Bulbeck 188) and, on another occasion: 'I find the word "postcolonial" totally bogus' (qtd in Bahri 78). Deepika Bahri has suggested that the notion of the postcolonial is 'a framing device to characterise the second half of the twentieth century' (52); this of course begs the question of who is doing the characterising, and what aspects of colonialism are assumed to be neatly closed off 'with relative impunity' (Bahri 51) and for whom, by such a frame. White supremacy (which term I use following bell hooks (116), in preference to racism), based upon control of more advanced technology has been maintained in what got to be called 'Australia' with the apparent end of colonialism about half-way through the 210 years since the invasion. Many postcolonial approaches embody a false complacency about how much has changed.

Rearrangement of boundaries determines not just how history is (re)told but also how race is conceptualised. Race has historically been defined as within particular boundaries; usually those doing the defining have re-produced them, by removing the population from their original land (onto contained allocated bits labelled reserves or, even, to another country as slaves, as happened to African-Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press Americans or as indentured labour as happened to the Kanakas in the late 19th century in Queensland). The White Australia policy instituted at the turn of the century in Australia with the repatriation of the Kanakas persisted until the 1960s, proudly proclaimed in the *Bulletin* masthead: 'Australia for the white man.' This historical episode is not comfortably closed either.

Constructions of race involve both physical aspects of bodies and culturally produced aspects; both operating within particular histories. Recently described as

'one of the last remaining uncriticised ideologies' is 'The belief that physical traits refer to or express an ethnic interiority, an identity or substance of genetic being that provides the external traits with meaning' (Rivkin and Ryan 855). Race is embodied in literary, political, historical and legal discourses, as well as materially. White supremacy is the exercise of material and ideological power to maintain the unequal power of another (racially distinguished) group. Some varieties of 'strategic essentialism' mobilise race in particular ways also, in the construction of identities, negative or positive, as part of the strategy of fighting back. Davies suggests that 'the term "Black", oppositional, resisting, necessarily emerges as whiteness seeks to depoliticise and normalise itself' (8).

Back in 1978, when Edward Said came up with the notion of 'Orientalism' to analyse the mindset of (Western) conquerors, he categorised this as 'a kind of intellectual power,' a 'western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient' (878). While Said's argument was originally developed mainly in relation to perceptions of the Middle East, it has some use for reading other conquerors' ideological constructions of the Other:

it is, rather than expresses, a certain will or *intention* to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate what is a manifestly different, (or alternative and novel) world.

The Orientalist mode of being in the world is simultaneously 'a historical phenomenon, a way of thought, a contemporary problem and a material reality' (Said, *qtd* in Rivkin and Ryan 874, 883).

Over the past few years some attempts to engage with the 'contemporary problem' of racism have consciously focussed upon the notion of whiteness. This of course raises the question of what white(ness) is – and it is, of course, historically constructed and, to some extent, variable and subjective. Ruth Frankenberg in *White Woman, Race Matters* (1993) describes processes of 'thinking through race' as being, in her argument, three modes of thought and being characteristic of whiteness. These produce effects in the hegemonic ideology of the West (also the dominant ideology in Australia following colonisation) in which white supremacy is dominant. Frankenberg identifies three separate moments that continue to co-exist: essentialist racism; colour and power evasiveness or blindness (or 'dodging difference'); race cognisance. She argues further that there are three features of whiteness: a location of structural advantage, a standpoint of race privilege, and participation in cultural practices perceived as normal. While whiteness is located in terms of 'structural advantage, of race privilege', reconsideration of the 'standpoint' from which white people are viewed is possible (169–70). There are many limitations to Frankenberg's frame (which seems mainly designed to conscientise white middle class women), but her notion of the three moments can often be identified in fictional narratives of Australian race relations, while her notion of the three features can usefully illuminate aspects of the positioning of white female authors.

