Beyond race and whiteness? Reflections on the new abolitionists and an Australian critical whiteness studies

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In her latest essay, Whitefella Jump Up: The Shortest Way to Nationhood (2003) Germaine Greer calls for white Australians to recognise the Aboriginality of their culture and themselves and to become a ‘hunter gatherer nation’. Ghassan Hage articulates a similar prescription in the Introduction to his latest book Against Paranoid Nationalism (2003, 3) when he also calls for “a becoming Indigenous, what American radicals call becoming a ‘race traitor’, on the part of non-Indigenous Australians” in order to redress the balance between the coloniser and the colonised. In both visions of the future, the dilemmas of white race privilege and colonialism are resolved by deconstructing the ‘white’ subject into the ‘black’. The nation is reconstituted in a different ‘sameness’ to that of a dominant whiteness - it becomes its ‘other’ - the Aboriginal. As Hage’s comment above indicates, one strand of whiteness studies in the USA has developed the notion of ‘race traitor’ to refer to the new anti-racist subject produced by the ‘New Abolitionist’ project of deconstructing whiteness in order to ‘white ant’ the structures of white race privilege. In this paper, I explore this New Abolitionist project as it has been articulated in the work of Paul Gilroy (2000), Vron Ware and Les Back (2002) in the light of arguments by Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2003) for a specific indigenous ontology, in order to establish why Greer and Hage’s prescriptions for indigenising the white subject are insufficient for the specificities of the (never quite post) colonial Australian society. In conclusion, I reflect on the implications if this for developing a critical sociology of Australian whiteness.

The subversive move is to reveal within the very integuments of ‘whiteness’ the agonistic elements that make it the unsettled, disturbed form of authority that it is – the incommensurable ‘differences’ that it must surmount; the histories of trauma and terror that it must perpetrate and from which it must protect itself; the amnesia it imposes on itself; the violence it inflicts in the process of becoming a transparent and transcendent force of authority (Bhabha 1998, 21).

For neither the epistemological status of whiteness as the implicit framework for the organization of what we know as the human sciences nor the epistemological status of white scholars as the authorized agents of institutional knowledge is called in question by a field called whiteness studies (Wiegman 2003, 250).

1. Bhabha and Wiegman grasp the dilemma that haunts the study of whiteness – how to escape, dismantle, deconstruct, challenge, resist white race privilege while avoiding inadvertently bolstering the logics of white supremacy which underwrite it. Bhabha’s powerful words capture the sheer effort of will involved in constructing and reconstructing whiteness, an effort which makes ‘the subversive move’ a task both urgent and difficult. Wiegman, on the other hand, outlines the conundrum for those of us positioned as ‘white’ in attempting to be subversive: a critique of whiteness per se does nothing necessarily to dislodge the privileged position from which we speak. Indeed, Wiegman’s chapter is a careful description of the ways in which American ‘whiteness studies’ in the 1990s, as a critical intellectual endeavour, converges with, rather than undermines, hegemonic liberal whiteness. In particular, Wiegman focuses on the the New Abolitionist school, exemplified in the works of David Roediger (1991; 1994), who rework US labour history in terms of the ways class is sundered by race through the operation of white race privilege. The New Abolitionist aim is to abolish whiteness through
a politics of the white race traitor, who refuses to think/act/be ‘white’. As the journal Race Traitor (undated) puts it:

The existence of the white race depends on the willingness of those assigned to it to place their racial interests above class, gender, or any other interests they hold. The defection of enough of its members to make it unreliable as a predictor of behaviour will lead to its collapse.

2. Drawing on Lipsitz’s observation that an anti-racist white subject is an impossibility, Wiegman refutes the subversiveness of the ‘race traitor’, who can only be imagined by equation with, or elision into, the ‘black’ (Wiegman 2003, 232). In this way agency remains as a preserve of the antiracist white subject who parachutes into a blackness always fixed in its marginality. Instead, she argues for a political project predicated on an awareness of how even radical traditions are implicated in the “histories and inequalities of racial asymmetries and oppressions” rather than by trying to locate non-complicit trajectories from which to resist the “universal epistemological power” of whiteness (Wiegman 2003, 251).

