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RACIAL LEGITIMATIONS AND THE UNBEARABLE WHITENESS OF BEING

# Editorial

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The title of this editorial is borrowed from a 2004 essay by Goldie Osuri and Bobby Banerjee where they unpack how white diasporic loyalties between settler states such as Australia, Canada and the United States frame the cultural and political importance attached to media events such as the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Marking Anglo groups as diasporic is one way of making national and transnational expressions of and identifications with whiteness visible. Typically these expressions and identifications are unmarked and taken for granted (in dominant cultural and political discourse) where non-Anglo groups are marked as 'ethnic' and particular. This particularity is typically scripted as a 'national problem' that needs to be detained, excluded or managed through assimilative practices of what is the unmarked and 'raceless' body politic of the nation. Current Australian government policies around asylum seekers, border security and multiculturalism for example, mark the transnational links of refugees and some migrants as signifying terror and extremism.[1]

In order to contest the emphasis on race as a 'problem' in relation to non-white groups, an important task of critical race and whiteness studies is to interrogate the power structures attached to and expressed through white identities and identifications. Such a critique "attempts to displace the normativity of the white position by seeing it as a strategy of authority rather than an authentic or essential 'identity'" (Bhabha 1998: 21). As editor of this journal, I often receive (some well-intentioned, some hostile) queries as to the journal's title and the legitimacy of explicating whiteness as a method of critical inquiry. Last year I

[1] See for example the 2005 "National Action Plan to Build on Social Cohesion, Harmony and Security" initiated under the former Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs and subsequently continued under the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. The Plan was developed in response to the July 7, 2005, London tube bombings and to facilitate initiatives around social cohesion to mitigate 'home-grown' terrorism (see the Department's webpage at: http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/a-multicultural-australia/national-action-plan/nap.htm#f).

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received an email from a senior academic at a world-renowned institution advising me to change the journal's title. The academic explained that the explicit mention of race was problematic but that the inclusion of whiteness "is almost unbearable". Notwithstanding the academic's institutional affiliation to a school of Oriental Studies, a discipline that many readers will know has long been critiqued by various exponents of critical theory, I replied to this email with a defence of sorts for critical race and whiteness studies and its international reputation as an academic field. These exchanges prompt reflection and re-evaluation of the ways this field is perceived as legitimate (or not) across different disciplines and in different geopolitical contexts.[2] They also draw attention to the complex power relations exercised through writing about race and whiteness.

So I ask here for whom is whiteness bearable and unbearable? For some, whiteness is visible and explicit and requires no 'uncovering'. For others, like myself, who are the beneficiaries of white race privilege, uncovering whiteness can be a choice to engage, or not engage, in critically analysing and making visible its racialised effects. Whiteness structures the different types of legitimations afforded to different types of representation, critique and narrative. It legitimises authoritative accounts of history and the parameters of knowledge itself (see Moreton-Robinson 2004). It goes without saying that there is more at stake for some communities than others in contesting the legitimising power of whiteness.

The papers collected in this issue examine the role of race and whiteness in legitimising and authorising particular stories of performance, citizenship, culture and belonging and the ways these racial legitimations reinforce and preserve racial inequalities.

The first paper in the issue by Maryrose Casey examines non-Indigenous accounts of Australian Aboriginal performance over the last two centuries and the colonising logics that underwrite these accounts. Casey looks at the common discursive construction of Aboriginal performance throughout a range of texts including newspapers, monographs, cartoons, paintings and documentary film. Although recorded at different times and in different geographical locations, these texts establish an economy of authenticity which dismisses Aboriginal performance as inauthentic and far removed from 'traditional' and culturally 'pure' Indigenous practices. This economy of authenticity functions as a form of "public pedagogy" (2) that locates 'real' Indigenous peoples in the past in order to deny "the embodied presence of Aboriginal people" (2) and affirm the inevitability of permanent settler occupation. As such, these accounts constitute "an invention of Aboriginal culture rather than a record of practice" (12). Drawing on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Casey argues that these accounts serve to construct a temporal and spatial distance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. This distancing serves to negate continuing Indigenous

[2] A recent scholarly dismissal of the use of critical race and whiteness studies to analyse violence against Indigenous Australians characterised the field as nothing more than "unsettling theoretical frameworks constructed for other purposes" (Finnane & Finnane 2011).

presence and assertions of sovereignty. Crucially, what these accounts demonstrate is that without an acknowledgement of Indigenous presence, the ethical imperative of non-Indigenous peoples to recognise and take responsibility for their part in the colonial encounter is denied and deferred (15).

Focusing on a different account of presence and belonging, Beenash Jafri critically analyses the 2011 citizenship guide, *Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Canadian Citizenship*. Intended as an information package for new citizens, Jafri argues *Discover Canada* is "a document in and through which the contemporary politics of Canadian national identity are negotiated" (2). Against the political backdrop of conservative critiques of multiculturalism and the popularisation of the 'clash of civilisations' discourse, she reads the guide's inclusion of references to the British Crown, traditions of liberty, freedom and gender equality as an attempt by the government to situate Canada as a defender of western civilisation in the 'war on terror'. This is achieved by appealing simultaneously to Canadian national identity as democratic and multicultural but firmly opposed to the "violent, extreme or hateful prejudices" bought to the country by some immigrants—implicitly coded as Muslim (7). As Jafri points out, this construction of violence as something that newcomers bring to an inherently "peaceful society" erases the ongoing colonial violence against Aboriginal peoples (8). Tellingly the guide makes mention of this colonial violence but locates it firmly in the past in order to reinforce the narrative of Canada as a peaceful, tolerant country. Jafri concludes that the guide invites Aboriginal people to buy into this narrative of a colour blind or raceless society in order to align themselves with the Canadian state in its 'war' against Muslim Others.

The final paper by Kevin J. Burke gives an account of the racialised epistemologies that make it possible to tell and re-tell stories about home. Using the familial and local history of Beverly, a neighbourhood of Chicago in the United States, Burke critically analyses the ways that race, or rather silences about race and racism, have shaped perceptions of his home town. Bringing together critical race theory and critical geography, Burke draws on Richard Delgado's and Jean Stefancic's notion of counter-narratives as a way of contesting dominant accounts of place and space, which attempt excise race and racism from their histories. Burke foregrounds structural and personal forms of racism in Beverly in order to interrogate his own complicity in "the in-built privileges and dominance perpetuated" by whiteness (6). He writes, "because boundaries and the stories of how they came to exist—rather than how they were enforced, codified, politically ensconced—in an epistemological frame of whiteness are bleached of intentionality, it may be necessary for white scholars to present the closest thing to a counterstory that can be told from a position of privilege, of dominance" (12). As with Casey, Burke is concerned with the way dominant accounts of place authorise and legitimise spatial boundaries that serve to entrench racialised structures of power and allow white people to believe that they are distanced from race and racism.

I hope you enjoy reading these papers and the different critical analyses of institutional, popular and personal stories that attempt to narrate race and racism in ways that are tolerable and bearable.

## Author Note

Holly Randell-Moon teaches sociology and cultural studies at the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia. She has publications on race, religion and secularism in the *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*, *Borderlands*, *Transforming Cultures* and *Social Semiotics* journals as well as chapters in the edited collections: *Religion, Spirituality and the Social Sciences* and *Mediating Faiths: Religion and Socio-Cultural Change in the Twenty-First Century*. She is the editor of *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies*.

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