1. Millennial blues: racism, nationalism and the legacy of empire

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Stage performances of whiteness function to both reveal and neutralise threats to Australia’s race-based hegemonic nationalism, and theatrical representations of race over the last century have been inextricably tied to wider anxieties about the formation and maintenance of a robust Anglo-Celtic society in a seemingly hostile geo-political region. Selected colonial and modern plays are deployed to sketch a range of responses to cultural diversification, focussing on the ways in which whiteness has been delineated in relation to the flexible signifiers of Asianness and Aboriginality, and re-assessing images of Australian identity in reference to recent political events that seem to have crystallised millennial anxieties about the country’s cultural and political future.

On 6 November 1999, when the majority of Australians answered a resounding ‘no’ to the question of whether we should change our current system of government from a constitutional monarchy to a republic, international observers, particularly those writing for the British tabloids, were somewhat bemused at our apparent attachment to a foreign monarch whose importance within even British politics had waned considerably. The issues at stake in the referendum were, of course, much more complex than this superficial reading of the result – as indicative of a backward-looking loyalty to the Queen – implies, since many Australians who voted ‘no’ in fact supported the switch to a republic but not one modelled on the only option given on the ballot papers. Nevertheless, the tabloid response does point towards an important and unresolved issue, not only among the fence-sitters but also in both monarchist and republican camps, in the intense debate leading up to the referendum: the issue of what role Anglo-Celtic culture could and should play in an increasingly multiracial Australia. This question, though by no means new, had gained urgency (if not clarity) at the cusp of the new millennium in the lead-up to the Sydney 2000 Olympics and in the wake of events such as the rise of Hansonite politics, Australia’s conflict with
Indonesia over East Timor's independence, and the stalling, under John Howard's conservative government, of the official reconciliation process between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

While the referendum seemed to approve the continued hegemony of Anglo-Celtic culture within our nation, David Malouf's assertion that the 'no' vote was 'a cry from the heart of those who did not feel like full participants in the new Australia' (Davie 241) should alert us to the intricacies of the situation. For instance, despite their original dispossession by British settlers, many Aboriginal Australians felt that indigenous interests would be better served by a system of government that retained links, however symbolic, with the British monarchy. This position emphasised the need for Aborigines to maintain an international avenue of appeal against local injustices such as mandatory sentencing for minor property offences. Other groups voted not to embrace constitutional change because they saw little benefit to be gained from what political editor Paul Kelly has termed an 'impoverished brand of republicanism', which, like earlier radical nationalist movements, defined itself by 'anti-British assertion' (23) while still championing an unproblematised model of Anglo-Celtic identity as the preferred Australian norm. Both responses signal rejection of a political system that did not propose to address in any significant way the on-going privileges of white (or white-thinking) Australians. At the same time, the 'no' vote was bolstered by those opposing more inclusive versions of republicanism seen, in some circles at least, as pro-Aboriginal and pro-Asian.

These conflicting notions of what agendas might (not) be served by an Australian republic suggest key points of connection and disjunction between racialised subjects in discursive formulations of the nation as articulated at a specific historical moment. Yet, the occasion inevitably invoked other historical moments at which debates about national identity dominated public discourse in anticipation of, or response to, certain political events, notably the 1901 Federation of Australian states, the 1970s implementation of multiculturalism as an official strategy for cultural development, and the 1988 bicentenary of Anglo-European settlement/invasion. Such discourse has long been characterised by a strategic mobilisation of race and ethnicity as flexible signifiers in hegemonic narratives of nationhood. In this respect, the recent republican debate was not especially progressive, even though its opinion-making elite may have prided themselves in being more informed, more cosmopolitan, more postcolonial, than their predecessors.
To consider ways in which issues of identity left unresolved by the referendum have figured within Australian theatre over the last century, this essay examines a limited selection of texts that stage Englishness, Aboriginality and Asianness as agonistic elements in the constitutive field of Australian nationalism. My primary aim is less to catalogue the paradigmatic modes of representation that mark Aborigines and Asians as racial Others against which white Australians have been defined, though that is part of the process, than to draw attention to those normative (Anglo-Celtic) figurations of national subjectivity that tend to pass as racially unmarked. This interest in images of Englishness – be it in metropolitan or (post)colonial guises – and its correlative discourse of whiteness derives from Richard Dyer’s argument that to understand whiteness as a racial category is to dislodge its centrality, since white power ‘reproduces itself regardless of intention, power differences and goodwill, and overwhelmingly because it is not seen as whiteness, but as normal’ (10).

