"Are you calling me a racist?": Teaching critical whiteness theory in indigenous sovereignty

Fiona Nicoll
University of Queensland

This article examines the relationship between critical whiteness theory and Indigenous sovereignty in the university classroom. Based on the author's extensive and problematic experience of teaching Indigenous content to non-Indigenous students, it demonstrates how critical whiteness theory can be used to shift the pedagogical focus from the racialised oppression of Indigenous Australians to the white middle-class subject position that is a direct product of this oppression. After critically examining the responses of a range of students who identified variously as Australian, African, Asian, Asian Anglo, Koori, male, female, hetero and 'straight' to the challenge of locating their own position on which subjective differences can be usefully and ethically negotiated in a "postcolonising" Australia.

[Increasing] numbers of teachers have begun to use the literature on whiteness with students – both Whites and students of colour – to help them see the different way that individuals whose relation to racism must be either "innocent" or "guilty" but as participants in social and ideological networks. While these networks are not of their own making, they nevertheless can come to understand and challenge them (Frances Meher and Mary Kay Thompson Teteaut 1998, 156).

In postcolonizing settler societies Indigenous people cannot forget the nature of migrancy and we position all non-Indigenous people as migrants and diasporic. Our ontological relation to land, the ways that country is constitutive of us, and therefore the inalienable nature of our relation to land, marks a radical, indeed incommensurable, difference between us and the non-Indigenous (Alleen Moreton-Robinson 2003, 31).

Feeling better, whatever form it might take, is not about the overcoming of bad feeling, which are effects of histories of violence but of finding a different relationship to them. It is in the face of all that endures of the past in the present, the pain, the suffering and the rage, that we can open ourselves up, and keep alive the hope that things can be different (Sara Ahmed 2004).

Synopsis

1. When non-Indigenous people are welcomed to country by the Indigenous owners, we acknowledge not only the traditional ancestors but also their living descendants as bearers of sovereignty that exists within and beyond the Australian nation, which it also pre-exists. Lest we forget this as Australia’s Prime Minister triumphantly declares victory in the “history wars”, (Sydney Morning Herald 10/9/03). The legacy of Terra Nullius sticks to our shores with the dirt as we walk over Indigenous sovereignties everyday. This article argues that regardless of the individual and family migration trajectories that have brought us to this place - critical whiteness pedagogy must address this fundamental fact.

Background

2. In 1988 – a year of bicentennial celebrations and protests – I experienced an epiphany reading a book on a train somewhere between Sydney and Albury. I would have been about 22 years old, the same age as many of the students I now teach. The book was Judith Wright’s We Call for a Treaty (1985), and explained why a group of prominent, while Australian, was advocating the constitutional recognition of Indigenous sovereignty, which had been consistently ignored by means of the legal fiction of Terra Nullius. As a descendant of white boat people who arrived here at the start of the 19th century, this book spoke powerfully to me, with its comparative discussion of Indigenous sovereignty movements in other parts of the world. It showed me how much ground had to be covered for justice to exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia. By the time I had finished the book, I felt excited about being part of a movement towards a treaty, which would begin to address many negative aspects of the nation’s colonial past and present.

3. This was five years before the High Court’s finding of native title in the Mabo (1992) and Wik (1996) decisions and before the publication of the stolen generations’ testimony in Bringing Them Home (1997) and subsequent debates over a national apology. It was also before the Reconciliation Act was passed in 1991. By the time of the Centenary of Federation celebrations in 2000, the question of Indigenous rights had been successfully re-presented in parliament and the mainstream media as a ‘black issue’ over which even Aboriginal people were divided. To vocally support the constitutional recognition of Aboriginal sovereignties today is to risk being constructed as a supporter of ‘symbolic reconciliation’. It is also to risk being seen as an obstacle to a more ‘practical reconciliation’, which will ensure that problems of health, housing, employment, substance abuse and domestic violence are addressed within Aboriginal communities. In John Howard’s Australia, ‘practical reconciliation’ has become the new ‘political correctness’ and ‘Aboriginal rights’ have become the new wrong – whether articulated by Indigenous or non-Indigenous citizens.