3. This emphasis on the recognition of complicity as the standpoint from which critical whiteness studies might make a ‘subversive move’ echoes my own growing unease with the ways in which talking and writing about whiteness seems to operate to bolster my own ‘anti-racist’, even ‘post’ colonial credentials as transgressive in ways which do not necessarily dislodge the colonising logics of knowledge production. In part my discomfort reflects the limits of the racist/anti racist binary which Ghassan Hage (1995), some years ago, identified at work in the Australian sociology of race and multiculturalism. Citing Bourdieu’s aphorism ‘Good intentions so often make bad sociology’, Hage (1995, 78) argues that the explicitly anti-racist stance of much sociology of race means the social analyst assumes the role of moral arbiter; the point of the exercise is to identify the ‘bad’ racism, revealed in the assumed anti-racist gaze of the sociological observer (see also papers by Ahmed and Standfield in this issue). In its place, he proposes Bourdieu’s concept of a “radical professionalism” whereby “if the sociologist has a role to play it is to give weapons rather than give lessons” (Bourdieu cited in Hage 1995, 61). Writing before the concept of whiteness began to figure in Australian race studies, Hage does not consider how the issue of complicity in white race privilege might complicate this prescription for an engaged sociology “to understand and explain the complex processes of domination that produce the ‘racist’” (Hage 1995, 78), rather than simply condemning and deploring. Nevertheless, his critique reveals the ways in which the racism/anti-racism couplet constructs a cosy sociological space that 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, I contend, we (the social analyst) still construct in the anti-racist position, a moral space of no or less complicity.

4. What a focus on whiteness brings to this is the ability to name what is so invisible to contemporary ‘white’ majority societies, the racialised nature of power and privilege, including that of the (white) sociologist and her structures of knowing. Potentially at least, the concept of whiteness does so without providing a moral haven of non-complicity for those who inhabit ‘white’ locations (including the ‘white’ sociologist). It is this possibility I want to explore in this paper: the potential for an Australian critical sociology of whiteness that both avoids the pitfalls of the racist/antiracist binary and thus builds in to its praxis an awareness of complicity in white race privilege.

Against Race and Beyond Whiteness: Imagining a ‘Post Race’ Future

5. New Abolitionism has recently gained a broader gloss in the work of Paul Gilroy, Vron Ware and Les Back. Drawing on British cultural studies and post-colonial theory they broaden the New Abolitionist project to “an attack on the very notion of race and the obstinate resilience of racial identities” (Ware and Back 2002, x).

6. Gilroy’s Against Race (2000) recasts Abolitionism away from the local concerns of white identity in the USA to an ambitious project of charting a “planetary humanism” - an imaginative tour de force capable of sweeping away “race thinking”, in its place ushering in a new “strategic universalism” defined as an “assertively cosmopolitan point of view”: a vision of “what it means to be human” where
the constraints of bodily existence (being in the world) are admitted and even welcomed, though there is strong inducement to see and value them differently as sources of identification and empathy. The recurrance of pain, disease, humiliation and loss of dignity, grief, and care for those one loves can all contribute to an abstract sense of a human similarity powerful enough to make solidarities based on cultural particularity appear suddenly trivial (Gilroy 2000, 16).

7. His starting point in this is not the rigidities and privileges of whiteness, but the complex productions of blackness generated by the Black Atlantic's creative agencies within a modernity located in the physical and cultural geography of Europe. In a lyrical, often untidy and always complex set of arguments, Gilroy describes the fecundity of black intellectuals' engagements with European 'raciology' in the process locating them at the centre of the post-enlightenment struggle with the light and dark sides of Western European modernity - democracy and fascism. His purpose is to reveal the ways in which black political thought is ultimately enmeshed in the net of European modernity - the 'camp' thinking that insists on conceiving 'ecologies of being' in terms of the fixities of genealogy and place or territory. Even resistant mentalities fall into this trap; Franz Fanon, Gilroy charges, ultimately limits the scope of his call for a "new history of Man (sic)" to the agency of an essentialised "third world" (2000, 248). The consequence, at the cusp of the twenty first century, is an ethnic absolutism that mirrors all the rigidities of mid twentieth century fascism, (itself caught in the glance of the Black intellectuals of the time with an admixture of horror and fascination), expressed in the rhetorics and uniforms of such groups as the Nations of Islam and the pseudo-science of "promelaninism", which explains 'black' difference or "the BLACK HUMAN" by "the chemical MELANIN" (2000, 257).

