The whiteness of climate change

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Abstract: This article examines two major debates in contemporary Australian discourses on the nation: climate change and whiteness studies. It is primarily concerned with establishing a framework for connecting the two discourses, and in that process it raises pivotal questions about how narratives about contemporary Australia feed on particular versions of the nation's past.

Keywords: whiteness studies; climate change; nation

Australia Day is a national occasion for soul searching, which is indicative of a healthy propensity for asking reflective, difficult questions about the past and future directions of Australian society. To raise wide-ranging questions regarding the mechanism of Australian society also invites dissension, as there are several competing Australian identity narratives — some mutually exclusive. 2010 was no exception, when then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd stood by his earlier announced preference for a 'Big Australia' with an estimated Australian population of 35 million by 2050. The ABC's *7.30 Report* had focused on the problems created by an increased population in discussions before Australia Day.[1] The idea of a 'Big Australia' is the latest version of a range of positive Australian responses to population growth as an aspirational goal intrinsically linked, in the view of its advocates, to future economic growth and international influence. An earlier but still fairly recent version is the Australian Population Institute's campaign for a greater Australia including a bigger population in 1999.[2] Further back, anxieties of depopulation haunted the Australian colonies during substantial periods until the Gold Rush in the 1850s, and after the second world war it was the country's capacity to defend itself coupled with the idea of Australia Unlimited which drove the biggest percentage-based increase in the nation's population. Opposition to the idea of population growth primarily through large-scale immigration has over time come from a number of quarters. Anti-Asian immigration lobbies, conservationists and nationalists have made up the major groups here. With fluctuating emphases in the pro- and anti-immigration lobbies, the debate over the ideal population size for Australia has a long history.

In this light Rudd's statement seems hardly to merit a great deal of attention. Even so, while it would be an overstatement to claim that it was Rudd's Big Australia enthusiasm which led to his later deposition as Prime Minister, it contributed to a view of a Prime Minister at odds with the electorate. Equally striking among the factors contributing to his fall was the failed attempt to push an EMS (Emissions Trading Scheme) through the Senate. This last was connected to the embarrassing *COP15* in which he invested a significant amount of energy and hence prestige. But in the end, it was Rudd's differences with the Australian mining industry over the mining profits' tax that confirmed his fate. All the above elements are most acutely concerned with the environment and linked to the core question of what drives, and what *should drive*, Australian society. The hung parliament, an outcome of the general election in August 2010, confirmed the image of a divided Australian society when it came to potential responses to issues of climate change,[3] population size and the environment-degrading mining industry. Guy Pearse's apt neologism, 'quarry vision', in his *Quarterly essay* on the same subject, illustrates how the mining industry in the national imaginary has come to be seen as synonymous with the welfare of the Australian nation, well beyond any actual economic importance and benefits.[4] Population growth as the result of large-scale immigration on the other hand has once again emerged as a prominent site of the nation's anxieties about the future. This takes place simultaneously with a worry over a declining birth rate. Hence since the mid-1970s the birthrate in Australia has remained below a population replacement level. Yet these two discourses live separate lives in the popular imagination and in political discourse.

The anxieties over climate change, and more broadly, environmental concerns on the one hand, and the concern over Australia's future population size on the other, represent separate moments of crisis in the nation's narrative, even if environment and demography are obviously connected through the trope of sustainability. This is again connected to the broader underlying cultural history of Australia's post-settlement/post-invasion evolution. The concern over environmental issues historically and contemporarily has received much attention, just as the question over Australia's population size and cultural composition continues to be a national obsession. However, linking the two through their deeper cultural historical affiliation has received little scholarly attention. I am going to argue that they can be connected discursively and that the link can be established by exploring a broader national anxiety that can be labelled as whiteness in crisis.

To talk of whiteness in crisis is to invoke whiteness studies, which has a patchy academic history in Australia with the publication of sporadic articles rather than a broad body of scholarship over the last decade or so.[5] Whiteness studies internationally is a broad field that de-naturalises predominant perspectives on Western societies and questions the premises on which white societies are built. This is not a new concern, but what is new about the approach is its foregrounding of how whiteness makes 'non-whiteness' visible in particular patrolled and problematised ways, while rendering itself invisible as an idealised mainstream norm. In Australia, whiteness studies have been primarily concerned with the connections between colonial Australia and its colour

regime, the White Australia policy, and the continued formal and informal discrimination against non-Anglo Australians also after the formal end of the White Australia policy. Whiteness studies in Australia builds on a number of insights garnered from a few highly profiled academic works with Ghassan Hage's *White Nation: Fantasies of a White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (1998) as its most prominent reference point.