4. The concept of ‘sovereignty’ itself has also been reconfigured in the wake of the second US-led invasion of Iraq. Like many citizens within nations that constitute the ‘coalition of the willing’, I use the word invasion advisedly to signal a refusal of official narratives celebrating the ‘liberation’ of Iraq. With the failure to discover Weapons of Mass Destruction, this liberation narrative has gathered force. And with it, sovereignty has been redefined more closely as that which is benevolently bestowed by the US super-power following the liberation of the amorphous entity consistently invoked by GW Bush - ‘the Iraqi people’. Howard gave this narrative a peculiarly cricket-tragic spin when he said recently ‘the Iraqis are coming up to the crease and taking control of their future’ (Australian 3/6/04). The point I want to highlight here is that this reconfiguration of sovereignty as something that is retrospectively bestowed on a deserving population.
effectively silences anti-war opposition framed in terms of 'invasion'. In the absence of pre-existing sovereignty, 'the Iraqi people' are precluded from being the object of invasion.

5. This narrative of Iraqi liberation to which Howard is so enthusiastically contributing also resonates much closer to home. The doctrine of Terra-Nullius precluded the British arrival in 1788 from being narrated as an invasion of Indigenous sovereignty. But rather than being justified in terms of 'liberation', the invasion was (and in many contexts continues to be) justified with recourse to the value of 'civilisation'. One of the most marked characteristics of the current neo-conservative political climate in countries like Australia, the US and Britain in which the prerogatives of 'patriarchal white sovereignty' (Moreton-Robinson 2003b) prevail is the extent to which notions of 'original' or 'inherent' sovereignty (Reynolds 1996 and Tully 1998) have been displaced by the 'derivative' or 'top-down' model that is currently being implemented in Iraq. The current government's decision to dismantle the peak Indigenous representative body, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), demonstrates that the refusal to engage with alternative definitions and practices of sovereignty as theorized by Indigenous activists and intellectuals (See Monture-Angus 2000; Watson 2002) presents a very real threat to the rights of members of Indigenous nations within these nation-states.

6. Before launching into the body of this article I need to clarify that – in making Indigenous sovereignty the epistemological ground of our pedagogy – it is important that non-Indigenous teachers recognize that Indigenous sovereignty is not a philosophical abstraction but an ontological belonging in this place (See Moreton-Robinson 2003). So the difficulties that non-Indigenous people have in clearly defining what it is should not be used as a basis for existence. Rather, the constitutively indefinable quality of Indigenous sovereignty for non-Indigenous people demonstrates its inherent belonging to Indigenous Australians. As sovereignty is their inherent property only they can define what it is. In this context, the task of non-Indigenous students and teachers becomes that of observing and beginning to denaturalize the everyday invasiveness of policies and practices underpinned by patriarchal white sovereignty.

**Lesson 1: Whites Teaching Whiteness**

7. The changing national and global political context described in the previous section has prompted me to adopt a new pedagogical approach to race relations in the classroom: "critical whiteness theory". Specifically exploring whiteness as a problematic, critical whiteness theory reverses the tendency of white academics of every political persuasion in Australia to focus investigation on Aboriginal 'issues' or 'problems'. In particular, Aileen Moreton-Robinson's analysis of the persistent dominance of the subject position 'middle-class, white woman' in Australian feminism (2000), has convinced me that Australia's 'post-colonising' challenges (Moreton-Robinson 2003a) will be more effectively met by reading, developing and applying critical whiteness theory to key debates in Australian studies, history, and cultural studies.