8. Such 'camp thinking', Gilroy argues, not only breeds a black authoritarianism which inevitably limits democratic political agency, but reproduces whiteness as the necessary 'other' to the fixed homogeneity of the 'black'. Explicitly anti racist, anti-fascist political movements are also trapped in such 'camp thinking', he further contends, drawing on the landmark events around the Stephen Lawrence case in Britain, in which anti-racist, anti-fascist demonstrators physically and verbally targeted black policemen for being traitors, as they struggled to get action taken against the white skinheads who murdered the young black man (2000, 51-53). This illustrates one of the key points that Gilroy seeks to establish about 'camp thinking' - its basis in a trope of sameness as the taken-for-granted basis of 'identity' - 'identity' as he points out, that is "always bounded and particular. … Nobody ever speaks of a human identity" (2000, p. 98). Thus the black policemen confronting the anti-racist demonstrators in Britain become the focus of the anti-racist attack precisely because they inhabit a terrain of in-betweeness that 'camp thinking' cannot process. Yet it is precisely this 'in-betweeness' that Gilroy sees as the actual hallmark of the Black Atlantic presence within modernity and that provides the resistant material for imagining beyond the 'camps' of raciology.

9. Through the vibrant productiveness of popular culture, Gilroy seeks to demonstrate how the diasporic qualities of the Black Atlantic bring to the heart of European modernity iconic forms of music, thought and bodies that resist and refute the attempts at ethnic and nationalist absolutism. Lauding the urban spaces of youth culture, Gilroy argues for hybridity, entanglement and mixing as the basis for an imagining of identity divorced from the binary rigidities of genealogy and place. It is this that forms the basis for his 'planetary humanism' that 'abolishes' raciology and camp thinking in an unashamedly utopian vision designed to generate and inform a cosmopolitan politics of progressive democratic alliances against racism and fascism in all its variants:

… the expressive cultures that have grown up in these polyglot urban spaces - transnational and translational vernacular cultures - supply and celebrate a variety of interconnection that not only acknowledges interdependency but, at its insubordinate and carnivalesque best, has been known to project an immediacy, a rebel solidarity, and a fragile, universal humanity powerful enough to make race and ethnicity suddenly meaningless (2000, 249).

10. What is required, however, for such a political potential to be fully realised is a vocabulary and theoretical framework able to describe these socio-cultural forms without resorting to the essentialisms of camp thinking - it is to this end that Gilroy seeks to develop the language and vision of 'planetary humanism' and a sense of belonging and identity based on being out of, not in, place.
11. In their book *Out of Whiteness* (2002) Ware and Back take up Gilroy’s mission to go beyond ‘camp’ thinking from a perspective within and speaking to, a critical whiteness studies that seeks to be “an attack on the very notion of race and the obstinate resilience of racial identities – one of its most disastrous consequences” (2002, 2). This is what distinguishes Ware and Back from the American abolitionists Weigman critiques. Their white anti-racist subject does not attain her possibility in the presumed blackness of the margins but in the un-coloured third space of hybridity. New Abolitionism, Ware and Back assert, “means moving inexorably toward a place that lies beyond the homelands of color and the ghostly structures of ‘thinking white’” (2002, 9). This new place is envisaged in precisely the terms of post-colonial hybridity that Gilroy uses: a place of plural and cosmopolitan identities and cultures, where everyone is all mixed up. Indeed, one of the book’s purposes is to uncover examples of such mixing and “non-racial” wisdom to demonstrate the tradition of resistance available for the Abolitionist to draw upon (2002, 14).