Back in 1941 Eleanor Dark commented: 'so-called "modern" problems are not new, but only old problems now reaching a culmination point ... they were already well rooted in the times of which I was writing' (qtd in Brooks 355). White women writing engaged in fiction about race relations in the first half of this century include Katharine Susannah Prichard, Jean Devanny and Eleanor Dark. How did these white women writers see themselves racially? In the times in which they wrote, the term 'chauvinism' was used for both racially and ethnically discriminatory ideology (West, qtd in Stevens 143). Devanny considered:

After one has been among the coloured people for sometime one forgets there is a difference of colour. It sinks to its proper level, simply black skin instead of white or brown or yellow.

She expected that the greater contact with non-Australian non-whites created by the war would produce in 'our men up there' changes in 'their attitude towards the white Australia policy' (NLA MS6238). Such passages demonstrate a major difference between Jean and many others at this period - including Franklin, who was given to outbursts invoking threats of yellow peril that included fantasies of 'filthy fecund Asiatics ... swarming like vermin' (Mitchell Library MS 364/26). This was in the tradition of Mary Gilmore who had warned against clever Asiatics at the turn of the century:

We fought for a White Australia first because our earlier knowledge of the East within our gates was that its morality was not ours, its customs repugnant to us, and contrary to our ideals. Soon we will have to fight the better types of an educated East. Then it will be a struggle for existence, in which the odds will be against the West. (qtd in Pearce 56)

Devanny had also observed 'the dark streak of chauvinism in the Australian, even the left Australian,' who 'despite their willingness to do the right thing ... only *act* equality with the dark skins. They don't really *feel* it.' She also wanted to challenge notions of the aesthetic superiority of the bluest eye:

White skin is the least nice skin of all. The loveliest skin I know is that of the young Chinese girl. There's a Chinese girl here, a stenographer, whose skin is that beautiful golden brown. Then, when the white skin is sun-tanned, how much improved it is. The black skin of the negro is often like *satin*, fine and beautiful. One day I was sitting with friend in the lounge of an hotel here, a lounge filled with business men of the town with their women folk. You never saw such a terrible looking lot of freaks in your life. Then an Islander walked in. A man who worked in the pub. He was stalwart, fine, shiny brown of skin, splendid teeth, intelligence shining like a light from his eye. Enough said. (NLA MS6238)

Among some earlier writing that can be read as challenging the normativeness of whiteness; uncovering it and marking it as a 'colour' is Dark's *The Timeless Land* which, she said, 'deals with the white people as aliens in the country' (qtd in Brooks 356). Ure Smith wanted to censor Dark's reference to 'darkest of all blunders, heaviest upon our conscience, the blunder of our dealings with the black Australians whose land we stole' (qtd in Brooks 294). Dark also struck hostility to the notion of stolen land; Ure Smith told her in 1944 it was 'true no doubt, but I felt it a trifle unnecessary to rub it in ... if the British hadn't stolen it someone else would have' (qtd in Brooks 294).

This attempt at a different standpoint by these women novelists in the 1940s is partly performed through a particular account of history and partly through the creation of non-whites as 'characters'. Both approaches generated contemporary hostility. Following the publication of Prichard's West Australian novel *Coonardoo* (1929) the publishers suggested to Vance Palmer that 'whitewashing the girl' in his *Men are Human* would be a good move. Prichard later told Douglas Stewart at Angus and Robertson: 'You seem to think of an Aboriginal woman as all "primitive instincts" like Bardie. She's not.' She also expected explicit hostility from white men for her representations of their theories and practices: 'I had models for Hugh and Coonardoo. When the book was published was always afraid that Geary wd come someday & take to me. Hugh did: appalled that a man's inner conflict shd have been so revealed' (Angus and Robertson Papers, 3269/66, 209).

The quaintness of the representations of race in these novels (which also are often looking back to earlier periods again) can reassure the contemporary reader about their comparative enlightenment. Dark's trilogy of historical novels of the 1940s deals mainly with some early settler families, and some aspects of race relations in the early colonial period. Brooks suggests of them: 'they speak of contemporary issues, but not in a contemporary voice' (Brooks 376). Jack Beasley, writing in the 1990s on Prichard, concedes that *The Roaring Nineties*, the first novel in Prichard's goldfields trilogy 'appeared to take over, uncritically, the topical hostility of the prospectors.'