8. Rather than positing 'whiteness' as one legitimate perspective among a multiplicity of other equally valid perspectives, critical whiteness theory investigates the historical rise of 'whiteness' as a cultural and symbolic value and basis of subject-formation. It also traces the material effects of whiteness on specific communities of subjects defined as 'not white', 'not-white' or in transition. Rather than being devoted to the demonization of white males or females (as some media reports have suggested) whiteness theory helps us to better understand the mechanisms of subject formation and reproduction, which consistently redirect resources in Australia (including land, employment and material culture such as fine arts) from Indigenous economies to non-Indigenous ones (see Page 1994). It is this commitment to understanding the complex and dynamic character of racialized political power that makes critical theory 'critical' and distinguishes it from a neo-liberal identity politics that consists of endless variations on an individualist theme of 'I'm OK, You're OK'. Far from attempting to reinstate an essentialist form of identity-politics, then, critical whiteness theory must grapple with the reality that whiteness is 'never just one thing and never the same twice' (Carr in Ellsworth 1997, 261).

9. In these troubled times when Keating-era academics are being bludgeoned by the left right and centre for being variously 'black armband', 'politically correct', 'postmodern' and 'cultural relativist', its important I think to insist that Indigenous sovereignty is not a narrow political agenda. It is the very opposite. It is the narrow political agendas of our parliamentary representatives that are preventing this issue of Indigenous sovereignty – which will not go away – from being squarely addressed. It also seems to me that one of the greatest mistakes intellectuals could make under the pressure of this bludgeoning is to discard the most valuable insights of theorists who are now being demonized as 'postmodernists'.

10. In particular I have found the arguments of Michel Foucault extremely useful in research and teaching with critical whiteness theory. Firstly, Foucault's critique of the "repression hypothesis" (1979) can be used to explain that power does not simply repress Indigenous people through the agency of 'racist' white people. It also and simultaneously produces the contours, possibilities and privileges of white subjectivity. Secondly, we can consider his argument about the diffuse character of disciplinary power in his much quoted statement that power extends far beyond the prison into "factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons." (1977, 228). This point is useful in distinguishing critical whiteness theory from traditional anti-racist pedagogies, which privilege the university as a site of ideological demystification – if not enlightenment.

11. Foucault's reminder that the university is one site of power-knowledge production among others enables us to jettison debates about the relevance of 'Theory' outside the ivory tower of the academy and to focus instead on the entanglement of race, class, gender and sexual orientation as axes of privilege both inside and outside the university walls. As reforms to the tertiary sector continue to dismantle 'free education' as a social value and our community service, the idea of the university as a vanguard of progressive politics rings increasingly hollow to students facing debts unimaginable to a free education generation. In a context where all but the most privileged juggle study with work commitments, students find it easy to relate to Foucault's critique of a monolithic power that is resisted by oppressed subjects via 'enlightened' or 'progressive' intellectual representatives. This skepticism about liberation narratives, combined with a capacity to understand themselves *simultaneously* as agents and objects of power can be productively harnessed by teachers of critical whiteness theory.

12. My decision to use critical whiteness theory to teach a Gender Studies subject called "Gender, Race and Australian Identities" at Sydney University drew on my previous experiences with teaching Aboriginal content to predominantly non-Indigenous student populations. In particular, I wanted to address problems that arose in teaching a subject...
called 'Perspectives on Contemporary Aboriginal Art and Culture' in 1998. No matter how hard I tried to cultivate self-reflective approaches to the subject materials, it was virtually impossible for me as a white lecturer to successfully shift the focus of student interest from Aborigines-as-exotic-Other to engage broader questions of Australian history and race relations. This was partly in spite of but perhaps also partly because of a significant contribution of Indigenous guest lecturers. In an institutional context where white academics were responsible for constructing the subject's content, assessment and authored the majority of prescribed readings, tokenism was unavoidable. I was determined to do things differently in 2003.

13. Although approximately half of the topics in 'Gender, Race and Australian Identity' focused specifically on Indigenous content, there were only two guest lecturers – Dr Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Aunty Nance De Vries with both of whom I have established intellectual and personal relationships. The most significant part of the assessment process was a research diary consisting of seven entries relating to different topics addressed during the semester. Encouraging students both as individuals and in groups to connect the subject materials to current affairs and their own experiences as embodied subjects in Australia facilitated a 'problem posing pedagogy' (see Freire 1993) capable of dealing with events outside the classroom which consistently penetrated the lectures and class discussions. For example, it was disturbingly timely that the US invasion of Iraq fell on the week that Edward Said's 'Orientalism' was scheduled.