12. For Ware and Back, then, eventually, whiteness disappears into an essentialism free zone much as Gilroy seems to envision for the black identities of Atlantic modernity. Thus the problem of privileging agency for the white traitor, highlighted by Weigman, is avoided as both white and black are accorded subversive agency in building the post-race space. However, I began to trouble over the possibility of being a (white) abolitionist in Australia trying to disappear into a colour free zone. The nub of my concerns focused on the ways in which the New Abolitionism charted by Gilroy, Ware and Back rests on a vision of sameness, of the collapsing of difference, in the shared space of hybridity. What are the implications of such a politics for an Australian social formation of white race privilege constructed around the white/non white/indigenous boundaries of identity and difference?

13. Ien Ang’s book *On Not Speaking Chinese Living Between Asia and the West* (2001) allowed me to bring my concerns closer to home. Ang is less directly concerned with ‘abolishing race’ or imagining a post race future than with charting a cultural politics expressive of a world in which she sees that “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). Her purpose is stated more prosaically than Gilroy, to ‘theorise togetherness’ as a circuit breaker in the ‘endlessness’ of difference. However, she likewise critiques essentialist notions of identity and proposes hybridity as the metaphor of the moment, but pays more detailed attention to the unpacking of identity than Gilroy or Ware and Back.

14. For Ang, 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. Both sets of ‘differences’ constitute themselves around axes such as class, gender and sexuality. It is this two-way ‘in-betweenness’ that Ang claims as “a necessary condition for living together-in-difference” a phrase that encapsulates how she seeks to theorise a “co-existence in a single world” (2001, 200). She envisages a co-existence 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, unlike the cosmopolitanism of Glory, Ware and Back (Ang 2001, 197). Ang mounts a cogent argument against identity as the basis of a cultural politics of difference by revealing the instability of the global binary ‘Asian 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 (2001, 199). Here, the “inbetweeness” of the non-Chinese speaking ‘Asian Australian’ demonstrates the hybridity of entanglement, of non-completeness, of always being (inter) related, of having no foundation. Interestingly, whereas Gilroy sees diaspora and multiculturalism as concepts capable of expressing an anti-essentialist hybridity, Ang rejects both terms as pertaining to a notion of hybridity as entanglement, instead arguing that they remain caught in deploying ethnic identity to effect a "living apart together" based on essentialism and closure (2001, 200).

15. Ang is careful to point out that part of the plurality of hybridity is precisely its specificity in particular contexts and conditions. This is a plurality she extends to whiteness, defined emphatically in political terms: “to be ‘white’ signifies a position of power and respectability, of belonging and entitlement, but who is admitted to this position of global privilege is historically variable” (Ang 2001, 188). She therefore situates whiteness more carefully than Ware and Back, pointing out for Australia “the precariousness and fragility of this antipodean whiteness, so different from (post) imperial British
whiteness or messianic, superpower American whiteness [which] inscribe and affect the way in which white Australia relates to its non-white 'others"' (2001, 189). Taking the charge to 'go back to your own country' yelled at her by a white Australian woman, Ang argues that, unlike her European counterparts, when a white Australian enacts such a xenophobic response to alien immigrants, there is a brittle doubleness involved, as the claim to being at home automatically re-enacts the exclusion and dispossession of Aboriginal people (2001, 190).

16. It is not only the white settler identity that is touched by the entanglements of hybridity, but also Aboriginal constructions of identity, in Ang’s view. She takes as her example Ian Anderson's explication of his indigeneity as vehemently NOT hybrid, "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 Anderson's claim to aboriginality and rejection of (happy) hybridity (ie hybridity as synthesis) 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 (2001, 196). Thus Anderson's "anti anti-essentialism" is not dismissed, but inserted into Ang's model of post-modern, post-colonial hybridity. But is this adequate to capture Australian specificities?