Randolph Bedford’s melodrama, White Australia, or The Empty North (Photo 1) provides a telling portrait of colonial anxieties about establishing and maintaining a robust Anglo-Australian society in a seemingly hostile geo-political region. First performed in 1909, this play fits quite neatly into a broader category of Asian invasion narratives that began in Australia in the late 1880s and intensified in the early years of the twentieth century as the newly independent nation began to define its cultural, political and economic position within the Asia-Pacific region. In generic terms, David Walker argues that the invasion narrative is a ‘discourse on the relationship between national strength, military capacity and the patriotic spirit’ (98). Whereas British invasion narratives of the period were commonly anxious meditations on the decline of imperial power and Britain’s consequent vulnerability at a time of intensifying European rivalries, Australian versions of this genre expressed fears of not being able to sufficiently establish coherent identities (Walker 98-101). As well as being geographically compromised because of its proximity to Asia, the fledgling Australian nation was also apparently at risk because of the effects of Britain’s commercial and political links with Asian countries. Hence, a sense of betrayal on the part of the mother country often permeated accounts of colonial nation-building. At the same time, some sections of the populace worried that continental decadence and complacency might spread to Australians, leaving them unprepared for a foreign invasion. It is not surprising, then, that nationalist intellectuals such as William Lane and Kenneth
Mackay figured the ‘shining purity of a white Australia and the dirty compromises of British capitalism’ as a powerful juxtaposition ‘between symbols of youth, cleanliness and purity and those of age, decay and exhaustion’ (Walker 106).

I offer this brief cultural history as a way of anchoring the character constructions and narrative trajectories evident in Bedford’s play. *White Australia* dramatises attempts by a squatter and an engineer to repel an invasion by an alliance of ‘coloured’ races that have declared war on Australia. This alliance is led by an English-educated Japanese spy who is assisted by a few of his own countrymen, various slavish Chinese supporters and, crucially, a treacherous Anglophile Australian (Cedric), whose bravery and loyalty have clearly been eroded by too many years spent in Britain. Most of the action is set in the so-called ‘empty north’ even though more populous areas such as Sydney are the predictable targets of the Japanese naval invasion that forms the spectacular climax of the play. The setting reflects strong contemporary concerns that the vast, sparsely populated areas of northern Australia were an open invitation to millions of Asians who might usurp land that white Australians had failed to develop.\(^6\)

Bedford uses a predictable array of stereotypes to convey the moral battle between good and evil that is well recognised as one of the hallmarks of melodrama. The Japanese villain, Yamamoto, is cast as a ruthless, duplicitous tyrant bent on annihilating Australians and stealing their land; he is also aristocratic and dangerously well-versed in the white man’s ways, almost admirable, provided he remains in his own country. The Chinese, on the other hand, are portrayed as lascivious, dirty, servile nuisances, threatening in numbers but individually lacking in the tactics to plan a successful assault. Pitted against these ‘yellow’ villains are two main kinds of white Australians: likeable but lazy, gambling drunkards too complacent to guard against attack; and resourceful, virtuous and energetic patriots whose valour and ingenuity eventually save the day when they bomb the Japanese fleet in Sydney Harbour from the vantage of a revolutionary airship balloon. In the finest of melodrama traditions, the winning side’s glorious victory is only made possible by the intervention of two comic servant types, in this case Aborigines, who rescue the ‘goodies’ from certain death after they have been captured by their foes. Although the Aborigines do get some credit for their valour, naturally it is left to the romantic hero, Jack, to reiterate the play’s moral message:
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Brother Australians! Today by some intelligence, with the aid of a strengthening love (turns to Vic) and by much of that luck which belongs to the drunkard and the fool, Australia has decisively routed its present enemy. Be we shall have more. Our rich and empty land is a permanent temptation to the poor and overcrowded world and if we would hold Australia we must be strong. No more unpreparedness – no more mad devotion to vicarious sport – arm yourselves and think, get guns and resolution. (85)