If this had been written in the 1890s it may have been understandable, but written 50 years later it gives rise to uneasiness. Historical novels have a difficulty, they have to find an accommodation between the self-consciousness of the subject times, and the consciousness of those times from the later vantage point. (145)

These earlier representations can however also be assessed in terms of Andrew Lattas' distinction between analyses 'that focus on the norms and identity structures of white European culture' and 'those concerned with reasserting a narrow definition of politics, resistance and hegemony'(240). In the beginning of colonialism in what gets called Australia after about a hundred years, according to *The Timeless Land* (original title, *The Black Man's Burden*), racism is not particularly operational; it is only with the appropriation of the land and the necessary legitima-

tion of terra nullius that white supremacist ideologies get fully mobilised. One American critic in 1941 considered that Dark 'has shown us the white men as the natives saw them', while Wilkes in 1951 expressed irritation that 'all the qualities of meanness and treachery in the settlement belong exclusively to the whites' (qtd in Grove Day 91, 87). The novel begins and ends with Bennelong (or Bennilong as Dark calls him) and 'the reader sees the arrival and behaviour of the whites from the black point of view, or Eleanor's version of it'. Bennelong is drawn into the white culture, but Andrew Prentice, the convict and his 'half caste' son, Johnny, live with Aboriginal people; Johnny later becomes the black alter ego that Conor's white son goes in search of.

Through Prichard's goldfield trilogy, the paternalism and exploitation of the white colonisers is shown especially through the figure of Sally Gough, the pioneer woman. Her counterpart in the Aboriginal community, Kalgoorla, functions as a kind of guardian conscience to the ignorant whites. Beasley sees her as a Hecuba figure:

enduring the death and degradation of not merely her immediate relatives, but of her entire people. She never accepts this placidly, is always magnificently vengeful, and it took several generations of Goughs to learn what Kalgoorla knew all along – that the lust for gold is evil and destructive. (141)

Devanny's planned series of three novels about the sugar areas of Queensland was a similar undertaking to Prichard's planned goldfields trilogy; both were primarily histories of an industry, and of the labour on which it was built. *Cindie* was the first volume, nearing completion in mid-1945. 'I will never write really well', she felt, 'only not doing so badly with the White Australian question in it' (NLA MS6238), 'now a burning question here' (JD/CORR(B)/165).

From the 1860s, the Queensland sugar industry had operated on an extensive form of quasi-slavery. After December 1890 no more Melanesian islanders were brought into the Colony. When the White Australia Policy was introduced in 1901, Kanaka workers were to be repatriated by 1906. In 1907, there were mass deportations, bringing to an end a period in which 60,000 Kanakas had been taken to Queensland, more than a third of them by nefarious or illegal means. *Cindie* spans the period from 1896 to 1907, revealing a conflict of various economic and political interests in the replacement of Kanaka (and Chinese) labour with white labour. Through the landowner Biddow, and Cindie, the former maid who becomes manager, Devanny depicts attempts at an egalitarian approach which nonetheless remains paternalistic. When they use Aboriginal workers to replace the falling pool of other non-white workers, Biddow and Cindie are accused by some farmers of seeking a cheap labour force. While they attempt a non-racist personal practice, the economic inequalities bound up with colonial society mean that the blackbirded Kanakas and the Aborigines dispossessed of their land have no real power in relation to their white employers. Cindie is initially subject to unthinking chauvinism; when Biddow tells her that the Chinese cook, Lo How's, 'feelings

might be hurt if I didn't eat the breakfast he will have prepared for me', she asks: 'Does that matter?' (43). Soon after arrival with the women and children of the family, Cindie of their group, significantly 'made the first move towards the black women', (23) but it is not until she has observed Biddow's style, which includes for example knowing and using the Kanakas' original names (rather than the Mary and Tommy Tanna that were habitual (31)), that she is 'shaken from her assumption of innate superiority to these black-skinned folk' (53), and tells her mistress Blanche not to use the word 'nigger' – 'in the hearing of a Kanaka' at least (92).