Yet whiteness studies has not until now engaged with environment studies. *Whitening Race* for example, which has become an opening classic of the field, makes no references to the environment, other than through the book cover that shows a characteristically Australian parched, cracked landscape. The absence of a link between literature on whiteness and on climate change represents a curious gap since both discourses have had, and continue to have, enormous influence on perceptions of Australia's cultural identity since the beginnings of colonial Australia. Seen in the *longue durée* of Australian cultural history, whiteness studies can be read as the latest manifestation of a critique of Anglo-Australian centricity. In similar fashion environmental concerns — in their latest focus, climate change — can be traced through Australia's post-contact history as the articulation of the differences between white and Indigenous ways of adapting to the environment at levels both abstract and empirical. Hence one can begin philosophically to discuss competing white and Indigenous ways of conceptualising sovereignty, or more practically, to discuss long term sustainable traditional Aboriginal farming traditions *vis-a-vis* unsustainable, introduced European farming and urban landscape traditions. My point is that these levels are connected, and that a failure to make this connection binds the analysis to a circumscribed non-Indigenous frame of reference. National territorial sovereignty is considered an absolute arbiter which national and international judicial frameworks are unable to conceive of as dividable between different cultural conceptualisations recognised within a contemporary shared judicial framework. This conceptual framework renders Indigenous claims to sovereignty unrecognisable, except in an informal and hence secondary way.[6] Similarly, introduced farming and urban landscaping practices cannot be separated from the fact that they are protected by their status as absolute forms of ownership, which makes other competing claims on the land – for example more Indigenously informed approaches to the environment – secondary. An approach informed by Indigenous knowledges leads necessarily to a far more radical understanding of the tensions between the Australian environment and introduced farming and gardening practices, as well as introduced forms of consumption, for example the preference for introduced meat over domestic meat. It speaks volumes that Australian fauna has predominantly been seen as pests, albeit alongside a few introduced animals gone feral (rabbits, donkeys, camels, pigs etc.), whereas cattle, sheep and horses are seen as natural domesticated animals despite their long and continued record of environmental destruction.

The missing link between whiteness studies and climate change is not an isolated Australian phenomenon. Also internationally the literature is extremely limited. One

useful starting point is the blog of the American academic, Tim Wise, who draws together the two discourses globally in the following passage:

> How many climate change activists, for instance, really connect the dots between global warming and racism? Even as people of color are twice as likely as whites to live in the congested communities that experience the most smog and toxic concentration thanks to fossil fuel use? Even as heat waves connected to climate change kill people of color at twice the rate of their white counterparts? Even as agricultural disruptions due to warming — caused disproportionately by the white west — cost African nations $600 billion annually? Even as the contribution to fossil fuel emissions by people of color is 20 percent below that of whites, on average? Sadly, these facts are typically subordinated within climate activism to simple "the world is ending" rhetoric, or predictions (accurate though they may be) that unless emissions are brought under control global warming will eventually kill millions. Fact is, warming is killing a lot of people *now*, and most of them are black and brown. To build a global movement to roll back the ecological catastrophe facing us, environmentalists and clean energy advocates must connect the dots between planetary destruction and the real lives being destroyed currently, which are disproportionately of color. To do anything less is not only to engage in a form of racist marginalizing of people of color and their concerns, but is to weaken the fight for survival.[7]

While my article is not concerned with comparing the broader, even global, reality Wise establishes, to the Australia situation, I am naturally interested in the more specific implications of Wise's insistence on the interconnectedness of climate change concerns and whiteness for the Australian context. Pursuing this angle entails first the recognition that climate change and whiteness discourses are simultaneously the result of the long historical processes, which I have briefly outlined, as well as currently unfolding political agendas with important cultural implications. Secondly, it requires identifying the significant elements of the historical process and linking those with the current political discourse. Thirdly, it requires detailed comparative analyses of the two interconnected discourses. This article aims to begin this considerable work by presenting an initial framework for interconnecting the two discourses, and then move on to discuss some of the implications they have for the work that lies ahead. The framework will here be presented in the form of two signposts, which I consider pivotal to understanding the broader discursive formations that whiteness studies and climate change discourse emerge from.