Of course, there is much in this play that invites, indeed compels, deconstructive analysis. In particular, one might critique Bedford's overt racism by examining ways in which the narrative uses carefully differentiated manipulations of racial otherness to demonise Asians and yet commend Aborigines even while displacing them from the imaginary space of the nation. This kind of analysis might be usefully informed by Homi Bhabha's work on the destabilising functions of the colonial stereotype, a hegemonic knowledge formation – or rather (de)formation (Lo 193-94) – that continually reveals its biases and slippages through a process of anxious repetition. Bhabha's formulation could also illuminate our understanding of Cedric's role as an imperialist traitor in thrall to the Orient and unable to withstand its corruptive power. Yet, ultimately, this particular kind of racism seems something of a soft target, and perhaps not the most useful focus for my purposes. More compelling areas for investigation are the play's incredibly anxious reiteration of whiteness and the question of how that may have functioned not only to normalise Anglo-Australian versions of national identity, but also, and in a perverse way, to de-naturalise notions of an organically white Australia.

The second part of my proposition is counter-intuitive, I know, and biased by a late twentieth-century recuperative impulse, but perhaps not as outlandish in this context as it might seem. Following Veronica Kelly's lead in reassessing the potential of colonial popular theatre to deliver powerfully subversive performances of empire (40-52), I would argue that the play, White Australia, in fact 'alienates' whiteness in at least two ways. Firstly, what I am claiming as a kind of accidental Brechtian verfremdungseffekt occurs through the extraordinary focus on what Dyer has called 'extreme whiteness', a form distinct from the unmarked whiteness that generally underpins the hegemony of Anglo-Australia. For Dyer, the whiteness of most people is ordinary, unspectacular or plain and this is what allows whiteness to imagine that it is able to speak on everyone's behalf – to be broadly representative. In his formulation, 'Extreme whiteness
coexists with ordinary whiteness [but] it is exceptional, excessive, marked. It is what whiteness aspires to and also ... fears’ (222). Thus extreme whiteness leaves a residue through which whiteness becomes visible as a racial marker rather than simply passing as an invisible, disinterested and normative category.

In Bedford’s play, the mode of excess in representations of whiteness begins in the first few moments with an audience aside by Kate, one of the heroines, as she reveals her distrust of Yamamoto: ‘I don’t like that man ... Green’s my eye but white’s my colour’ (2). This kind of obvious racial self-fashioning is adopted time and again by virtually all of the other Anglo-Australian characters, though it has different inflections according to gender and circumstance. The women are, of course, paragons of virtue whose whiteness is rhetorically intensified as they prove their allegiances to the national ideal of racial purity. Ironically, Victoria, the romantic heroine, is even willing to endure sexual violation rather than reveal strategic military secrets to the Japanese, though, predictably, this threat of inter-racial rape is averted at the eleventh hour. The paradox here is that the promised submission to racial contamination actually makes Victoria whiter since she would lose her virtue to protect white Australia. Extreme whiteness thus constitutes itself in the field of racial otherness, deriving ontological power from the threat of that which is ‘not white’. The already fallen white prostitute, Paw Paw Sal, provides an even more overt example of the improbable power of extreme whiteness when she is found, mad and dissolute, in the opium dens of the Port Darwin Chinese community:

MAC: You are a white woman.

SAL: I was – Gord forgimme, I was. (52)

Spurred by her countryman’s verbal recognition of her whiteness to rebel against her Chinese pimp, Sal manages to stab her oppressor, exclaiming, ‘White’s my colour, you yellor dog’ (53). Moments later she dies but not before uttering a refrain: ‘I’m all white again, an’ gord forgimme, all white’ (53). Here the anxious repetition of a re-appropriated whiteness suggests it is less an essence than an aspiration (Hage 20), something that can, to a certain point, be accumulated.

