

*Black Thoughts on Whiteness: Perspectives from an Aboriginal Woman*

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When I was asked to write ‘something on whiteness’ by a friend of mine, I thought “what” – what can I write on ‘whiteness’? I am an Aboriginal woman, not a white woman. I don’t know the mechanisms of white minds although I’ve been married to a Dutch man for many years”. The request from my friend was food for thought. Although I had tried to fathom the mind of my husband, colour played no part of our sometimes heated disagreements. It was more of a gender struggle, a clash of wills between a husband and wife; a man and a woman - unless I called him a ‘bull-headed Dutchman’ and he would call me a ‘hard-headed Aboriginal woman’. But his whiteness and my Aboriginality never entered the equation when tempers flared over some trivial domestic matter during our forty-five year union. So when Anne asked me to write my perspectives on ‘whiteness’, I thought, “Here’s a challenge. How do I begin this paper”? My best approach to this quandary was to be honest with myself, the reader and the white people who have helped me over the years. With this problem solved, here are my perspectives on ‘whiteness’ and ‘white privilege’.

From an early age I have had two images of whiteness ingrained in my mind – white people and ghosts. Both frightened the life out of me when I was a child living the Aboriginal lifestyle with my parents, siblings and extended Nyoongar family in the South West of Western Australia. My first memories of white people began when I was about four years old and lived with my parents at the Moore River Native Settlement (van den Berg) situated near Mogumber, a small settler farming community. Many Aboriginal people and children throughout Western Australia were incarcerated in this prison-like compound. This history of Western Australia, in fact, throughout all of Australia during the post colonial years, was the norm for the Aboriginal people – placed in missions and settlements, or harassed by the authorities if they happened to live on the outskirts of some white town or in their own traditional homelands. Anyone with white skin was the enemy! Is it any wonder that Aboriginal children were scared and told to ‘run and hide in the bush’ if the adults saw a white person coming close? It meant danger for all concerned and to run and hide was our best defence.

I remember there were times when my parents had to speak to the white authorities. I used to be so scared and would hide behind my mother’s skirt for protection. Can you imagine a tiny child frightened to death of seeing a white person? Lucky for our family we weren’t taken from our parents, but the fear was always present, lurking in the background ready to pounce. In considering the black history of Australia since colonisation, Aboriginal people were nothing more than vermin or at best, consigned

under *The Fisheries Act of 1909* (Haebich) to be classed, not as human beings, but under the native plant and animal life. The colonial and early post-colonial history written in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century tells of the many massacres committed against Aboriginal people by white people. So is it any wonder we were constantly afraid of white people?

The form of ghosts was also a worry for Aboriginal children. We would cower when we listened to adults telling tales about their experiences with seeing these supernatural phenomenon. It is funny but these ghosts were always white ghosts, never black ghosts. The 'boogey mans' (bogy men) were our Nyoongar term for the wudarjis, our little hairy men who lived in the bush or in caves and would grab disobedient children and steal them away. We learned to heed our mother's warnings of straying too far from camp. Yet somehow or other, these little hairy men weren't half as bad as seeing a ghostly white figure floating towards us with hands outstretched, ready to grab us. We children would shake in our terror. When we went to bed we would huddle under the blankets, frightened of coming up for air in case we saw a white, grotesque face looking down at us. Now, of course, I'm not too scared of ghosts but these two images of whiteness stayed with me for years.

When I commenced school I had to overcome my fear of white people. My parents were adamant that I attend school, no arguments. Their reasons were that if their children did not go to school, we would be taken from them and placed in a mission or settlement like they both were. They did not want this experience for their children with the result that unless we were sick, school was our forced destination. For me though, there were too many white people, both adults and children. In time I learned to accept school life and I even learned to stand up for myself when those same children believed we Aboriginal children were inferior to them and called us names, which resulted in many fights at school. We experienced the effects of white privilege in the school yard when our families and heritage came into question. Because we were Nyoongars and came from the lowest socio-economic class and lived in dire circumstances, we learned at an early age to obey white adults and their laws, and to try to stay out of trouble. Our parents suffered the indignities of being treated with white paternalism but were powerless to stop the abuse to their adulthood. We lived in two worlds – the Nyoongar world where we practised the cultural ways of our ancestors during the weekends and holidays, but come Mondays, we had to accept white rules and regulations as decreed by the government of Western Australia; and accept that white privilege was not for us. We were a darker shade of pale.