Signpost 1: Australian cultural history as a discourse of whiteness, and its resistance to contemporary change:

Australia began its Western nationhood with the displacement, and attempted annihilation of Aboriginal culture, and continued after independence in 1901 to ensure that the country remained a white settler society through the bipartisan racist White

Australia Policy. This policy had two main purposes. It prevented non-white immigration, even after the category of non-white became an increasingly floating signifier, as the 20th century elapsed, and as priorities on race issues shifted. It also denied citizenship to Australia's Indigenous population and paved the way for continued discriminatory treatment through a host of policies which sought to undermine Indigenous claims on the land.

When the White Australia Policy lapsed, a carefully policed version of multiculturalism succeeded it. Since the 1990s multiculturalism has come under attack from the left because of its inherent, conceptual conservatism and from the right in a populist-driven backlash, premised on successfully orchestrated but very fuzzy ideas of Australian society's coherence being threatened by the presence, or, more acutely, the arrival of potentially subversive 'others'. Simultaneously, an Indigenous cultural struggle for recognition which gained momentum in the 1960s, met fierce resistance from the new Right, who, after its rise to power in 1996, sought to systematically dismantle Aboriginal institutional structures.

At a deeper level this signpost is characterised by the continued struggle of predominantly Anglo Australia to prevent the establishment of a narrative about Australia that is able to assert that cultural difference as crucial to any conceptualisation of Australian cultural history. While this is a struggle over historical representation, that is, over whether Australia's settlement history is a narrative of invasion or settlement, it is also a very contemporary struggle. At one end of the spectrum the new Right seeks to bury multiculturalism and resurrect assimilation. At the other end the recognition of the discrimination against Indigenous Australians and non-Anglo Australian 'others' is the historical premise on which a narrative about the acceptance of cultural difference is built.

Signpost 2: Australia's climate change discourse as a contemporary political discourse, and its failure to take on board the environment history that has led to the contemporary crisis:

Australia is a Western nation, subscribing to the capitalist, neo-liberal market ideology of the West, which in relation to climate change means it is attached to the ideology of economic growth as the solution to the problem rather than its source. Australia has a paltry environmental record, in terms of GHG (Green House Gas) emissions, fossil fuel dependence, general destruction of the environment, pressure on biodiversity, etc. The most valuable export commodity in Australia is coal and the coal industry has (with the rest of the mining industry) a determining influence on the directions of political decision-making in Australia. It helps, as has been seen during the last few years, make and un-make political leaders. But the influence of the mining industry also exists below the immediate front line of Canberra politics. One telling example of this is Professor Ross Garnaut's dual position as the head of the Climate Change Review and chairman of the mining company, Lihir. Lihir's record on depositing waste in the sea off the coast of New Guinea is surrounded by controversy, yet the issue is not whether

there are good/better or bad/worse mining companies.[8] The problem lies in the implicit argument that the fight against climate change is best served by having those whose job is contingent on making the mining industry as profitable as possible write the reports on what needs to be done generally in society to prevent climate change.

What is characteristic of this signpost is its overt concern with the future prospect of an Australian environment damaged severely by the impact of global warming. While the concern over the future in relation to climate change is obvious, the premise of the debate means other equally fundamental issues are neglected. These issues are in fact related to the deeper questions concerning what produces climate change. One is the question about the relationship between climate change, demography, immigration and the Australian way of life. Another is the question of how climate change, and more broadly the current environmental crisis in Australia, has been produced historically.

Connecting the discourses

The troubled environmental and race records outlined above are seldom central to prevailing narratives of what constitutes Australian identity. Nations construct and imagine themselves as modern platforms enabling social change. If anything the above account lists, in the spirit of Benedict Anderson's reading of Ernest Renan in *Imagined Communities*, what the Australian nation needs to forget in order to construct its own identity as well-intended, cohesive and inclusive. The process of forgetting, however, whether in the form of suppressing unpleasant historical events, or as an act of ignoring unpalatable current events, entails an active process of sidestepping or suppressing accounts which threaten to expose the underside of the dominant narrative of, for instance, successful white settlement in Australia.