The play’s versions of Australian masculinity are similarly punctuated by numerous vocal iterations of whiteness, delivered either as a form of self-reference, or as a way of interpellating others into the dominant discourse. From playful, approving expressions
such as ‘Ah, mate, you’re a white man’ (29), to assertions like ‘I’ll show that I’m white when I’m wanted’ (25), to the jubilant battle cry of ‘First blood to the white man’ (24), the sense of whiteness is intensified to the point of radical excess. Whiteness is represented as the organising principle of colonial Australian society and the moral touchstone of its male patriots. In an elegant paradox, Australian masculinity draws on Englishness as a form of white patrimony but also defines itself against the emasculating Englishness that Cedric, the traitor, has accumulated. As a male parallel to Paw Paw Sal, Cedric is the figure who plays out the instability that radical excess makes possible. He emphasises his whiteness as a marker of difference from his Asian collaborators – who constantly refer to him as ‘the white man’ – yet, among members of his own race, he has lost his claim to whiteness by dint of his treachery. The choice of an Anglophile but Australian-born traitor as the play’s villain serves Bedford’s patriotic purpose well because it allows him to take a shot at Britain’s pro-Asia policies as well as at those Australians whose slavish imitations of Englishness were seen to weaken the national type. In this respect, Cedric’s characterisation reflects one of the central contradictions in the constitution of white Australian identity: that it is commonly defined in terms which suggest both an extension of and a radical break from the British imperial centre.

In one version of Bedford’s script, whiteness also registers as a constructed rather than natural category through a comic set piece where Terribit and Minimie, the two Aboriginal characters, play at being their white masters. Using a surcingle (corset) and stays, along with affected upper-class manners, Minimie fashions herself as ‘White Mary’ and then demands all the privileges, including the vote, that her new status is supposed to afford. Terribit, meanwhile, takes on the role of the white suitor, albeit somewhat reluctantly because he fears it will compromise his own masculinity. After a considerable amount of stage business, they discard their disguises and resume Aboriginal modes of behaviour as Minimie paints Terribit with ochre to prepare him for war. This kind of cross-cultural transvestism, overtly staged as a self-reflexive performance, seems to me perfectly to fulfil Brecht’s demand for a historicised treatment of social relations. Terribit’s comment, ‘White’s the best trick of all but I’ll back black against yellar till the cows come home’ shows that he is fully aware of the ways in which Aborigines are positioned relative to Asians and Anglo-Australians in the social hierarchy. That Australian melodramas typically used white actors in blackface to play Aboriginal characters, a convention likely familiar to colonial
audiences, further stresses the possibilities for a wayward signification of whiteness in Bedford’s play.

If we agree with Dyer that to make whiteness noticeable as a racial category is to take the first step in dismantling its authority, then it would seem that the generic modalities of melodrama – the mode of excess, the overt polarisation of moral categories, the comic performativity – mesh quite well with the postcolonial critical project of dismantling racial privilege. I am not suggesting here that White Australia was deliberately written to engage critically with the racist discourses of the time, but rather that both its text and dramaturgy open up possibilities for such a project. Support for this stance is evident in reviews of the premiere performance, since at least one commentator (from the nationalist Bulletin of 1 July 1909) complained that the ‘talk of White Australia from the word “go”’ strained credibility and that the political purpose of such ‘verbiage’ was ‘too glaringly obvious’ (8). In a more contemporary context, it might be possible to argue that the mode of excess that has characterised Pauline Hanson’s vitriolic diatribe against Aborigines and Asians also serves to put whiteness on the public agenda in a way that problematises its earlier invisibility as the Australian norm. Hanson’s 1996 maiden parliamentary speech ‘Australia, Wake Up!’ reads as the classic invasion narrative in the melodramatic mode, except that it is missing the comic set piece: implicitly addressing her fellow white Australians, Hanson warns of an imminent takeover by Asian hordes abetted by villainous local multiculturalists, the latter trooped as traitors to the nation. Aborigines, according to this narrative, are responsible for a fatal disunity within Australian society and so weaken our ability to repulse the Asian enemy. We are warned that time is of the essence, so we must come to our senses before it is too late to steer the nation unswervingly towards its right (white) destiny. From this kind of perspective, it is not surprising that events such as the East Timor crisis were constructed in some sectors of Australian society as a timely wake-up call. In a complicated chain of signification, Australia’s conflict with Indonesia over East Timorese independence was also used to bolster the monarchists’ case for a ‘no’ vote in the constitutional referendum, the logic being that decreasing constitutional ties to Britain would make us more prone to Asianisation and, in particular, to adopting bad republican models such as that of Indonesia.

