
GOING WHITE:

CLAIMING A RACIALISED IDENTITY THROUGH

THE WHITE AUSTRALIA POLICY

by Anne Barton

In reflecting on my identity as the great granddaughter of Sir Edmund Barton, Australia's first Prime Minister and one of the architects of the White Australia Policy, I attempt a socially responsible discursive mapping of my white identity as a beneficiary of white nation building. A robust and honest reflection on my racialised identity aims to show that, as a white Australian, I can only become part of the solution when I recognise the degree to which I am part of the problem, not because I am white, but because of my investment in white privilege.

White privilege is the other side of racism. It confers benefits on those of us who are white in the form of naturalised entitlements that are socially formed. When I look into the mirror and see a human being (instead of my blue eyed white face), white privilege is at work. This is because although people with my skin colour are a small proportion of the world's people, it is our white faces I see everywhere in the world that 'matters': media, academia, business, justice, government, and so on. White privilege is rarely acknowledged, it is carefully invisible, and 'normal' in the Western world.

This manifests in a series of disconnections from the majority of the world: as a white person I have the luxury of not hearing what people of colour say about me or my people, and therefore do not see the whole picture. As a white person my world view is a silent referent for all forms of knowledge, of acting, and of being, so I partake of what Chakrabarty calls '*inequality of ignorance*'.¹ I am rewarded for this ignorance by an open invitation to partake carelessly in utilising resources and power without acknowledgement or rightful payment, because I carry my whiteness wherever I go. I live in a world that overvalues me because of my skin colour and which continually reinforces my sense of entitlement.

Kevin Rudd's 2008 apology acknowledged the nation's 'unfinished business' and the role the past plays in shaping the present and the future. The promise of

the apology- a 'new future' of respect, of constitutional recognition, of transforming the way the nation thinks about itself- remains unfulfilled. In this paper I contend that this could not be otherwise without a discourse, encompassing the personal and national, which acknowledges the benefits that continue to accrue to white Australians from Australia's history as a white nation, whether or not we want to, and despite any other oppressions we experience.

This paper aims to explore what it means to be white in a white settler society, drawing on critical race theory and whiteness studies, as well as reflection on my own status as a privileged white subject with a particularly personal connection to white nation building. My capacity for reflection and for analysis of unequal power structures is a result of working for ten years in the disability and homelessness fields, then for three years as a support worker for a group of people who were or had been homeless. Through this work I got a close up look at what happens when you are on the bottom structurally, and by aligning myself with these groups I saw the way they were made voiceless and invisible by the attitudes and actions of people like me.

In May 2001, I took part in the Melbourne Centenary Federation celebrations as a descendant of Edmund Barton. The complexity of my feelings about 'outing' myself as a descendant, and the subsequent flurry of media interest, provoked me into an examination of my identity and lived experience as a privileged white Australian with a personal connection to Federation and the White Australia Policy through my great grandfather.

An important component of this process was an introduction to whiteness studies as part of a Masters Program I undertook at RMIT University Melbourne in 2008. I wrote about Rudd's apology using a theoretical framework of whiteness studies and presented on this paper at the Australian Critical Race and Whiteness

Studies Association 'Reorienting Whiteness' Conference in December 2008. There I heard Aileen Moreton-Robinson deliver the keynote address and understood that solely on the basis of being white, I am implicated in a system of racism. I realised that no matter what position I take about racism, whether I am overtly racist or if I work to end racism, the privileges I gain from being born with white skin colour are woven into the fabric of this society and flow to me anyway. The decks are always stacked in my favour and those are the decks I deal with.

During my presentation I asked the white workshop participants to talk in pairs about how they benefit from being white. This proved fascinating. Most people complied, and afterwards some showed me the emotional result – tears, anger, fear. From this I learned important lessons: intellectualising whiteness allows for a disconnect with its lived experience; white people do not have safe places to heal from the hurtful effects of whiteness; whiteness draws power from how bad white people feel about themselves.

Since 2008 I have been making race my issue – 'going white'. I acknowledge the complexity of theoretical approaches to whiteness studies and the way different oppressions, of which racism is one, interconnect. I continue to bring an analysis of oppression to the ways that I too am a target of oppression, through the operation of sexism. However, it is becoming clearer to me that oppressions are shored up by a socially validated pull to see ourselves as victims of oppression rather than agents. My decision has thus been to explore with integrity and honesty my whiteness and the privileges that flow from it. For example, my easy access to education, employment, and other resources means I look and sound 'right' in the eyes of other white privileged people, which gives me more access to those resources. I also have the privilege of doing nothing instead of doing the right thing, without being held accountable.

