

## **Cultures of Denial: Managing the Past, Justifying the Present** <sup>1</sup>

### **INTRODUCTION**

In this paper, I propose that if dominant white understandings of colonisation rely upon a relatively linear interpretation of history, then the unsettling of this linearity may allow for the voicing of a critical reading of racism in Australia. In order to do this, I suggest that psychoanalysis may provide a means for understanding the everyday talk of white people in ways that may challenge the now/then accounts of history that are used to deny ongoing acts of white violence and, thus, to refuse the fact of Indigenous sovereignty. Through a brief analysis of focus group data with white Australians, I suggest that we may see repression at work when those of us who are descendants of white colonisers attempt to manage our relationship to the past. However, I also suggest that such acts of repression are never successful; they reveal the contingency of the present upon the past, and forever unsettle the location of white people in Australia.

### **WORLDING**

In her work on colonisation and psychoanalysis, Ranjana Khanna employs the concept of ‘worlding’ in order to explore how particular knowledge making practices are universalised through the subjugation of alternate knowledges. She suggests that the practices of worlding are ‘profoundly ideological’ (4) – that they are reliant upon the concealment of colonial violence in ways that both justify white belonging and deny the acts of appropriation that shape practices of imperialism (see Probyn). To map this concept onto the Australian context, I would suggest that the form of ‘worlding’ that arose from colonisation was reliant upon the fiction of *Terra Nullius*<sup>2</sup>, the presumption that only white ways of knowing about land and country are valid. Such presumptions continue to inform the ways in which the white Australian nation responds to the sovereignty of Indigenous people, and hold us in ‘psychoanalytic-like relations’ (see Parker), where the conflation of the subject positions ‘white’ with ‘self’, and ‘Indigenous’ with ‘other’, works to legitimise the unequal relations that exist between the two groups (Riggs and Selby).

### **METALEPSIS**

A useful way of understanding the interconnections between colonisation and worlding, and their influence within contemporary Australia, may be to focus on how history is constructed in markedly different ways according to how particular events are temporalised. Edelman suggests that this is captured in the term ‘metalepsis’: ‘the rhetorical substitution of cause for effect or effect for cause, a substitution that disturbs the relationship of early and late’ (96). As I will discuss, the effects of analepsis are evident in the ways in which white people talk about Indigenous people in Australia. Thus, the ‘substitution of cause for effect’ is one of the ways in which white acts of genocide and dispossession are managed through recourse to claims about ‘Indigenous threat’. Such claims try to deny Indigenous agency by employing primitivism as a lens through which white people may interpret the resistances of Indigenous people (see Riggs, 2004, and Riggs and Augoustinos). As a result, we may see analepsis at work where white people attempt to account for ongoing histories of colonisation and genocide by discounting their relationship with the disadvantage faced by Indigenous people.

## PSYCHOANALYSIS & COLONISATION

Drawing on these notions of ‘metalepsis’ and ‘constructions of the other’, I suggest that some of the foundational tenets of psychoanalysis are directly applicable to the analysis of colonial nations and colonial subjectivities. The account of subjectivity as outlined throughout the work of Freud may, very roughly, be referred to as the practice of understanding how ‘past events’ have shaped ‘the present’. The revealing of the ‘primal scene’ is taken as a key tool for understanding the complexes of adult experiences. This account may be translated into the colonial context, whereby it is only possible to understand how white subjectivities are constructed ‘in the now’ through recourse to the primal scene of colonial violence. We may locate this as being the context of Terra Nullius itself. If white belonging in Australia is predicated on the denial of Indigenous sovereignty, then how is this lack justified by those of us who currently identify, or who are identified, as white in Australia?