Whereas Bedford’s melodrama synthesises anxieties undergirding the sedimentation of the White Australia Policy as a form of racial
management, Mona Brand’s 1948 social realist play *Here Under Heaven* turns on a discourse of tolerance that anticipates the 1970s policy switch to official multiculturalism. This discourse of tolerance is played out through various characters’ responses to the surprise appearance of a Chinese woman, Lola, in a tightly-knit southern Queensland sheep-grazing community. Lola gains entry to rural Australia at the invitation of the upper-class station-owners who never consider that their soldier son’s new wife, whom he met in Singapore during the war, might not be white. The play’s narrative project is clearly to show how racial prejudices get in the way of productive cross-cultural interaction, and yet the implied proposition that tolerance will lead to a genuinely democratic nation troubles me in a number of ways. Preston King points out that ‘if one concedes or promotes a power to tolerate, one equally concedes a power not to tolerate’ (6). Taking up this argument, Ghassan Hage sees racial tolerance as the flip side to racism in so far as it is ‘never a passive acceptance, a kind of “letting be”’, but rather an action that always presupposes control over an object of tolerance (89). In the Australian context, Hage insists, multicultural tolerance is therefore ‘a strategy aimed at reproducing and disguising relationships of power in society ... a form of symbolic violence in which a mode of domination is presented as a form of egalitarianism’ (87).

There is evidence in Brand’s play to support this argument as the power of the arch-racist, Mrs Hamilton, gradually gives way to the will of her more tolerant son, Richard. Lola is not passive in this transaction, but neither is she fully agential, since Richard’s rebellion against his mother seems on one level at least to represent a proper resumption of patriarchal power after a brief and unwanted interregnum. Mrs Hamilton’s intolerance, despicable though it may be, nonetheless positions her as a manager of national space, an empowered subject rather than an objectified Other to be tolerated or not tolerated according to the imperative of a race-based society. At the spectatorial level, the Asian Other is firmly positioned as the object of the viewer’s racial tolerance, which limits an otherwise brave political project, at least read in contemporary terms. Try as she might, Brand is unable to construct a fully-developed Asian character without resorting to cultural stereotypes; as a result, Lola, in her exquisite cheong sam, excites our exoticising gaze while the white Australians in the play are never racially marked. The implied world view of the younger Hamiltons – a view that absorbs difference back into unity at the level of family cohesion – is in fact epistemologically consistent with the very subtle hint of nostalgia that seems to pervade
the play even as it looks forward, in a way quite revolutionary for its
time, to a different kind of nation. For me, this nostalgia is located
primarily in Mrs Hamilton's lament for a pioneer past that does not
seem entirely to lose its mythopoeic force even though it is conjured
through the racist dialogue of a character we are encouraged to
critique.

Where Brand is more successful in dislodging the authority of
whiteness is in her treatment of class issues. The Hamiltons' full
access to white nationhood as a privileged social space depends not
only on their visible racial features but also on their upper-class
attributes, which are aligned with Englishness at various points.
Hage notes that certain markers of class capital such as economic
riches, education, manners, accent and religion, function to signal
whiteness in so far as they allow their possessors to claim certain
forms of dominant national belonging (56). As Brand's narrative
unfolds, the Hamiltons' class capital is shown to be at risk, both from
the drought that threatens their livelihood and from a historical
weakening of class barriers, which Lola seems to exacerbate. That she
is cultured, highly articulate and clearly more knowledgeable about
world affairs than the insular Australians unsettles the fixity of
class/race hierarchies. Moreover, it is Lola who deliberately
transgresses social boundaries by bringing a sick Aboriginal child to
the homestead so that she can tend her. This particular juxtaposition
of racial subjects signals an oppositional social orientation whereby
the Asian migrant seeks to establish national belonging in reference
to Aboriginal rather than Anglo-Celtic society. Such orientation
represents a signal moment in the national imaginary, even though in
the world of the play that moment can only be fleeting since the
Aborigines are ultimately figured as a dying race.