RUDD'S APOLOGY TO THE STOLEN GENERATIONS

The experience of hearing former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd say 'sorry' was cathartic. I noticed it had a profound effect on me and my white middle class work colleagues. In the moment, it was hopeful, it was healing, it was right. A closer reading of the apology, however, revealed it to be a more complex gesture.

Rudd's apology in February 2008 was clearly a relief from and antidote to the rigid practice of whiteness by the Howard government, yet at the same time it introduced what might be called the new softer whiteness of the

Rudd government. Rudd could bask in the moral glow of delivering on a righteous promise and the statesmanship of speaking a truth that had been silenced. Other white settler nations heard and responded. Yet the apology continued an Australian political tradition of framing the state's response to Indigenous people around disadvantage, not around rights. Rudd's proposal for a new partnership of respect, cooperation and mutual responsibility to close the gap in education, health and employment through the formation of a joint policy commission, though apparently heartfelt, ignored the substantial issues of sovereignty, treaty, land rights, and our foundational myth of *terra nullius*.

The apology was another in a long line of attempts to create a national identity of one nation reconciled to its past on white terms. The apology to some people for some of the wrongs perpetrated by the white settler societies took on enough symbolic gravity to morph into a grand gesture of reconciliation sweeping aside all other issues. In essence it continued the national defensive project that was embodied in the *Restricted Immigration Act 1901*, otherwise known as the White Australia Policy.

With this legislation the new nation trumpeted its racial identity – Australia for the white man! It was aimed at excluding those who were not white and therefore did not belong. Indigenous people were excluded in ways that continued the genocidal program of the British colonisers when they were rendered invisible in the Constitution, a logical consequence of the doctrine of *terra nullius* (land belonging to no one). In 1788 Indigenous people were considered too primitive to have title to land under English common law. In 2008 the apology framed them as still in a separate category to Australians, with a 'gap' between 'us' and 'them' that needed to be closed to 'they' could be like 'us'. This led me to examine the Act in the context of Australian whiteness.

THE WHITE AUSTRALIA POLICY

In *Empire*, Niall Ferguson lists the more important features disseminated by the British throughout the empire as 'the English language, English forms of land tenure, Scottish and English banking, the common law, Protestantism, team sports, the limited or 'night watchman' state, representative assemblies and the idea of liberty'.² All very familiar, because Australia was and is a true child of empire. In a speech about Federation, delivered in 1900, Edmund Barton speaks of Australia as 'a powerful unit of a mighty empire', peopled by 'the purest example of the parent stock to be found outside those isles... furthest in distance, closest in kinship'.³

The new nation, soon to be federated, is 'aglow with the instinct of popular freedom', and is one of the 'great, free, independent nations' of the British Empire.⁴

Barton's grand vision was for a great new democratic nation unhindered by the constraints of aristocratic privilege and free from the impossibility of a peaceful mix of races – a lesson 'learnt' from Radical Reconstruction in the US. When in the same speech Barton stated, 'It cannot be long before the immigration of persons and races not wanted in Australia will be regulated by one equable law',⁵ he is referring to replacing the restrictive immigration legislation of the colonies with the *Restricted Immigration Act 1901*. The shift from linked colonies on the Australian continent to a federated nation embedded Australian whiteness as above all a defensive project. After all, a nation based on an act of theft of land from its Indigenous people must continue to defend what has been taken. This is my flawed heritage – nation building and defensiveness.

WHITE PRIVILEGE AND IDENTITY

The institutionalisation of white privilege has been articulated by many, from the seminal writers on whiteness in the 1990s such as Frankenberg and bell hooks, to more recent writers such as McIntosh, Kendall and Pease.⁶ I will not attempt here to do more than acknowledge the importance of the structural maintenance of white privilege. My focus is on mapping my identity as beneficiary of white privilege, in an attempt to throw light on how white privilege is both installed and perpetrated.

Peggy McIntosh, in her article *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, identified 26 daily effects of white privilege in her life.⁷ She also noted the pressure to avoid noticing white privilege due to the power of the myths that are challenged when it is examined. McIntosh ends by asking, what do we do with the knowledge of our privilege? She notes that it is an open question as to whether recipients of white privilege use our unearned advantage and arbitrarily awarded power towards systemic change. Her point is important, as one of the key mechanisms of white privilege is to remove we who are privileged from situations that will show us why it is important for us to change it. Physical separation and distance between the lived experience of people of colour and that of whites operates to make white privilege invisible to those of us with it.