The connection between past and present is critical, because the isolation of disturbing accounts about dispossession from a broadly accepted national narrative of peaceful and benevolent settlement comes back to haunt contemporary relations between white and Indigenous Australia. When dispossession is historically disconnected from the nation's narrative, it strengthens the implicit argument that contemporary Aboriginal problems are divorced from, rather than the product of, systemic violence sustained since the beginning of settler Australia. In terms of the environment, when introduced agricultural and gardening practices and their accompanying Western life style are represented as the 'natural' Australian way of life, it becomes difficult to deal with the contemporary environmental crisis in a consistent way, settling instead for individual crisis management, from bushfires to floodings.

In terms of the population growth issue the situation becomes even more complex. The settler narrative, or, if you will, the white settlement narrative, establishes Australia retrospectively as a site where the nation's narrative about what Australians are, and what drives their society, is already completed. Others may or may not be let into the nation, but the important parameters of the narrative are fixed, in that sense their inclusion, when forthcoming, is predicated on their acceptance of this narrative. One could also argue that the philosophy of economic growth as a sustainable way of life is

probably accepted by many prospective migrants. The problem arises when the crisis of sustainability becomes too apparent to be ignored, that is, when the long term unsustainability of a society's way of life becomes momentarily evident in the short term as a precursor of the real crisis. But since settler society is unable to recognise its own destructive premise, then in very practical terms it cannot see the record of environmental disasters throughout Australia's white history as the condition for acting on climate change/environmental destruction. Instead of focusing on this long historical process of environmental damage, the national narrative shifts its attention to concerns related to current damaging environmental practices. More importantly this shift enables the view that the current and future environmental crisis will be exacerbated by the inflow of people, whose 'alien' background makes them unsuited to deal with the peculiarities of Australian nature's cycle. But if the present and future migrants are in fact arriving in a society historically and currently built on an unsustainable way of life, their presence cannot be less sustainable because of their 'unaustraliannness'.

What should be clear from the above is that connecting the two signposts forces the re-situating of the nation's narrative, but it also requires re-contextualising the two central narrative strands. In the following discussion I will outline what this re-contextualisation entails.

Re-contextualising white-Aboriginal contact history in the light of whiteness studies

If contemporary Aboriginal problems are separated from their historical origin in the process of dispossession, contemporary Aboriginal disadvantages *have* to be produced by Aboriginal people themselves, which can lead, following Frantz Fanon's argument in his seminal text, *Black Skins, White Masks,* to Aboriginal people's internalisation of the problems. This is, of course, an important point, but my concern in this article is with the role whiteness plays in this process, and here the Aboriginal internalisation process is produced by whiteness's need to remain a naturalised and incontestably positive component in the nation's historical narrative. Only when the privileged position held by whites is secure can the national identity become more inclusive. Because Aboriginal people and the non-white 'migrant' are the two most threatening markers, they can only be produced as never-quite-adapted 'others'. Indigenes appear ironically as simultaneous victims and violators, but never as a norm. To change this representation of the indigene would entail not only the recognition of the whiteness of Australian history and the national imaginary, something that has been recognised, but also a description of the process through which invisibility and visibility have been and continue to be produced, from the original act of dispossession to contemporary interventions into Indigenous communities.

To the extent that the displacement of Aboriginal people in colonial Australia is formulated in national narratives as a story of oppression and suffering, it is measured as a black backdrop against which a bright present day Australia emerges. Hence criticism of dark episodes in the nation's history can be tolerated, and even regarded as a healthy self-questioning exercise, but cannot amount to a critique of the underlying

principles of settler society itself. To criticise the rationale of those who settled the land becomes a double act of sacrilege. It relativises the hardship and suffering of the 'pioneers' — voluntary (free settlers) as well as involuntary (convicts) — and it constructs a narrative based on racist exclusions of non-whites. This is hardly the material on which a national imaginary can be productively constructed and, as such, one could argue it is beyond expectation to ask for such a critical counter-narrative to emerge. What other nations have demonstrated this capacity for self-questioning? Yet there are examples where moments of whiteness in crisis produce the platform from which a more balanced account of the relationship between white and black Australia can be staged. One prominent example is former PM, Paul Keating's Redfern Park address in 1992, where he outlines a different white-black contact history: 'The problem starts with us, the non-Aboriginal Australians. It begins, I think, with an act of recognition. Recognition, that it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers.'[9]

Kevin Rudd's much later formal address on behalf of the Australian parliament in February 2008 is by contrast a far more conspicuous national act because of the circumstances under which it was delivered. Its emphasis on cohesiveness and healing produces a history, where the destructive acts against the stolen generations are stripped of agency. Policies were wrong, but it becomes difficult to identify those who implemented these policies and by what agency. Anonymous state bureaucracies are the culprits, and who would retrospectively wish to associate themselves with those? In Keating's address the 'we' are the non-Aboriginal Australians, that is, people – white Australians. Keating in this way recognises racism as an innate element in Australia's post-contact history, whereas Rudd speaks of a faceless, institutionalised racism abstracted from a history of deliberate actions by white settler society.