Tirwana is in the tradition of Devanny's many wise and reliable black men who are (often but not always desexualised) helpers and confidantes for the heroine (153). When Cindie first embarks on work in the fields and Blanche queries whether it is 'proper' for her to 'go over there with all those men', Cindie responds 'as for the Kanakas – they're not *men*'. The neighbouring pioneer woman, Mary Callaghan, corrects her: 'Our women, Cindie, never forget that the Kanakas are men' (35). The ritual reproduction of the conquerors' ideology and superstitions is a complex exemplification of class and ideology; a white labourer laughs soundlessly at (Tanna) Tommy's lay preaching about the 'sweet bye and bye' (54–5); the Kanakas sing but Tirwana does not. Cindie wonders why.

There was something on his mind!

His mind! For the first time Cindie thought of the Kanakas as human beings like herself. People with minds. She thought of them as *men* but in a manner divorced from the significance given to that presumption by Mary Callaghan. (53)

Devanny's fictional representations of pioneer women on the frontier invite comparison with Prichard's depiction of Mrs Watt, Jessica and Molly in *Coonardoo*. Despite Cindie's and Blanche's different attitudes to workers, they are both exploiters, albeit in different ways. While Mrs Watt, like Cindie, is represented as a benevolent agent of colonialism she is, nonetheless, part of that oppressive process. The novels of both Prichard and Devanny can be seen as marked by a degree of complicity in whiteness, and an element of unavoidable identification with the pioneer woman, associated with their positioning in relation to the material and cultural hegemony. Also interesting in *Coonardoo* is its scrutiny of racial attitudes, particularly those of Mrs Watt and her son Hugh; Hugh's refusal of a sexual relationship with Coonardoo, while it avoids the usual patterns of sexual exploitation of Black women by white men, can nonetheless be read as marked by racial ideologies, and this is also the case with the approach of Biddow and Cindie to relationships with 'their' non-white workers. At the same time, when we are reading these raced representations now, maybe we need to distinguish between being an inheritor of colonialism and an active supporter of white supremacy – 'the two involve very different kinds of agency' (Frankenberg 171). Frankenberg's argument that whiteness can be delinked from racism is one that these writers would have liked – though they did not live to see much of the wave of novels offering Black

women's perspectives on these questions initiated by Monica Clare and Faith Bandler (see Ferrier).

Blacks get to speak with some authority about whiteness in *Cindie*. At the wharf from which the state repatriated nearly all his fellow kanakas in the early 1900s, Tirwana makes a speech:

The white man is a fool when he does not see that beneath the white skin and the black skin and the yellow skin is one heart, one blood; one blood that is red, one will to live good! The white man who works and does not take the hand of the black and yellow man as brother is *one damn bloody fool*. (321)

'It is close to my heart', Devanny said of this novel – but when it was published in 1949 (JD/CORR(B)/165), many of her comrades in the Communist Party did not like it. She believed this was 'because it featured historical truth – when what was wanted was a spurious *Uncle Tom's Cabin*' (306).

Irene has been drawn into turn of the century Labour Party politics, but back under the influence of Biddow and Cindie she rejects the racism that often pervaded them. Tirwana at the wharf spoke about how race affected the Kanakas, but pointed out that there were also class and other political issues relevant to the true interests of whites:

You are not alone! There are a great multitude of men like you and some of them have white skins ... You, boy, people like you who can talk out loud what is in your hearts, you are lucky people. You are *big* people. You are *leading* people ... And I have seen the white man too, often thinks he is alone in facing up to problems. But it is only because, like you, he does not look around him and see the – the *waiting* in the hearts of the people who can't talk, how they wait on him who can talk, who can read their hearts and talk about it to the world. (320)

Political complexities to do with white strategies of divide and rule in relation to the non-white population are also addressed in *Cindie*. After the riot provoked when Chris Martin (one of the more chauvinist of the white farmers) calls one of the Kanakas a 'myall' at the sports day, the Kanakas are told by Sow: 'The white man, he all the time on top, if Kanaka he thinks he better than other black man' (311). When another Kanaka responds that 'The black Australian, he just like animal', Sow replies: 'I see white Australian like animal too ... I see white Australian crawl on knees with drink. I see him lie on road in own spew ...'