To apply psychoanalysis to the example of colonisation in Australia, then, I take a point made by Patricia Elliot as my starting place – that the denial of Indigenous sovereignty is predicated on the denial of white lack. In this way, the temporality of colonisation is unsettled through the metalepsis of white violence – not only does white violence continue to occur, but retrospective acts of epistemic violence continue to construct colonisation as ‘free of violence’, a claim that is used to justify white invasion. Yet, if we are to read colonisation *through* psychoanalysis, by reading backwards and across histories, it may be possible to see how:

- a) white narratives of the present are located upon a range of assumptions about responsibility (or the denial of it),
- b) and similarly, how these assumptions have formed the basis of white belonging since colonisation, in ways that continue to affect how we understand our location as white people now (Allen, 2003; Moreton-Robinson, 2003).

Thus, rather than accepting a straightforward definition of the ‘post-colonial’, we may employ psychoanalysis as a means to understanding a ‘continuum of colonisation’ that, read through metalepsis, allows for a reading of the past and present as mutually constituted through the repression of white violence.

## DATA AND METHOD

In the analysis that follows, I provide some examples of everyday talk, where white people attempt to account for their belonging, and thus manage the unsettling that Indigenous sovereignty produces. The extracts of talk in the following analysis was drawn from a discussion group conducted in 1995 on ‘race relations in Australia’. The time at which the extract reported here was collected (June 1995) is of considerable significance as it was during a period of unprecedented public debate in Australia over Indigenous entitlements to land. Most notable was the Mabo Decision of the High Court, and the subsequent Native Title Act (1993), which, for the first time, recognised that an inherent *right* of Native Title - or Indigenous ownership of land - existed where none had previously been acknowledged. More locally, in South Australia, considerable media attention was given to Indigenous protests at the building of a bridge at Hindmarsh Island on land of cultural and spiritual significance to the local Ngarrindjeri people.

Group discussions were selected, rather than individual interviews, to facilitate a closer approximation to the kind of spontaneous talk, argument, and debate likely to be found in everyday conversation. The group discussions covered a range of issues including the nature of racism in Australia, observed instances of racialised discrimination, affirmative action, equal opportunity, and Indigenous land rights. In the following analysis, I focus specifically on one particular section of talk where the participants discussed Indigenous land claims. My intention here is to illustrate several of the points that I have made throughout the paper thus far: the repression of white violence through the construction of the category ‘Indigenous threat’, the management of ‘the past’ through recourse to ‘the present’, and the repression of a lack of white belonging. It should be noted that my intention here is not to contribute to the labelling of particular white people as racist (and to claim a non-racist subject position for myself) but, rather, to look at how histories of white violence are managed, and how racism as an institutionalised social practice shapes white subjectivities in colonial nations such as Australia.

Similarly, the analysis that I engage in, which employs a discursive psychoanalytic approach to examining racism (for more information on this approach, see Riggs, 2005), does not seek to locate racism as an aspect of ‘individual psychology’, nor does it seek to apply psychoanalysis in the traditional sense as a diagnostic or therapeutic tool. Rather, I use psychoanalysis for the very fact that it is so ingrained in the everyday ways we think about ourselves and our relationships with other people in the Western world (see Parker). As I have already mentioned, notions of self and other are foundational to both psychoanalysis and racialised practices in nations such as Australia. My intention in using psychoanalysis is to turn it back upon itself in order to illuminate how non-indigenous understandings of self and other are related intimately to the ways in which white belonging is justified in Australia. My use of terms such as ‘repression’ signals my debt to previous psychoanalytic research on race and whiteness (see Khanna and Seshadri-Crooks), whilst also recognising the currency of such terms in everyday talk.

## **ANALYSIS**

Anthony: I think the current [Indigenous land claim] just, well, sounds like a circus to me - money money going left right and centre there. But Mabo actually, yeah, I get quite angry about that - I actually don't feel any responsibility for my forebears.

Interviewer: Why's that?

Anthony: Well I wasn't there.

Natalie: (laugh)

Anthony: But yeah, no I don't.

Barbara: Relevant point.

Anthony: Umm, and I was surprised 'cos I guess you read about that but... a friend I do have that's fairly close is doing law and actually he's manning some case against the housing trust or whatever but in amongst all that he, you know, was telling me about some

group that was about to make a claim on Adelaide and it really freaked me out - this is bullshit.