As a recipient of an exclusionary policy which framed the racialised identity of my country and its 'real' people, I

carry in my invisible knapsack the legacy of the White Australia Policy. It has provided me and my people with a white nation in which we flourish, but at a considerable cost to our humanity. I continually benefit from this as I move about this country.

Part of this legacy is an inherited defensiveness, a requirement for me to protect my privileges, including what my people took and continue to take, from others that may do the same. The result has been and continues to be atrocities, theft and violence. This is characteristic of colonisation throughout history. My legacy, it turns out, is a continuation of centuries of violence and greed.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

My challenge is to reconcile this deeply flawed inheritance with a desire to honour Barton's role in the founding of this nation. I am proud of my ancestor. The more I learn about him, the more I realise I would have loved him (as so many of his colleagues did). His grand vision, his commitment to nation building, his capacity to find the workable compromise, his concern with honour and service, and his cheeky sense of humour, are inspiring and endearing. He was a man of his time. The values he and his colleagues brought to Federation were what made them the right people for the job. Our foundations as a nation deserve to be viewed through the lens of historical empathy. It becomes possible through an understanding of how white people, like all agents of oppression, get seduced, coerced and tricked into accepting what looks like something really good: privilege, resources and power. When I considered the alternatives for each of us growing up in our racist societies, it was clear we had little choice but to collude with the structures of white privilege that our families were stuck in. My understanding was based on a position that logically there could be nothing wrong with being born a white person. It is not being white that is the issue. It is that in being born and growing up white in a white settler society, I am seduced, coerced and tricked into investing in white privilege.

Courage and integrity are our tools to dismantle oppression: Courage, to map the oppression and its effects on the self, individuals, groups and human society. Integrity, to take action from the position of being an agent of that oppression. It is challenging but possible: some men, for example, continue to challenge sexism and male domination. What then happens is a discovery - there are a tribe of others passionately committed to this. There are many resources for white people who decide to challenge enculturation into whiteness. There are

many white people who work for respectful relationships, equitable structures, and inclusive institutions. Leaving white privilege is, it turns out, a global social movement.

Going white has enabled me to see that not only giving up privilege, but also giving up defending the past and the present, is required for dismantling racism. It appears to require safe places to talk about being white, to acknowledge oppressive acts and thoughts, and for white people to move beyond blame and punishment to deciding to amble our way towards connections to and partnerships with the majority of the world's people.

CONCLUSION

In talking about being white and privileged, it is necessary to be true to the logical consequences of understanding that mechanisms 'produce' people with investment in white privilege. These, I have argued, are mechanisms that seduce, coerce and trick people into this investment. They are perpetrated by ordinary decent folks born into white settler societies. They are embedded into our institutions, discourses, cultural expressions and become 'normal'. They draw power from silence and invisibility. They function, in Australia, to perpetuate the defensive project embodied in the White Australia Policy and continually re-enacted by those of us who are part of the dominant society.

One act of resistance to a flawed heritage is to speak up about that heritage. To move forward requires an acceptance of the past in its entirety, and of its continuing effects on the present. It requires an understanding of the dynamics of oppression/privilege as damaging to all humans, not only to people experiencing discrimination. If we as a nation are going to see constitutional change and a new future, we must accept our flawed heritage and speak up.

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- 1 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton University Press, 2000) 28.
- 2 Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (Penguin Books, 2003)23.
- 3 Edmund Barton, 'Speech about Federation' delivered in Sydney, 1900, occasion not recorded <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.ms-ms51-5-977-s1>>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 See Ruth Frankenberg, *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* (Duke University Press, 1997);

bell hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (Holt, 1995); Peggy McIntosh, 'White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack' in Paula Rothenberg, *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism* (Worth Publishers, 3rd Edn, 2008); Frances E Kendall, *Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships Across Race* (Routledge, 2006); Bob Pease, *Undoing Privilege. Unearned Advantage in a Divided World* (Zed Books, 2010).

- 7 McIntosh, above n 5,125-126.

Err Sorry... Ur place or mine?

Teena McCarthy

Handmade plaster cast rabbits, and fabric, wood boomerang, Australian Flag, red fabric & acrylic paint

This installation depicts the rabbits as the colonisers invading the place of arrival 'invasion'. A 'payback' from the rabbits as they take over the colony!