**Imagining a ‘Post’ White Australia**

17. In the introduction to his latest book, *Against Paranoid Nationalism*, Hage (2003, 5) makes an explicit connection to the project of New Abolitionism, suggesting that the way out of Australia's current dilemma of identity and reconciliation is for the settler to become a 'race traitor' and 'indigenise'. In a 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. At this time, "a national memory or a non contradictory plurality of memories of colonisation in Australia is impossible" (2003, 91) 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" (2003, 92). Moreover, because these two identities 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" (2003, p. 94). Thus while a pro-apology position is admirable, even desirable, it is at best "a repentant coloniser's take" on the past (2003, 94). - an assumption of responsibility that is quite different to the colonised memories of the past that turn on survival and resistance, not recognition and repentance. The 'race traitor' overcomes the incommensurability between indigenous and white Australians by collapsing the settler into the indigenous. Hage does not explore what this might involve but Peter Read and Germaine Greer, amongst others, have.

18. In his book *Belonging*, Read (2000) argues for the possibility of a sharing between indigenous and non-indigenous settler Australians on the basis of a mutual recognition of different but equivalent ways of belonging in the land. In this way, Read wants to redress the tendency of the white Australian liberal to indulge in "self-denigration that portrays us as morally or spiritually deficient" and as never able to belong (2000, 3). The crux of Read's argument is caught in the personal journey the book documents between Read and Dennis Foley, a Gai-mariagal man of the Eora people, and an academic. Dennis's country - around Manly in Sydney, they discovered, was also the country of Peter's youth. Read recalls: "Dennis's dreaming country was also my country of association and memory" (2000, 22). Some of the most moving parts of the book are where Read recounts his and Dennis's journey through this country - sharing their stories of the place. This intimate entangling of indigenous and non-indigenous sense of place and belonging is the basis of Read's vision of a reconciled Australia. To achieve this requires of the non-indigenous an awareness that full belonging can only come once Aboriginal people have their land back to share with 'us' (the non-indigenous) (2000, 223).

19. In *Whitefella Jump Up: The Shortest Way to Nationhood*, Greer documents entanglement differently as a basis for Australia becoming a "hunter gatherer nation" (Greer 2003, 77). In Greer's view, Australia has always been an 'Aboriginal country'. Entanglement followed on from the Aboriginal response to invasion - continuing attempts to assimilate the 'whitefella' into the indigenous worldview. The refusal to acknowledge this and assume Aboriginality as an identity has induced pathological
consequences for white Australia - including the demon drink and the denial of Aboriginal influence on 'us' in our ways of speech and thought. Assuming Aboriginality as an identity becomes a liberatory move for Greer, allowing Australia to shuck off its second rate status as a wannabe WASP nation in the international league, and potentially to assume a leadership role amongst the majority world of the postcolonial nations, and most particularly "making common cause with other hunter-gatherer peoples" (2003, 77).

20. The ease with which the 'race traitor' can disappear into indigeneity - itself by implication hybridized in the process - is challenged however, by Aileen Moreton-Robinson's critique of hybridity and anti-essentialism. Moreton-Robinson's starting point is the "incommensurable difference between the situatedness of the Indigenous people … and those who have come here" (2003, 30). The basis of this incommensurability is the indigenous ways of being in the land, "the ontological relationship to country" as she terms it (2003, 31), which is quite different from the settler's claim to possession of the land. The ontology of country claims a singular continuity (although not necessarily a fixity or authenticity) - is this the same claim to those "binary rigidities of geneology and place" Gilroy sees as the root cause of the "camp thinking" that breeds the essentialisms of race and constrains black Atlantic and White Euro-america's abilities to imagine human freedom?

21. Moreton-Robinson pre-empts the charge of essentialism that might be levelled at the ontology of country by refuting the term's applicability to non-western ways of thinking about self and identity (2003, p. 32). 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 Gilroy's model presumes, but by never recognising them in the first place. As such, the indigenous subject is differently situated to the white settler subject and to Gilroy's Black Atlantic or Ang's Asian banana. Even the dislocations of removal do not disturb this Aboriginal ontology, because, Moreton-Robinson argues: "through cultural protocols … we can be in place but away from our home country" (2003, 33).