Lesson 2: Reversing the Rhetoric of Reverse Racism

14. Student feedback at the end of semester was positive overall. And several made the comment on their evaluations that the subject had been relevant and useful to them in different and unexpected ways. Having said this, however, being confronted with critical whiteness theory when many students expected to learn about 'Aboriginal culture' as well as being required to record their responses in diary-form was personally and politically confronting for some. This was partly because theorists like Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Irene Watson address their readers not as 'native informants' but as subjects with intimate knowledge of white Australian institutions and dispositions. Some students reacted defensively to this intellectual interpellation, attempting to dispossess these Indigenous theorists from the ground of knowledge by presenting them as the hostile and emotional subjects of 'reverse racism'. In various class discussions I was struck by a powerful but never explicitly articulated sense that the perceived crime of 'reverse racism' on the part of Indigenous and other people racialised as non-white was an even greater offence than white racism itself. As teachers and active researchers we need to generate new pedagogical strategies to deal with the emergence of a defiant form of white subjectivity, which is injured by the very idea of racism.

15. There were about ninety students in the class with a variety of different backgrounds and the research diary task explicitly encouraged them to relate the topics to their own experiences of Australian identity and migration. To my knowledge, there was one Koori, a large number of Anglo and other European-Australians, some Indian and Asian-Australians as well as a sizeable chunk of exchange students from the US including Armenian-American and Korean-American. There were also some students from the middle-East including Afghanistan and Lebanon and there was one student from Rwanda. The majority of the students were women, with men making up around 20%. A handful of students also identified as 'lesbian', 'gay' or 'queer'.

16. A big challenge was how I was learning and teaching how to disarticulate whiteness from a reductive kind of identity-politics, which in recent years has become the subject of endless polemics about 'political correctness'. So rather than focusing on identity per se I had to keep bringing the focus to bear on the processes through which individuals identify with and invest in patriarchal white sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson, 2003b). Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s work on mis-recognition and ‘passing’ (Ahmed 2000, 129) we were able to examine some of the reasons why I might mistake a 4th generation Asian-Australian student as a ‘Asian international student’ or an Indigenous student as a ‘white Australian’. Rather than posing the question of whether these examples render me more or less racist than the next white person, my concern was to highlight why such mis-attributions happen and why they matter. So it was important to demonstrate that everyday processes of racialisation affect my own professional and personal practices as much as those of my students. As I will go on to argue, the capacity of whiteness theory to function critically in the classroom was undermined precisely to the extent that I felt into performing the role of the anti-racial white teacher, which maps closely onto the subject position identified by Moreton-Robinson as ‘middle-class white woman’ (2000).

17. A related challenge was how to mobilise critical whiteness theory without perpetuating what Suvendrini Perera describes as either a ‘drauma of binary black/white relations, or, as is often the case where questions of multiculturalism are acknowledged, as an unequal trinity in which “migrants” and especially “Asians” form a kind of belated third, or supplement to the central conflict of black and white’ (2000, 12). I will argue that an explicit recognition of Indigenous sovereignty was the only ground from which it was possible to avoid reinforcing both this dichotomy (and its ‘Asian’ supplement). Before elaborating this argument, however, I want to briefly describe how specific racialised subject positions were played out in the course of the semester. Also bear in mind that these subject positions were always played out with reference and in relation to my own subject position as a middle-class white Australian woman with the institutionalised power to reward or penalize student responses (See also Tilone 1998, 171).