Re-contextualising the environmental crisis

The discursive focus on environmental damage and climate change is overtly on the present, rather than seeing these as the result of historical processes. This is understandable with reference to climate change, because the science itself is relatively new. It can be traced back to the 1950s,[10] and as a more broadly accepted international scientific and political platform of concern to the increasing sense of a global crisis in the 1970s, following the watershed publication, *The Limits to Growth* (1972) and later on the *Brundtland Report* (1987). In Australia, the popular breakthrough of these concerns[11] came with the publication of Tim Flannery's, *The Future Eaters* (1994), a book that also generated a documentary television series on the ABC (1998) leading to Flannery's emergence as a highly-profiled public scientist. Flannery tied the argument of environmental damage with the issue of population size, and although he makes the famous but unsubstantiated claim that Aboriginal fire-stick farming practices paved the way for the extinction of the megafauna in Australia,[12] his work is mainly known for its alarming concerns regarding Australia's future biodiversity, water supply and environmental degradation.

Flannery's relevance for my article's argument is at once peripheral and central. It is central because of the way it combines popularity (which makes it part of a national discourse) with a convincing argument that the Australian environment is in a crisis. But it is also peripheral because it engages only marginally with the issue of how cultural preferences and cultural articulations produce effects. To be more precise — though Flannery acknowledges the West's primary culpability with respect to the responsibility for global warming — historically as well as contemporarily — and although, he recognises fossil fuel dependency as a crucial driving mechanism in Western culture (and even more specifically in the US and Australia) — he does not engage in explaining which cultural processes have produced the dependency. Nor does he examine why concerted efforts to silence global warming science continue unabated except by pointing at the lobbying of the extreme Right and of the polluting industries themselves.[13] Yet, this only constitutes part of the explanation. It cannot account for the democratic support climate denialists enjoy in Australia (and the US) apart from an argument which reduces the electorate to mere puppets. And even if it is tempting to see this as evidence of an analytical deficiency on the political Right, this has, at least, to be seen in conjunction with what that political platform advocates as *its* positive vision for a future Australia. Flannery does not analyse the ideological views that support stances of the right and of the left. His pragmatic, voluntarist attitude to combating global warming prevents him from engaging with the integral elements of Australian society premised on a fossil fuel economy, land clearing, and the mining industry. His pragmatism requires him to work within the systems of the same climate denialists — systems he has already described as uninterested in engaging with climate change.

The indecisiveness which ends with the voluntarist argument in Flannery's *The Weather Makers*, also haunts his earlier watershed book, *The Future Eaters*. In both works he avers that the way 'we' (most Australians) live is unsustainable and he consequently argues that already Australia's at the time 18 million inhabitants (1994) were too many for the continent, because of their unsustainable use of resources. Yet, given this critique of a built-in unsustainability, it is curious that population control is targeted by Flannery over consumer mores — the same consumers that Flannery specifies in *The Weather Makers* as being the world's worst offenders on a per capita base. Where does this strange process of connecting and disconnecting environmental issues from the wider settlement history come from?

One place of looking for an answer to this is the article 'Can Environmental Sustainability Become the Basis for our National Identity',[14] where Flannery in a brief fashion discusses the connection between national identity and environmental history in Australia. He begins the article by pointing to the uniqueness of the Australian environment, and how this has created a unique process of coming to terms with the land, but also has led to a long history of destructive habits. On the negative front the attempt to turn Australia into a 'second England'

> reads as a rush towards 'development', which was then – and often still is – just a soft word for the destruction of Australia's resource base.