As I grew older and was sent to high school in Perth, I became more orientated to the white world where everything was regimented and time was the regulator. Arise early, do the household tasks set out for us, have breakfast, dress in school uniform, catch transport in time for school, return to the hostel, change out of uniform, do afternoon chores, short leisure period, have tea, help clean kitchen and dining room, do homework, have showers, retire for the night. The next day we went through the same thing. After doing the weekly cleaning on the weekends, we were free to attend a matinee at the local movie theatre providing we attended our Girl Guide meetings and

church on Sundays. We Aboriginal teenagers were well and truly being integrated into the white world by watching the clock. Our lives were organised around this man-made timepiece. No longer did we judge the daylight hours by the sun and the shadows it cast in our environment, but by the white man's clock. In many ways it became our enemy, pushing us to maintain time limits set by those in charge of us. At the hostel and the high school, we were set tasks that had to be completed within a certain time frame and the only period when we could revert to 'Nyoongar time' was when we went home for the holidays. If nothing else assimilated us into the white world so overwhelmingly, it was the clock!

Over the years I learnt to live like a white person, albeit a pseudo-white. My nursing aid experiences in a large city hospital compounded my learning on white culture; their laws, rules and regulations, the protocols and their class and social systems. It made me realise that, as an Aboriginal person, I was accepted for my work ethos but as a social equal, I fell far short of friendship and loyalty from my colleagues because of the colour of my skin. Civility and common courtesy was the yardstick by which I was measured and which was reciprocated by most of the nurses. There were the occasions when several nurses were friendlier than what was the accepted norm, but for the most part, my friendships were with other Aboriginal girls who were doing their training as well. However there were times when I encountered outright racism from some nurses and patients. These were the times when I really felt that I did not belong in the white world, when I felt like packing my bags and heading for the safety of my Nyoongar world. At home I could be "me", accepted and loved for being me, a Nyoongar girl, full of life and the joy of living, not a darker replica of the white race. Although I was integrated into the white world, I was still an Aboriginal person and I was not permitted to forget it and nor did I want to forget it. I was not allowed to forget that I was (in white minds) inferior to white people, which brings me to the concepts of 'white privilege'.

What is 'white privilege'? What is 'whiteness'? And why should I feel so cynical about these terms? Is it 'sour grapes' because I wasn't born white with all the privileges bestowed on me from birth? No. When I compare my own Nyoongar culture with white Australian culture, I do not like what I see, for white culture is based on capitalism and materialism; and looking after the 'common people' is secondary to the power and privilege; and deceit, found in governments, the bureaucracy and academia. White culture has forgotten the values of its forefathers and is nothing compared to my own Nyoongar culture. In this modern day, when most Nyoongar people are trying to survive in a world in turmoil, we older people try to adhere to the values and teachings passed down from our traditional law-makers and our old people, and we try to make our younger generations follow the same principles. Our traditional laws were made for the good of the people, not the individual. As a writer I have written academic papers and books on the subject of traditional Aboriginal cultures, so I won't elaborate in this paper, but there really isn't any comparison between the two races in Australia. In our black and white world, binary oppositions abound as in cheese and chalk, fire and ice, nature and science and sunshine and shadows. But it is not just the differences in culture that signifies incompatibility between the two races, but the innate dispositions of superiority over the other that white people inherit that is the crucial issue to the

question, “What is whiteness”? In fact, it is the attitudes of white people towards the other that is problematic.