18. I have emphasized the challenges entailed in a pedagogy that continually returns to the teacher’s subjective location within objective power relations. And it's tempting to give up faced with the eye-rolling of some colleagues who – in a neo-liberal political context where racism, sexism and homophobia are represented as “blemishes” upon an otherwise flawless national character - approach ‘whiteness’ as either an anachronistic and possibly dangerous development within identity politics or as the latest excess of academic ‘Theory’. But my sense of the importance of persisting with this pedagogical approach was reinforced in the response of a teacher racialised as non-white to the conference paper on which this article is based. She wanted me to know that teaching with critical whiteness theory was not an option for her because it is too easy for white teachers to position themselves as victims of ‘reverse racism’ to relate to her as an embodiment of this most insidious form of political correctness. In this context, the apparent paradox of a white teacher identifying (with) white race – on one hand – and recognizing Indigenous sovereignty – on the other – can be pedagogically productive insofar as it unsettles the connection between embodiment and ‘perspective’ (see Nicoll 2000 and 2002) naturalized through the rhetoric of ‘reverse racism.’

19. Ruth Frankenfield cautions against taking the “invisibility of whiteness” as axiomatic, pointing out that neo-liberal race-blindness is a relatively recent and arguably anomalous...
phenomenon in race relations. (Frankenberg 2001) Student responses to ‘Gender, Race and Australian Identity’ illustrated quite a pervasive sense of being visible targets of discrimination by ‘politically correct’ persons in positions of authority. A handful of white Australian students, of which a disproportionate number were male, expressly explained discomfort at being addressed as ‘white’ by Indigenous and other theorists racialised as non-white. In particular, this group felt that Indigenous feminist theorists Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Jackie Huggins were overly harsh in their criticisms of the white feminist anthropologist, Dianne Bell who they believed was ‘only trying to help’ Indigenous women to speak out against rape in Aboriginal communities. Some of the students’ discomfort had having their subjectivity named and characterized in terms of whiteness was articulated through the argument that – in ascribing limits to what a middle-class white woman could be - Moreton-Robinson was guilty of ‘reverse-racism’.

20. One said with the all the righteous confidence of someone opposing her ‘politically correct’ lecturer: ‘She’s just imposing a stereotypical view of white women.’ It was challenging to respond constructively to these comments. And as I blustered through what I hoped was an adequate reply, the student looked me in the eyes and asked aggressively: ‘Are you calling me racist?’ I was taken aback. Firstly, by the extent to which – in the six or so years of Howard’s campaign against ‘political correctness’ – the very idea of suggesting that someone might be racist has been elevated into a crime to rival (if not displace) racism itself. And secondly, because accusing the student of racism had not crossed my mind. I wondered what specter of a ‘politically correct’ lecturer would do such a blatantly unprofessional thing.

21. I gathered my thoughts to reply to the student: ‘I’m not implying that you are racist, any more or any less than I am. What I want you to consider is that and you I share a common ground as white Australian women and that the subject position ‘middle class white woman’ has not only shaped our heritage but continues to influence our everyday practices.’ Placing us together on the shared ground of whiteness not only defined this particular situation; it also worked against re-inscribing the subject position ‘middle-class white woman’. That is: my refusal to embody moral virtue and perform an exemplary role as the ‘good’ lecturer dedicated to the fight against racism and racists made it easier for other white students to honestly explore the ambivalence that accompanies the recognition of their race privilege.

22. Some of the Asian-Australian and Asian-American students also expressed difficulties relating their subject positions to the critical whiteness theory. To address the needs of such students in future, I would definitely include more content to directly engage Asian-Aboriginal-Australian histories and cultural forms. But having said this, the last thing critical whiteness pedagogy should do is to reintroduce the essentialist identity-politics, which have provided such fuel for neo-conservatives’ fire in recent years. So Asian-Aboriginal cultural production would need to be introduced in terms that emphasized its relevance to all Australians rather than as a means of confining Asian students to a specific ‘interest group’. And rather than assuming that students racialised as not-white are constitutively non-racist, we need to consider that they may have their own individual or collective investments in maintaining Aboriginal subordination. (See Hage 2003, 114-115)

23. Another student who was challenged by whiteness theory was from Rwanda. Easily the darkest skinned student in the entire group, she struggled to understand the reasons for her sympathy with the values and the attitudes of white Australians towards Indigenous people. It turned out that as a Tutsi, she had been raised to feel racially superior to the Hutu majority. Catholic missionaries having referred to this physically distinct minority as a lost tribe of Ethiopian Coptic Christians. Having witnessed the genocidal civil war in her country, she understood the embodied antipathy towards those with different physical features and cultural values and did not harbor a lot of hope for reconciliation in her country. She also expressed anxiety that the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty might unleash greater violence between Indigenous and white Australians than currently exists.