A second volume of the trilogy, entitled *You Can't Have Everything* and completed in 1946, was set in the period 1923–1930. It was never published, the Communist comrades and the Australasian Book Society disliking it. In it, the white hero, Biddow Senior, articulates forcibly:

How can the setting of one race or nationality against another advance the conditions of the workers of any country? Tell me that! It can only assist the employing class of all countries to keep them down. Labour may be right in general but in this in particular they are playing the game of the most conservative of the tory class. Damned inhuman, I call it! Racial discrimination is a policy for scum! The scum of all nations! (296)

Cindie meditates on how it is strange that 'the kanakas stuck in her mind more real than her own countryfolk, the aborigines.' She tells Inez: 'Those were the days, love. Life in the canefields now is drab and uninteresting compared with the days of the kanakas. A spaciousness, a romantic glamour, overlaid the days of the great plantations' (163). Her maternalist ideologies are subjected to some self criticism:

Her dreams and plans of those old times seemed in retrospect to be fantastic. Dreams of schools for the shy little brown wood-pigeons; dreams of the original Australians marching side by side with the white invaders to a land of happiness and plenty. They had not endured for long, those dreams, Soon they had dissolved into the miasmatic mists given off, like stench from a rotting corpse, by the "inspired" doctrines of White Australia. (384)

At the end of the 1940s, Devanny wrote a novel set on Thursday Island, *The Divers, the Devil and Pan* or *Pearls and Baroque*, an interesting study of race relations, and of prevalent alcoholism among whites in the tropics. Like *You Can't Have Everything*, it never found a publisher. Around the same time, she had written an article that challenged racist stereotypes of the Islanders, whom Jean had found unfailingly 'court-teous and well-behaved' – this 'despite temporary madness induced by methylated spirits blackmarketed by whites', and despite 'the spectacle of white women staggering drunkenly down the street or sprawling around hotel lounges' ('Labour').

The patriarchal Sam Geary lookalike, the pearler Buck Rose, has two sons, one with an Islander woman, Ama Solomon, and one with his white wife, Mabel. The latter has a rather jaundiced view of sexual and racial politics. 'Men are what they always were: lecherous, vile, seeing nothing in women but sex. You think I don't know? Look at the state of things on the island: men with wife number one and wife number two! And chasing after the black women into the bargain' (28).

She wants her son to marry: 'It would keep you safe from ... these black harpies' (28–9). Favid from the other side of the 'colour-line' asserts: 'People of colour should keep away from that lot altogether' (201). Buck's part-Islander son, 'as a Mixed-blood was not debarred, as were the Islanders, from licensed premises and the purchase of "hard" liquors' (25). However, he partakes in moderation, unlike Buck, who is an alcoholic. The second draft, *The Pearlers* or *The Pearlers and Pan* (Devanny MSS/25/2, JC) makes some of Lonce's responses rather cruder; at one point he thinks, in relation to Flora: 'would serve her right if one of the buck boongs ran amok with metho and did her over' (111).

Devanny attempts a deconstruction of white supremacist ideologies (or 'chau-

vinism') in her novels that is more wide-ranging than that of Dark or Prichard. Nonetheless, location, standpoint and participation remain problematic issues for all of them. The endeavours of these women novelists were being paralleled by those working in other fields. Anthropologists as well as historians encouraged Dark; Manning Clark said he had been much influenced by 'the inspiration in reading *The Timeless Land*', while Phyllis Kaberry praised Dark for including 'some Aboriginal characters in your book' (qtd in Brooks 364, 427).

The 'curiosity' Said noted has, of course, always had its limits if this means a challenge to the colonisers' economic dominance being on the agenda.

The slippage between culture as inwardness and culture as outwardness allows a discursive sleight of hand. Those claiming an ethnic identity are complimented on their otherness only when they can choose to divest themselves of it at will. (Cowlshaw and Morris 6)

While these 'white' representations of race that these women novelists offer are 'progressive' in their time, they can nonetheless not be separated from what whiteness 'means' – although to some extent they tried to revision this. Of course, as Brooks put it, 'what Eleanor did is not something a white novelist would do easily now' (Brooks 365). The various reasons why this might be the case would be worthy of more scrutiny than has been possible here.

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