I ask again, “What is whiteness?” How does a white person feel and what comprises a white person, besides the colour of their skin? Is it their mental or spiritual make-up or the geographical origins of the ancestral roots of the Causacian race? In anthropology, the different races of the world were categorised in times past as; Causacoid/white from Europe; Negroid/black from Africa; Mongoloid/yellow from Asian countries (Plog, Jolly & Bates 184). Australoid/black from Australia was a later addition. Anthropologists found these words useful as descriptive categories for the diversity of the human race (Plog, Jolly & Bates 184) and not as an authentic classification. I’ve used these terms to show that human evolution and climatic/environmental factors determine human biological diversity. The pigment “melanin” from the sun’s rays in the human being determines the colour of the skin and “the greater the melanin concentration, the darker the colour of the skin”. (Plog, Jolly & Bates 178). These anthropologists also states, “The colour of the skin in human populations vary from very light, as in northwest Europe, to very dark, as in parts of tropical Africa, Asia, and Australasia . . .” (1976 178). It is clear that the sun’s ultraviolet rays determine a people’s skin colour. However, in this modern age when there is a dispersion of any people from their traditional homelands, human beings of all colours have survived in harsh environments from their homeland roots.

In looking at ‘whiteness’ from an anthropological point of view, it is misleading in the present day, because human movement throughout the world is a common occurrence. Leading in the diaspora of human migration to other parts of the world were the Caucasian race, travelling the world, exploring strange lands and establishing settlements regardless of the peoples who inhabited these countries. What cultural inclination made Europeans seek distant lands to claim as their own without thought for the black or coloured peoples who owned these lands? It wasn’t only the white race whose culture dictated the terms of power and privilege for some and subservience and poverty for others.

History speaks of many instances where different cultures have built their empires from around the world. The Mayans, the Incas, the Egyptians, the Chinese, the Greeks, the Romans, the Jewish, and the Christians; all these cultures have at one time or another, ruled their world with fear, violence and death. When did human beings start believing that their particular cultures were better than others? Many of these aforementioned empires have faded into oblivion, only to be read about in history books. What drove the white European cultures to be more powerful, and more universal, than all the other empire builders? The answer is the accumulation of wealth, the prestige that having power emits and the privilege of being ‘white’.

Whiteness, in this modern age, opens doors that remain closed to the other; unless of course, the other has money and power to back up their blackness. Oprah Winfrey, the Talk Show host in the United States, is an excellent example of money, power, prestige and privilege being bestowed on a ‘coloured person’. It is debatable whether she would

have attained such recognition if Winfrey hadn't been so successful. However from my own experiences of 'whiteness', I have had to battle all my life to overcome the racism and bigotry aimed at me and other Aboriginal people in Australia. I believe I have been successful in my chosen field of academia and writing. But many are the times when people have looked at me and my Aboriginality and believed that I was illiterate and could barely speak the English language. If my husband is with me, they address him first which makes me believe that I am an invisible entity in the country of my ancestors. In fact white people make all Aboriginal people invisible. It appears that we are not consumers in this country, neither do we experience catastrophic events that happen to white people, yet Aboriginal people live in these areas and are subject to the vagaries of Mother Nature. In this day of multiculturalism in Australia, why is it that all other races and cultures who immigrate here are made more welcome than the original inhabitants? Is it because the white forefathers are guilty of stealing this land from the Aboriginal people when Europeans first came to Sydney Cove in 1788? There were no treaties signed like those in North America and New Zealand when white settlers first established themselves in those countries.

So why is it that the Aboriginal people are continuously being denigrated and despised by Australian government departments, politicians and in many cases, 'normal' white people? There is an under-current of racism and paternalism always present in any dealings with Aboriginal people. On the whole, we are treated like children with no sense of responsibility or citizenship. Why? The Aboriginal people have moved with the times and the majority have shown the above qualities in their everyday lives. So what is it about white people who will not accept Aboriginal people with equality and fairness? They use Aboriginal icons in advertising, but they do not use the people. Why? Are they so afraid that Aboriginal people will prove just as good, if not better, in the scheme of life? An example of the above comments is, 'On one radio program, my husband nominated me for an award for older Australians who accomplished their dreams during their life. All went well until the organisers discovered I was an older Aboriginal person. They immediately cancelled this project'. Perhaps they did not like the idea of an educated Aboriginal beating the older white people who applied. It left me feeling deflated and somewhat angry. However, my regret and anger was tempered with resignation. "That's life", I said to my husband, quoting Australia's most famous bushranger.