Lesson 3: Owning Our Relationships

24. The most useful pedagogical strategy I discovered in teaching critical whiteness theory was to begin to redefine how ‘relationships’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians are usually understood. I began the semester by proposing that everyone has had a relationship with Indigenous Australians regardless of whether they had individually met an Aboriginal person or not. And I suggested that, rather than asking ‘how can I write or speak about Aboriginal people when I haven’t met any?’, they could ask instead ‘why haven’t I met any?’. Not as an individual moral interrogation but in order to isolate one of the structural factors that separate Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. To illustrate this point I used the example of the stolen generations. I explained that the fact that many Aboriginal children were removed from their parents, sometimes at birth, did not alter the fact that a relationship that existed between them. But policies and practices of assimilation had a profound impact on the quality of that relationship. Later in the semester we went to visit an exhibition at the Liverpool City Library about the life of Aunty Nance de Vries – a stolen generations member who addressed the NSW Parliament in 1998 when the Carr government delivered an apology in response to the release of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission’s Bringing Them Home Report (De Vries and Nicoll 2001). Students’ diaries recorded the trip to Liverpool and Nancy’s interaction with them in the context of her exhibition as a highlight of the semester.

25. In focusing on the quality of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians we avoided some of the paternalist (and maternalist) tropes of reconciliation, which envisage a future of harmonious relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians following the ‘restorative justice’ accomplished by a national apology to the stolen generations. The Aunty Nance exhibition clearly demonstrated that – while it may have given official recognition to her experiences as a stolen child – the NSW government apology was ultimately unable to restore Nancy’s broken relationship with her birth family.

26. In her analysis of ‘the politics of bad feeling’ played out over the issue of an apology to the stolen generations, Sara Ahmed writes:

What is presumed in the literature on restorative justice is that injustice is caused by the failure of the social bond. The restoration of the social bond (the family, the community, the nation) is hence read as a sign of justice. Justice is also assumed to be about ‘having’ good relationships. I would argue that the struggle against injustice cannot be transformed into a manual for good relationships. Justice might then not simply be about ‘getting along’, but may preserve the right of others not to enter into relationships, ‘to not be with me’, in the first place. (Ahmed 2004, 11)

I think this encapsulates the problem of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationship precisely.

27. The invisiveness of patriarchal white sovereignty in this place has always deprived Indigenous Australians of the opportunity to decide whether or not to enter into relationship with us. And the absence of a treaty in Australia – particularly since Terra Nullius was overthrown by the High Court's Mabo decision in 1992 - suggests that a state of affairs where Indigenous people could choose whether or not to be in relationship with other Australians is currently beyond the scope of political imagination. For students to critically reflect on why this is the case, it is necessary to explicitly articulate the issue of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationships to that of property relations. For example, consider the recent statement by Amanda Vanstone, Minister for Immigration and Indigenous Affairs: "The whole notion of separateness puts indigenous Australians into a different category and they are not. They are first Australians, they are ours," (m.e.) and they deserve to get the same treatment that everybody else gets." (Australian 17-18/4/04) Another example like this through the lens of critical whiteness theory enables students to address questions such as the following: can you imagine a national future in which Australian politicians no longer refer possessively to ‘our Aboriginal people’?