> That arrogant colonial vision left a fearful legacy, for it actually made people feel virtuous while they dealt the land the most terrible blows... It is the bitter harvest of all of this that we are reaping so abundantly today. (167-68)

Flannery's account seems final in its assessment of environmental destruction and the culturally rooted causes of it. Yet the next passage asserts, 'Today as the Australian environment subtly teaches those who listen to it, Australians are undergoing a radical reassessment of their relationship with the land' (167). This optimistic turn of events is produced primarily in Flannery's account by farmers recognising their need to come to terms with the Australian environment, and he argues their vision is also spreading to the cities. For Flannery settlement is a learning process of adapting to, in the case of Australia, an environment very different to European landscapes. The extremity of the difference combined with the relatively short history of settlement explains why the process has not yet been completed. Both the slow process of coming to terms with the environment, and the destructive impact of settlement on the environment are plausible explanations, but bringing them together constitutes a paradox, which requires that a choice be made between them. And that choice has analytical consequences, yet none are forthcoming. If Flannery's explanation hinges on nation-building, understood as a process of coming successfully to terms with the environment, replacing a narrative of colonial environmental destruction, Flannery must present the reader with a moment of change that entails rejecting the accepted knowledge of the past, and a tipping balance in favour of the environmental conservation. Yet, this is nowhere to be identified. Hence in his conceptualisation of Australia's environmental history, destruction and nation-building go hand in hand, and produce in his account an irreconcilable contradiction, precisely because whiteness is simultaneously his norm for conceptualising Australian history, and the norm that causes the destruction of the environment.

The whiteness of the climate change debate in contemporary political discourse

In the lead-up to the election of Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister, two agendas played a central role, the prevention of climate change and reconciliation. The election was followed by his immediate departure to Bali to pledge Australia would sign up to the Kyoto agreement, and on February 28th 2008 he gave a public apology on behalf of the Parliament of Australia to the stolen generations. Here, it would seem that, after the Howard years, a Prime Minister was finally prepared to address the uncomfortable unfinished business of Australia's race record and to address Australia's responsibility to actively contribute to the fight against climate change. However, while the apology to the stolen generations will remain an immensely important symbolic act in favour of reconciliation, even if it does not address the broader social issues, Rudd's intervention in the international climate change negotiations prior to and during the 2009 Copenhagen fiasco marked the beginning of his political decline. Copenhagen demonstrated primarily the ability of white nations to close ranks when their world order was threatened. The collapse of COP15 made the Emissions Trading Scheme virtually impossible to push through. Even the watered-down reduction levels proposed for an Emissions Trading Scheme, which suggested a desire to appear to act, rather than

be effectual, met fierce resistance in the Senate. Had Rudd been more successful he would have had an enormous task ahead of him to persuade or force Australians to become climate conscious. The dangers of seeming too climate-change conscious has been clear on the right side of the political establishment leading in the end to the election of a climate change denialist as opposition leader. The same leader had expressed reservations about issuing an apology to the stolen generations,[15] thus demonstrating the connection between attitudes towards climate change and the issue of reconciliation as central ingredients to any vision of Australia. However, rather than seeing these two episodes as manifestations of the usual divide between left and right in Australian politics, it is also possible, and analytically more productive, to see them as displays of whiteness in crisis. What they show in this light is an inability, or unwillingness, to make visible the invisibility of white privilege established through a history of black displacement and the dismissal of a native environment. Aborigines stood in the way of settlement, as Australian nature stood in the way of making pre-colonial soil amenable to European farming practices. This coexisted, and still coexists, with an emphatic reading of Aboriginal culture and Australia's peculiar nature as the two singular most important factors in establishing Australia's uniqueness.[16] To explain this paradox of mutually exclusive narratives, it is necessary to understand the disconnected ways in which issues are discussed, which again is the result of a long-term evolution of these fault lines. The category of whiteness is useful as an analytical tool, because it connects a range of otherwise separately analysed issues, or deliberately disconnected discourses, at a societal level. 'Whiteness' in Australia is embedded in political practices, in economic preferences, and in the continued 'white' reflection of what Australia should be.

From national to international whiteness

This article's preoccupation has been with the domestic Australian situation and its relations to the evolution of a national culture. Both climate change and whiteness are broad categories which, as Peter Singer argues, become truly troubling at an international level:

> We put the interests of our fellow citizens far above those of citizens of other nations, whether the reason for doing so is to avoid damaging the economic interests of Americans at the cost of bringing floods to the people of Bangladesh... While we do all these things, most of us unquestioningly support declarations proclaiming that all human have certain rights, and that all human life is of equal worth.[17]

Singer's argument is simultaneously a statement about coming to terms with the historically constructed inequalities of our global reality, and an acute reminder of the connection between whiteness and privilege also on a global scale. It is also of course an invitation to engage.