_Here Under Heaven_ also puts whiteness at risk via its focus on
miscegenation. Cross-racial sexual desire highlights the notion that
'heterosexuality is the means of ensuring, but also the site of
endangering, the reproduction of [racial] differences' (Dyer 20). Dyer
maintains that if white bodies cannot 'guarantee their own
reproduction as white', then they are 'no longer indubitably white
bodies', and 'the "natural" basis of their dominion is no longer
credible' (25). This is why white women's virginity has been such a
site of anxiety within British imperial projects. In Brand's play, it is
the men rather than the women who sexually compromise their
whiteness. Two of the Hamilton sons have ignored the social
prohibition on interracial sex – one with an Asian the other with an
Aborigine – transgressions that cannot be overlooked since both result in hybrid offspring, though in the case of Australia’s liaison with Asia (figured by John’s marriage to Lola), hybridity is only foreshadowed by Lola’s pregnancy. Thus the hypothetical ‘Eurasian’ and the bastard ‘half-caste’ stand as images of a refigured nation. Nonetheless, it seems that this play’s potential intervention in the hegemonic nation-building process is considerably weakened by the absence of assertively visible signs of such hybridity. The figure of the Eurasian is only anticipated at some point in the narrative future and the part-Aboriginal child haunts the margins of the stage, appearing briefly as a mute and virtually lifeless form almost completely obscured by the blanket in which she is wrapped.

Whereas Brand’s capacity to unsettle racial categories may have been limited by the scarcity of suitable actors at the time, forty years later Louis Nowra was able to assemble a large multiracial cast in his epic adaptation of Xavier Herbert’s *Capricornia* as a special bicentennial project in 1988. In my book *Sightlines* I argue that this play, particularly in its performative articulations of hybridity, celebrated miscegenation to the point of dislodging racism as the central narrative subject. Rather than reiterating this line of analysis, I want to examine briefly *Capricornia*’s treatment of Anglo-Celtic versions of whiteness and their functions within a counter-hegemonic narrative of nationhood that had particular significance at a time of celebratory national self-imagining occasioned by the Bicentenary. Set in Port Zodiac (Darwin) in the 1930s, Nowra’s epic play isolates and critiques mechanisms of racial privilege by making visible the rhetorical strategies through which the typical colonialist invasion narrative unfolds. A key tactic of this counter-discursive project is to dramatise the feared decline of the white races that the invasion narrative attempts to avert. Hence, the play abounds with abject or degraded forms of whiteness embodied in characters who use addictive drugs, go combo, commit violent crimes or simply succumb to the tropical heat. When whiteness is not always already degraded, it is positioned as fundamentally at risk. This inherent instability is figured primarily through the anxiety surrounding Marigold, the colonial belle, who is eligible for marriage but not safely removed from the moral and physical temptations of Port Zodiac’s degenerate society until close to the end of the play. There are also a number of scenes that invoke Englishness as a signifier of whiteness only to dismantle its discursive power vis-à-vis the management of racial categories. A case in point is the pseudo-English tea party during which Mrs Hollower (a missionary) and Dr Aintee discuss
eugenics while the Aboriginal servant girls Tocky and Christobel parody their table manners and general attitudes in a running meta-commentary for the audience.

Nowra juxtaposes all these images of acutely visible whiteness to a chaotic transitional society where signs of Asian and particularly Aboriginal national belonging are increasingly the norm. At one point Norman, the ‘half-caste’ protagonist is left to run the formerly white-owned cattle station with the help of Tocky, now his lover, a handful of black stockmen and a Chinese cook. While Tocky’s pregnancy briefly signals a hopeful future for those formerly positioned as the underclasses of imperial modernity’s progress in Australia, the fact that she dies before her baby can be born suggests that the historical moment depicted was not ripe for the acceptance of a re-racialised northern society where negotiations between Asian and Aboriginal Australians could be more pivotal than those anchored by the white mainstream. Nowra’s vision, however, means to be taken seriously as a contemporary model of the nation, not only in broader cultural terms but also in the more specific context of current Australian theatre. As part of a productive counter-bicentennial discourse aimed at interrogating the ‘explosion of populist nationalism, commercialism and Eurocentrism’ (During 179) that erupted during our year-long public celebration of imperial conquest, *Capricornia* staged an alternative image of the nation, one inflected by an acute awareness of the ways in which racial tensions have shaped our history.