Lesson 4: Never Trust A Good Middle Class White Woman

28. Having encouraged students to focus on the quality of their mediated relationships with Indigenous Australians, the last thing I wanted to do was to come across as an ideal role model of anti-racist practice. For this would have defeated the purpose of critical whiteness pedagogy. I agree with Ellsworth’s criticisms of ‘white ally’ pedagogy in this context for ignoring:

... the complexities of social positionings and the structures of social relations that come from the shifts and multiplicities described above ... its hard to avoid the paternalistic connotations of white ally as helper ... the specifics of if when and how our help as white people is appropriate, wanted or useful are crucial. Yet the complex situatedness of being an ally is seldom addressed in curricula focused on creating white allies. (Ellworth, 1997: 268)

I felt it was my responsibility as a teacher of critical whiteness theory to honestly relate the difficulties as well as the delights that any white Australian will experience in trying to improve the quality of our relationship with Indigenous Australians.

29. White people can be painfully aware of the racialised conditions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjectivities both in the past and in the present even as we perpetuate these conditions. I’ve sometimes referred to this ambivalent condition as ‘disgenuousness’ (See Nicoll 2001, 2002) but – to the extent that white subjects are often not aware at the time of what we are doing and saying in relation to Indigenous Australians and their interests – this term fails to entirely encapsulate the problem. It is unfortunate that we often come to awareness only when Indigenous subjects are able to demonstrate the negative effects of our representations or actions. So ‘retrospective consciousness’ might be a better way to describe a white subject position that functions somewhere between unconsciousness in a psychoanalytic sense and disgenuousness in the sense of constructing a deliberate misrepresentation of the self.

30. The affective states that accompany this ‘retrospective consciousness’ are most frequently experienced as guilt and/or shame. (See Probyn 2000 and Ahmed 2004) But to the extent these effects are individualized, they can actively work against recognition of the collective nature of whiteness. That is: the experience of ‘my white guilt and/or shame’ can paradoxically prevent me from connecting with other white people to address the real problem that we constitute for Indigenous Australians. This is why I think that it’s important to first try to ‘resolve’ our discomfort at the recognition of whiteness in individual(ising) affects of shame and/or guilt. Ultimately the aim of critical whiteness theory should be to unsettle white subjectivity rather than create opportunities for individual confession, catharsis and redemption. A more effective model for critical whiteness pedagogy would be for white people to examine why Indigenous claims on this place unsettle us so deeply. This sort of collective project seems to me to respond to Moreton-Robinson’s suggestion that, rather than focusing on ‘the multipliclicitous, fractured subject’, white feminists need to theorize how to give up power (2001, 3). While Australian students will only be inspired and empowered to undertake this challenge to the extent that their teachers are also prepared to reflect on the operation of our white race privilege. For example ...

31. In spite of everything I have learned about the experience of the stolen generations and the attitudes of white foster parents and policy-makers, I have sometimes been blind to the materialistic values which shape relationships in my everyday life. Like many white middle class 35-ish Australian women, I am childless (or child-free?). And I am aware that my not (yet?) reproducing is seen as a national problem just as high rates of Aboriginal teenage pregnancies are seen as a national problem. The adult mortality of Indigenous men is 21 years less than non-Indigenous men and there is a 20- year disparity in favor of non-Indigenous women. This can lead to a situation that is sometimes called ‘granny fatigue’. My partner is a Nunga woman (also without children of her own) so I’ve experienced this syndrome at fairly close quarters through our Aboriginal social networks. As a childfree (or childless?) woman without responsibility for children in my own extended family, I’ve sometimes wanted to help out in cases of ‘granny fatigue’ by taking the little kids out of one particular grandmother’s house for a couple of hours here and there for a trip to ‘Maccas’ or the beach.