Barbara: (laughs)

Byron: They've already claimed part of Brisbane, haven't they a claim...

Anthony: Yeah. I don't know. Just something inside, just it really made me quite angry - it is just bullshit, you know why? Well because Captain Cook didn't sign an agreement when he, you know... I really get quite angry - it's bullshit.

Natalie: Yeah but its all...

Anthony: And I nah, no I don't, I don't feel any, you know, I feel responsible for what's happening currently but I, I don't feel guilt or umm, responsibility for my forebears.

Natalie: Mmm, but they're also using their being Aboriginal to get their own way to a certain extent more.

Barbara: You can't be responsible for something you weren't around for.

#### **'DOING REPRESSION': INDIGENOUS THREAT**

In this extract, we can see examples of the participants 'doing repression' and, in particular, repressing histories of white violence through the construction of the category 'Indigenous threat'. Anthony suggests that a friend of his told him 'about some group [of Indigenous people] that was about to make a claim on Adelaide and it really freaked [him] out'. Byron goes on to say that some Indigenous people have 'already claimed part of Brisbane'. In these ways, Indigenous people are positioned as a 'threat' to the harmony of the white nation (Riggs and Augoustinos). This implicitly denies white violence by focusing on the 'threatening acts' that Indigenous people are apparently engaging in (i.e., making claims on land). Such constructions position Indigenous people as at fault for 'freaking out' white people such as Anthony, that the actions of Indigenous people with regards to land rights are in no way a response to over 200 years of white violence against Indigenous people.

In a similar way, white violence 'threatens' to come up as an issue, but is repressed in order to maintain the image of white moral good. Michael Billig suggests that we can see repression at work when people attempt to manage their stake in a conversation that involves topics they feel uncomfortable about, or which are considered to be socially taboo (51-54). In his fifth turn, Anthony attempts to justify the denial of land rights to Indigenous people by pointing out that there was no treaty between Indigenous people and white colonisers: 'Well because Captain Cook didn't sign an agreement when he, you know... I really get quite angry - it's bullshit'. Here we can see that, when Anthony comes to the point in his talk where white violence threatens to be revealed (which would thus undermine his implicit justification for the white possession of land), he backs off and recentres his own anger at the land claims of Indigenous people. His statement that 'Captain Cook didn't sign an agreement *when he, you know*' (emphasis added) could just as easily have led Anthony to talk about 'what we know', that colonisation resulted in the genocide and dispossession of Indigenous people from their land, a fact that effectively renders redundant any suggestion about 'an agreement'.<sup>3</sup>

### **‘DOING REPRESSION’: JUSTIFYING BELONGING**

Repression is also evident in the text where the participants (in particular, Anthony) engage in a range of rhetorical strategies in order to justify their belonging. At the start of the extract, Anthony states that he does not ‘feel any responsibility for [his] forebears’ in order to deny any responsibility for white violence and, implicitly, Indigenous land claims. Yet, in doing so, he acknowledges the existence of his ‘forebears’, thus constructing a now/then model of history whereby the present relates to what went ‘before’. Anthony continues to deny the connection between now and then by stating that he does not feel any responsibility because ‘well [he] wasn’t there’. In this way, he distances himself from his ‘forebears’ and denies a model of accountability that rests upon a now/then linear model of history. Further on in the extract, Anthony states that ‘Captain Cook didn’t sign an agreement...’ to which we could append ‘back then’, and he then goes on to say that he ‘really get[s] quite angry’, to which we could add ‘now’. Here, Anthony implicitly creates a distinction between ‘then’ (and its implication in colonial violence), and ‘now’, in which he feels justified in ‘feeling angry’ (and, indeed, not feeling guilty).