In the past two decades, with the increasing momentum of theatre that stages a variety of Aboriginal and Asian-Australian identities, the hegemony of whiteness as a performative signifier of Australianness has diminished to some extent. Nevertheless, plays still emerge that appear to engage critically with our past and present racism while ultimately reiterating the fantasy of a white nation. My symptomatic (mainstream) example of this trend is David Williamson’s 1997 play, *After the Ball*. Styled as an intimate family drama, this text seems to touch only tangentially on the issues of national identity, Hansonite politics and republicanism since Williamson’s characters – all white Australians – are primarily enmeshed in the kinds of conflicts that reflect deep-rooted family disharmony. Yet it seems to me that the play is as much about a dysfunctional nation as a dysfunctional family. Through a series of flashbacks designed to convey the history of filial antagonisms, Williamson also supplies a telling political retrospective. For instance, Judy’s pro-Asian stance is set against her
father's fears of being over-run and outclassed by Asians in a dialogue reminiscent of the early 1980s debates about Asian immigration, an issue which has resurfaced with a vengeance since the rise of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party.

In After the Ball, the race debate unfolds so that Ron, the father, expresses his outmoded racist views in ways that invite a critique, but one that is inevitably muted by a number of sleights of hand. The first is neatly effected through the play's gender politics, which generate considerable sympathy for Ron by developing his character against a powerful foil: his shallow, nagging, uneducated, socialite wife. The Sydney Theatre Company production emphasised this contrast by portraying Kate, the wife, as every bit the shrew while Ron presented as a kindly if old-fashioned father figure - just the kind of 'dinkum Aussie' that formed the bedrock of the post-war generation. The second trick, a rhetorical one, is achieved by citing Asian ingenuity/intelligence as part of a commonsense rebuttal of racism. Hence Ron maintains:

I'm not a racist. A racist believes his lot's superior. I don't. They're superior. Year after year, the top students are always Asians ... Asians are brighter than whites. In fifty years time, all we'll be doing is collecting their garbage. (59)

This disavowal is uncannily similar to Hanson's much-quoted protestation: 'I am not racist. I know in my heart I am not racist ... I take people on who they are' (Hage 183). But whereas Hanson leaves herself open to attack because of her overtly 'redneck' politics,11 Ron (and by implication Williamson) covers himself to some extent by tapping into a more subtle and persuasive discourse: the discourse of 'Anglo decline', which Hage has identified as the 'sense of Australia’s dominant ethnocultural grouping being under siege' (181). Elsewhere in the play, the sense of decline is detached from the immigration debate to become a more general lament for the changes wrought by modernity and late capitalism (Barcan). It is this detachment, intensified in the Sydney Theatre Company production by an appeal to nostalgia via projected sepia-toned photos used to illustrate the flashback sequences, that invites Williamson's predominantly middle-class audience into thinking race is not one of the play's real vehicles of hegemonic nationalism.

In contrast to their parents, the younger generation in After the Ball seem to offer progressive and inclusive visions of contemporary Australian identity. Judy, the daughter, embraces the idea of a multicultural society, but her position is not all that far removed from Ron's in so far as her take on multiculturalism is based on discourses
of enrichment and productive diversity that never really dislodge Anglo-Australians from the centre of the cultural map. Her stance illustrates Hage’s argument that, ‘rather than being imagined as a crucial part of the national body, multiculturalism is imagined as an object performing a function for that body’ (149). Judy’s particular kind of pluralism cedes no national or governmental space to Asian or other migrants but rather envisions a society/nation of ethnic enclaves clustered around an Anglo-Celtic centre. Not surprisingly, her views are never really scrutinised because they benefit from a broader construction that creates an ontological gap between multiculturalism and racist intolerance (Hage 77). And because Judy believes passionately in that gap, she can assert with confidence in relation to the 1997 Queensland state elections that One Nation political candidates will not win substantial support. (Many like-thinking Australians were proved wrong on that count.)

Within Williamson’s conservative view of a multicultural society, Aboriginality hardly figures except in a throwaway line that praises Aborigines for having been responsible custodians of the land before the arrival of white settlers. Englishness, on the other hand, features prominently as that which Australians must reject in order to come of age as a modern nation. The narrative of the nation’s filial journey towards full independence from the imperial centre unfolds through the son, Stephen, who initially leaves Australia for Europe in protest against the 1975 constitutional crisis when Prime Minister Gough Whitlam was sacked by the Governor General. We are compelled, or at least I am, to read the family argument on this political crisis as a commentary on the republican debate leading up to the 1999 referendum. In so far as Stephen galvanises the discourses of maturity and independence to stress the failure of Australia’s democratic process in its deference to a distant and irrelevant political figurehead, the play stresses a need for a constitutional break with the monarchy.