32. In one case, it took the intervention of another Koori grandmother to make me recognize that my determination to ‘help out’ by taking the kids out for the day could very well make matters worse for one particular family. She pointed out that if I really wanted to do something positive it would be much better for me to give granmy a break by going out with the kids and both or one of their parents. Since then a car, I could take the family out for a drive and a picnic. This seemed to be so obvious yet I had never thought of it. Why not? And why did I assume the children were simply available to be ‘taken out’ by a middle class 35ish Australian woman? I am childless (or child-free?). And I am aware that my not (yet?) reproducing is seen as a national problem just as high rates of Aboriginal teenage pregnancies are seen as a national problem. The adult mortality of Indigenous men is 21 years less than non-Indigenous men and there is a 20-year disparity in favor of non-Indigenous women. This can lead to a situation that is sometimes called ‘granny fatigue’. My partner is a Nunga woman (also without children of her own) so I’ve experienced this syndrome at fairly close quarters through our Aboriginal social networks. As a childfree (or childless?) woman without responsibility for children in my own extended family, I’ve sometimes wanted to help out in cases of ‘granny fatigue’ by taking the little kids out of one particular grandmother’s house for a couple of hours here and there for a trip to ‘Maccas’ or the beach.

33. Having established the existence of a relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia, the next step is to explore the political, legal and ethical grounding of this relationship. In other words, we need to explain to students why the material ‘problems’ for Indigenous people created by the rise and persistence of whiteness as a regime of power that specifically mobilizes the idea of ‘race’ resist address
through relativist concepts such as 'cultural difference' and demand consideration in relation to fundamental questions of sovereignty.

34. In a detailed critique of David Roediger’s introduction to Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White, Ruth Frankenberg (2001) illustrates the ease with which white intellectuals slip from criticizing whiteness to reinscribing it by invoking a homogenous "we" in appealing to our readers, students and/or the nation itself. This helps us to understand why the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty must underpin effective critical whiteness pedagogy in Australia. For once we discount Indigenous sovereignty, the national "we" invoked by white Australian writers establishes a binary opposition making Indigenous Australians the incorporated term as 'our Indigenous people'. And this perpetuates a focus on them, their "cultural difference" and "problems" associated with this difference. The right-wing twist on this focus simply substitutes Aboriginal "privileges" for "problems" through a truly disingenuous juxtaposition of the situation of the most 'successful' blacks to that of the most 'downtrodden' whites. In contrast, the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty shifts the focus altogether. Rather than centering on Aboriginal problems or privileges, Indigenous sovereignty re-presents patriarchal white sovereignty - as well as secondary investments that non-white immigrants may have in it - as the problem.

35. As long as Indigenous sovereignty continues to be dismissed (as an "impractical rights agenda") there is literally no ground for better relationships between Indigenous and other Australians. Aboriginality will continue to be constructed as an object on which white (and to a lesser extent non-white) Australians act. And whether such actions are to be applauded or regretted will continue to occupy the centre of national debate. In this context, as I've argued elsewhere, (Nicoll, 2002) the question for critical whiteness theory to ask is not: 'Is there Indigenous sovereignty?' but 'What is the relationship of other Australians, in the name of whom national sovereignty is claimed and defended, to this Indigenous sovereignty?'

36. My teaching in 'Gender, Race and Australian Identities' used critical whiteness pedagogy to present the ground of Indigenous Sovereignty as the place where all Australians come into relationship. And it presented whiteness as that which historically removed and continues to remove that ground – initially through Terra Nullius and policies and practices of assimilation and, most recently, through restrictive native title legislation. Once Indigenous sovereignty was taken into account, the contradictions inherent in the rhetoric of reverse racism, which attempts to make victims out of the beneficiaries of Indigenous dispossession, became clear. This enabled us to determine more precisely where we stand, as individuals and as members of different but always already racialised collectivities, in relation to a broader, national 'possessive investment in patriarchal whiteness.' (Moreton-Robinson 2002b) Finally, to return to Perera’s concerns about perpetuating a 'drama of binary black/white relations', my experience suggests that when we acknowledge the ground of Indigenous sovereignty the axis of national drama begins to shift, enabling white Australians and non-Indigenous Australians racialised as non-white to explore less invasive ways of being towards those in whose sovereignty we stand.

Fiona Nicoll is a lecturer in Cultural Studies at the University of Queensland and Vice President of the Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association. Her research areas include queer theory, Australian nationalist subjectivity, cultural economies of gambling and reconciliation and Indigenous sovereignities. Email: fnicoll@uq.edu.au

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Bibliography


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