Throughout this paper I have asked the question, "Why?" Why do 'whiteness' and 'white people' feel so superior to others of a darker colour than white? According to Ranzijn, McConnochie and Nolan, "We are concerned with whiteness because on the whole the 'white' people have the power in our society, and power imbalance is an important factor in maintaining disadvantage in Indigenous people and other sectors of our society" (Ranzijn et al 152). Ranzijn et al also quotes from Ruth Frankenberg, who describes whiteness in this way:

- It is a descriptor or identifier for light-skinned people with Western features.
- It is an experience that involves receiving unearned privileges due to racism.
- It is an ideology, social structure, or worldview that is based on a system of exploitation based on the idea of White supremacy.

White is seen as the centre or the norm and is usually unmarked and involves unacknowledged privilege because of assumed dominance. (Frankenberg 152-153).

In essence, white people do not notice other white skin people and feel that white skin gives a belonging to their existence, whereas a person of colour is “out of place” in white society. Because the Aboriginal people have been usurped of their rightful place in this country, Ranzijn et al (2009) also state that, “Because Australia is a white country, white people feel they have the right, or should have the right, to go anywhere in Australia, including Aboriginal land. Since the dominant ideology (the values and core beliefs) of Australian society is white ideology, white Australians have a sense of ‘governmental belonging’ (153).

It appears that ‘governmental belonging’ essentially debars the other, especially Aboriginal people, from reaching their full potential in Australian society. But do Aboriginal people want to be ‘as white’ to be accepted by white society? From my own experience I want to be accepted for what I am – an educated Aboriginal woman who has just as much right to take my place in Australian society. But again skin colour, ‘whiteness’ and ‘white privilege’, and racism (that word dreaded by white Australians) denies me that right to be treated as a human being, regardless of the colour of my skin. Yet we are stereotyped and categorised in the racial system as well as the class system and in all categories, Aboriginal people are on the bottom rung of the social ladder in classifying human beings. Even the lowliest white person or black immigrant is considered more important by government bodies. White Australians hide behind their whiteness and unearned white privilege because, by birth and association, they belong to the dominant race. Many do not believe that ‘white’ is even a race or that they have any special privileges that the other races don’t have. They are just ‘white’. (Radermacher 33-34). To these people, ‘white’ is the norm. Aboriginal people laugh when a newly-arrived white person to this country or those white people who live in the upper classes, see an Aboriginal person for the first time – they stare at us and after a while, they approach us and ask, “Are you an Aboriginal”?, “Do you speak English”? Some larrikin replies, “You’d better watch out, we might eat you”. These people give a nervous laugh and move away. Probably not good public relations, but it’s good for a laugh.

Many white Australians believe they are not racist towards Aboriginal people and many who accept us as human beings and treat us with respect. We are all human beings; we all belong to the human race. We are all essentially the same, only the colour of our skin is different. What a dull old world this would be if there was only one type of human being, one skin colour, one hair colour, one eye colour. Thank God for our differences. It’s a pity some humans think they are better than others. I was given a book several years ago for giving the keynote address to the students who were graduating from the local high school. This book, *One People many journeys*, is published by Lonely Planet (2006) and shows all the peoples and cultures in the world. It says in the introduction that “essentially all people are the same, that there is not a ‘them’ and an ‘us; there is really only ‘us’ – for we all share the joy of birth, celebrate life’s special moments, seek to find meaning in our lives, the strength to endure, the resilience to keep trying and the

sorrow of death. While we are on our own unique path, we are all on the same journey". It is a very appropriate quote to end this paper on 'whiteness'.

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