22. The ontology of country is an expression of radical difference that precludes blending or entanglement. In other words, there is no sense of 'in-betweness' inhering to 'being in country'. Hence, asserting the ontology of country is not a self-essentialising move, strategic or otherwise, as Ang's placement of Anderson's rejection of hybridity implies. It can only be perceived as such if the western construction of the subject is taken as the norm. There is a "doubleness" to the incommensurability described by Moreton-Robinson. On the one hand, Aboriginal Australians are marginalised as "the result of colonization and the proximity to whiteness while centring is achieved through the continuity of ontology and cultural protocols between and among Indigenous people" (2003, 33). From this 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.

23. Where does this leave the visions of a post white Australia based on indigenisation put forward by Read and Greer? Surely they are trying to displace the possessiveness of whiteness and its incommensurability with the ontology of country? Yes and no. Their traitorous intent to acknowledge Aboriginal presence and authority is constrained or compromised by the logic of agency in their texts. Peter invites Dennis, "my shadow brother to explore together our own proper country and our separate griefs" (Read 2000, 29), surely reversing the protocols of ownership, while the 'grief' of the settler turns on the recent awareness that his memories of happy family holidays on the north Sydney beaches occurred alongside the deprivations, marginalisation and oppressions of being an aboriginal fringe dweller in the 1950s and 1960s. The indigenous Other against which whiteness inscribes itself becomes the benign familiar, ready and willing to receive the white settler almost as the prodigal returned. Only Greer imagines the possibility of Aboriginal resistance to the idea of the indigenous settler: "More vexing is the question of whether blackfellas would let us become Aboriginal, whether they would adopt us" (2003, 41). She answers her own question by reworking the cross-race encounters of the colonial past into a narrative of Aboriginal attempts to incorporate and welcome, scuppered by the stupidity and arrogance of the 'gubbas', who failed to recognize the invitation. That
invitation – to become Aboriginal is, she is convinced, still there for the acceptance. Again, like Read, Greer ultimately imagines the indigenous presence as open to and for the white settler to ‘move in’ and get comfortable. Ken Gelder’s comment on Read’s book is equally applicable to Greer: “This is post-colonialism-as-fulfilment, but only for white Australians. This is reconciliation, but only on non-Aboriginal Australia’s terms: to make this class of people even more settled than they were before” (Gelder 2000).

On Being Not ‘Free to Roam’

24. It seems to me this is precisely what these attempts to imagine a post white Australia are about: getting the anti-racist white subject comfortable again. Addressing the race privilege of whiteness is a profoundly discomforting process. How can we be anti-racist and agents of white race privilege at the same time? I think this informs the sense of urgency and passion informing the arguments for finding a ‘post race’ ‘post white’ space of hybridity and entanglement for the white ‘traitor’ to become not raced, and the rash of calls in Australia for the settler-identities to indigenise. This haste to rush out of whiteness is however, unseemly, particularly in the Australian context of being always ‘not quite post’ colonial. As I hope to have demonstrated here, it risks reproducing possessive whiteness by continuing to exercise a white race privilege of colonizing agency; in a strange reversal of extinguishment, the indigenous is now conflated sufficiently to incorporate the settler. This forecloses the possibility of taking seriously the incommensurability claimed by indigenous intellectuals such as Moreton-Robinson for indigenous ways of knowing and being.

25. Where does this leave an anti racist sociology of race and whiteness? Ware and Back’s emphasis is on an intellectual politics of transgression based on an abolitionist consciousness defined as empathy with the suffering caused by white supremacism, a commitment to change society for the better, and a vision of a world without injustice and exploitation (2002, p. 285). There is little to argue with here, but there is no hint either of the doubleness of whiteness; as we contest we are also complicit. In terms of a specific Australian version of ‘the New Abolitionism” called for by Ware and Back, this very doubleness of whiteness allows for the possibility of transgressive practices that work against the invisibility of whiteness as an essentialist position –wether 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 ‘inbetweenness’, in a situation where the settler claim ‘to be’ is constituted on the disavowal and dispossession of the indigenous?