### **‘DOING REPRESSION’: METALEPSIS OF TEXT**

Whilst it appears that Anthony effectively distances himself from acts of white violence, the understanding of metalepsis that a psychoanalytic reading provides may allow us to view the text differently. Anthony’s claim to anger in the ‘now’ may be read as an enactment of the ongoing violence that he represses when he shifts the talk away from ‘Captain Cook... when he, you know...’. In this way, the distinction between now and then is challenged, thus evidencing the repression of ongoing acts of white violence. This reading is reinforced in Anthony’s last turn, where he states that he ‘feel[s] responsible for what’s happening currently but [he doesn’t] feel guilt or ... responsibility for [his] forebears’. Here, again, Anthony returns to a construction of history that denies a connection between now and then, which fails to adequately account for why he ‘feel[s] responsible for what’s happening currently’. His denial of guilt for his forebears could be read as an attempt to distance himself from the (repressed) reference to Captain Cook and white violence in his prior turn. We can see this in the interactional trouble (Billig, 60-70) that he faces in expressing this to his fellow participants. In his final turn, Anthony repeats himself a number of times, changes his claims about accountability (from ‘I don’t feel any you know’ to ‘I feel responsible’), and uses the word ‘but’ to signal a split between what he will or will not take responsibility.

Following Edelman, then, I suggest that such repetitions within people’s talk actually signal the ‘doing of repression’. In order to manage the fact that his denial of Indigenous land rights is a reenactment of the violence of ‘Captain Cook’ and (potentially also) his ‘forebears’, Anthony repeats himself in trying to limit his accountability, belying the now/then effects of colonial violence that underpin his claims to belonging. In this way, the metalepsis of the text challenges the final claim made by Barbara, that ‘you can’t be responsible for something you weren’t around for’, by challenging a now/then account of history. This renders visible the way that white violence (and white responsibility) is an ongoing act. By juxtaposing the now and then, the participants attempt to manage white belonging by focusing on the now and, yet, they are drawn continually into accounting for the past or denying their connection to it. A psychoanalytic reading of these acts of ‘doing repression’ reveals the contingency of the now on the then, disconfirming Barbara’s

statement by demonstrating that we, as white people, are responsible for something (i.e., white violence), and that we have *always* been around for it, and it continues to ‘be around’.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this analysis, I have suggested that the participants’ ‘do repression’ in order to manage their relationship to white privilege, racism and Indigenous sovereignty by:

- a) constructing historical narratives that repress white violence,
- c) projecting this violence onto Indigenous people, and
- a) alternately denying and affirming their relation to the history of Australia’s colonisation by white people.

In these multiple ways, all of the participants manage their claim to belonging in Australia, and demonstrate some of the complex practices of repression that prop up white privilege. The psychoanalytic analysis in which I have engaged reveals the contingency of white belonging, and challenges now/then accounts of white history through the metalepsis inherent in the texts.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the UQ Australian Studies conference, 'The Body Politic' in Brisbane, 24-26 November 2004. It has been peer-reviewed and appears on the Conference Proceedings website by permission of the author(s) who retain(s) copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.
- <sup>2</sup> The notion of *Terra Nullius* has been used in Australia since colonisation to claim that the land was empty upon the 'arrival' of white people, that because the many Indigenous Nations that existed before colonisation did not conform to white modes of 'ownership' and 'land management' (i.e., pastoralism), they could make no claim to ownership of land that preceded those of white colonisers. Whilst some Indigenous Nations have had success in claiming land rights over the past few decades in Australia, there continues to be much contestation over land rights in general, and the current Howard government has shown little sign of recognising Indigenous sovereignty. See Moreton-Robinson and Probyn.

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<sup>3</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I have focused on the ways in which white people (since colonisation) have directed, or attempted to manage, Indigenous sovereignty. This is a necessary analytical move to make, in order to demonstrate the violent foundations of white belonging but, at the same time, it runs the risk of contributing to the denial of Indigenous sovereignty and agency. I acknowledge here that there exist many counter-stories to the dominant accounts of colonisation, and also many examples of collaboration and negotiation between Indigenous and white peoples. My point is not that such events did not occur, or that relationships do not continue to exist, but that the dominant narrative of the white Australian nation comes with denial of the reality of Indigenous sovereignty.