Notes

1. http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/archives/2010/730_201001.htm
2. See Vizard, Marting and Watts (eds). *Australia's Population Challenge*. Camberwell: Penguin, 2003.
3. It is possible to argue that even the Liberal party was hung over this issue: although there were other issues involved in the fight between Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull, the climate change was right at the centre.
4. Guy Pearse, 'Quarry Vision: Coal, Climate Change and the End of the Resources Boom' in *Quarterly* 33, 2009. Tim Flannery has put forward the same argument in his conversation with Robert Manne in April 2010. See, http://www.themonthly.com.au/after-copenhagen-tim-flannery-conversation-robert-manne-2402.
5. The only collections of articles on whiteness in Australia are *Whitening Race*, edited by Aileen Moreton-Robinson 2004, the 'Approaching Whiteness' section of the AHR, issue 42 2007 edited by Anne Brewster and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, and *Unmasking Whiteness: Race Relations and Reconciliation*, edited by Belinda McKay 1999. Discursively, the field draws upon whiteness studies in the U.S. (Ruth Frankenberg) and to a lesser extent Britain (Richard Dyer). It emerged at the same time as Asian-Australian studies (in the late 1990s), with which it shares a concern over the orchestrated backlash from the New Right against multiculturalism and Aboriginal Australia.
6. Suvendrini Perera is one of several scholars who have discussed competing definitions of sovereignty. See, Suvendrini Perera (ed.). *Our Patch: Enacting Australian Sovereignty post-2001*. Perth: Network Books, 2007 and Suvendrini Perera. *Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats and Bodies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
7. http://www.redroom.com/blog/tim-wise/with-friends-like-these-who-needs-glenn-beck-racism-and-white-privilege-liberal-left. Accessed on September 30, 2010.
8. http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/pacbeat/stories/201009/s3007872.htm. Accessed September 30, 2010.
9. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQyqyyRJn94. Accessed September 30, 2010. Fiona Probyn-Rapsey also discusses Keating's apology in the context of the difference between guilt and complicity as a way of distinguishing between immediate (or situational) and structural forms of responding to moments of whiteness in crisis. See Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, 'Complicity, Critique and Methodology: Australian Con/texts', in David Carter and Wang Guanglin (eds), *Modern Australian Criticism and Theory*, Qingdao: China Ocean University Press, 2010 218-26.
10. See Spencer R. Weart. *The Discovery of Global Warming*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard U.P., 2003.
11. Conservation has a strong presence in Australian history, though it is also important to point out that conservationists have only in specific cases been able to stop or prevent large-scale environmental destruction from going ahead. The Green movement had already set the agenda for environmental concerns since the 1970s, and the clashes over

deforestation, the loss of tropical rainforest, and most famously perhaps, the Franklin Dam dispute, but I am arguing that Flannery's book turned these collective disputes into a broader national concern. For a history of conservation movements in Australia see, Drew Hutton and Libby Connors. *A History of the Australian Environment Movement.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

12. As critics have pointed out it is impossible to say, whether Aborigines did or did not contribute to the extinction of the megafauna in Australia. Paleontological research is preoccupied with questions of the long term evolution of humans and other species, or in its broadest definition any forms of organic life. It is necessarily characterised by a great deal of uncertainty and speculation. The problem with Flannery's unsubstantiated claim lies in the repercussions his assertion has for the crucial discussion of the sustainability of pre-European contact Aboriginal society. This again has implications for the degree to which European farming practices can be seen to be characterised by their destructive effects on the environment, as a contrast to Aboriginal 'best practice', to use a contemporary buzzword.

13. See his conversation with Robert Manne, http://www.themonthly.com.au/after-copenhagen-tim-flannery-conversation-robert-manne-2402

14. *Australia's Population Challenge* 166-177.

15. See for example, http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2008/s2151585.htm

16. For one interesting situated account of the cultural difference approach to managing the environmental crisis, see Jessica K. Weir, *Murray River Country: An Ecological Dialogue with Traditional owners.* Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press: Canberra, 2009.

17. Singer 152.

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