26. Let me return to Hage’s critique of Australian anti-racist sociology. His solution is Bourdieu’s notion of a radical professionalism, in which the sociological gaze focuses on “uncovering what is censored and repressed in the social world”, a ‘science of the hidden’ rather than a judgemental sociology of the righteous (1995, 72). This professionalism goes some way to addressing the need to explore whiteness rather than play the blame game before parachuting into blackness. However, it does not draw the sociological observer into the continuum of complicity. Indeed, it assumes the sociological gaze is still somehow external to the racialised social formations that produce it. Would such a radical professional be able to take seriously the claim of incommensurability? I suspect not, for what Bourdieu’s vision does not problematise is the right or will to know embedded deep within the western/modern knowledge bank.

27. In a recent key note speech the indigenous legal theorist Dr. Irene Watson asked a rhetorical question of indigenous intellectuals and people – she asked ‘Are we free to roam?’ (2003). Her answer was negative – whether in terms of land rights, social citizenship or intellectual production – the indigenous subject is always marked as partial, always bounded as the other that mirrors back the normativity of whiteness. To me her question and its answer raised another that demanded answering: how do ‘we’ white ‘radical professionals’ stop assuming we are ‘free to roam’? Free to roam into indigeneity, free to roam out of whiteness, free to roam by re-naming the claim of incommensurability as essentialist, free to universalize our knowledge production. My response is, we discover the limits to our ‘roaming’ by taking seriously the incommensurability claimed by indigenous
intellectuals such as Moreton-Robinson and Watson. This is not to advocate a simple relativism, however. Relativism is a refusal of engagement and responsibility that throws the question of ‘togetherness’ back on the less powerful ‘other’ (Narayan 1998). Instead, an ‘uncomfortable’ engagement with the doubleness of whiteness is required by the white ‘traitor’. On the one hand, a recognition that, from the indigenous perspective, whiteness is an essentialising claim to possess that is incommensurable to indigenous ontology. On the other, a continuing effort to reveal, analyse and challenge the multiple ways in which whiteness is internally incoherent, differentiated, hyphenated. This captures the doubleness of whiteness, as a plurality of complicity and contestation that is always already pulled together into a cohesive hegemony.

28. Placing limits on ‘our’ freedom to roam and recognizing our complicity as we contest the race privilege of whiteness means also revising the metaphors we use to envisage our goal. There is a trope of sameness or unity bedevilling the visions of post-race and post-white futures I have considered here. A desire for singularity, even in the polyglot cosmopolitanism of Gilroy’s ‘planetary humanism’, where everyone is out of place, presumably even the indigenous subject (not referred to at all in Gilroy’s epic or Ware and Back’s Out of Whiteness). In the Australian context of failed colonial modernity, singularity necessarily gets caught in continuing colonization, either by extinguishing the indigenous claim to ontology of country or in appropriating and conflating indigeneity to ‘fit’ the settler and ‘disappear’ the white. Instead of sameness, I think a vision of ‘together in difference’ might be more productive, a togetherness based on the recognition of incommensurability.

29. In the Bourdeuian critique of anti-racist sociology, an intellectual politics is focused on the preservation of a space for the radical professional to operate in a new internationalism based on non-Eurocentric universals forged in the talking shop of a parliament like that of the Writers Parliament (Hage 1995, 80). Before you can have a parliament, it seems to me, you need an agreement about sovereignty. In Australian terms, this means a Treaty that constrains the freedom to roam of the white subject and negotiates across incommensurability to build not identity or one-ness but a respectful engagement. For the ‘traitorous’ sociologist of race and whiteness, I think this is the task - to start the hard grind of treaty work - building into our practice an awareness of the doubleness of complicity and contestation, revising our universals to reveal their limits, acknowledging the partial situatedness of our knowledge making and its products, and refusing the seductions of slipping into indigeneity to avoid the discomforts of being within whiteness.

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Bibliography


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