What is interesting about Williamson’s conjunction of republicanism and the discourse of Anglo decline in face of the increasing Asianisation of Australia, is that it perfectly captures the ambivalence and confusion that characterised many Australians’ approach to the referendum. This ambivalence continues to be evident as we lumber, inevitably, towards the next constitutional debate and, according to most analysts, an eventual republic of some kind. Meantime, the continuation, almost ad nauseam, of the so-called race debate in both political and public arenas confirms Len
Ang's argument that 'the ideological work necessary to actively disarticulate racism and nationalism ... has remained undone' (125). Our theatre's challenge for the new millennium is to create paths through this ideological impasse, to dilute the cultural power of whiteness by embracing heterogeneity and difference.

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Notes

1 For detailed analyses of the referendum’s results, see *Australian Journal of Political Science* 36.2 (2001). Commentators featured in this special issue discuss the varying roles of national identity, political affiliation, and partisanship and populist protest against politicians in defeating the proposal for a republic.

2 In this essay I use the term ‘Anglo-Celtic’ as a marker of ethnic origin, regardless of current geographical location. ‘British’ pertains to the broad geopolitical entity of the British Isles and, at times, its erstwhile empire. It is not synonymous with ‘English’, which is used as a more limited descriptor to refer to things identified with England itself (as distinct from Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and so forth). These terms often have specific connotations and histories in the Australian context but all evoke whiteness in their most common usages. ‘Anglo-Celtic’ is the more neutral term and has been appropriated to categorise the dominant white culture while Britishness and Englishness often signify ambivalently as traits that both constitute and contrast with Australianness.

3 There is some debate over which of two extant versions of the script was used for this premiere. Unless indicated otherwise, references given here are to the copyright reading version titled ‘White Australia – The White Man’s Land, or, For Australia’ held by the National Archives of Australia, CRS A1336/2, item 931. The play was performed under the title *White Australia; or, The Empty North* on 26 June 1909, at the King’s Theatre, Melbourne.

4 It is worth noting that invasion narratives still persist in Australian popular culture, albeit in much diluted forms. Their continued purchase is evident in the recent support for the federal government’s refusal to allow asylum seekers (mostly of Middle Eastern and Afghan origin) to be processed on Australian territory.

5 Walker’s account of Asian-Australian trade in the period explains that these effects were not always clear or detrimental to Australian interests; nevertheless the general fear of being overrun by Asians often led Australian opinion-makers to paint political events pertaining to Asia in a negative light (68–84).

6 In this respect, the Northern Territory was regarded as only nominally an Australian possession during the early colonial era. The small Anglo-Australian population had failed to make the land productive and thereby stake a legitimate claim on it, and the local Aborigines could not always be trusted to defend white interests. Moreover, the significant numbers of Chinese already living in the area were figured, quite literally, as further ‘chinks in the armour’ (Walker 113–26).

7 The name is not incidental but, in all likelihood, chosen to evoke positive aspects of British character in the young Australian heroine (by dint of reference to Queen Victoria) as well as to signal eventual victory for her side.
In the script version held in the Library of Congress, Washington (D21455, deposited in 1910), Cedric becomes the focus of a redemption narrative when, in a compressed climactic moment he reclaims his whiteness (and thus his birthright) by double-crossing Yamamoto in a belated effort to take his proper place in the nation.

Library of Congress script (50).

This argument is based on the production’s costuming codes, its embodied visual ironies, racial slippages and self-conscious character constructions, and on the performative virtuosity of a multi-racial cast playing across a spectrum of racialised characters (Gilbert 1998, 112-14).

Suvendrini Perera discusses at length the ways in which Hansonite politics have been affiliated with the working and rural classes with the result that ‘redneck’ has become an explanatory label for the versions of whiteness supported by Hanson’s philosophies. In this formulation, class politics operate to distance normative Anglo-Celtic whiteness from the more extreme versions (191).