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Whiteness and ‘the Imperial Turn’
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The study of whiteness as a racial category emerged roughly at the same time as historians became interested in postcolonial theory and Subaltern Studies, and forged what became known as ‘the new imperial history’. Yet the two areas had different scholarly roots. Whiteness studies grew from labour history, sociology, cultural studies, and feminist theory, among other fields. In this essay I consider some connections between whiteness studies and ‘the new imperial history’ as they have evolved, and a few of their implications for each other. Recent work has emphasized the global circulation of racial thinking, and historians of empire have located whiteness as a racial category in diverse colonial sites. Arguably, since the 18th century if not before, the white settler colonies have been key sites. Relevant questions, I think, include: Has white settler colonialism been the breeding ground of specific forms of whiteness? How has the whiteness created by white settler colonialism been connected to the whiteness constructed by slavery and post-slavery societies—or that of societies shaped by both slavery and settler colonialism? How has Australian history, in particular, contributed to broader understanding of changing historical constructions of whiteness? And how might analyses of whiteness contribute to future work in Australian history? I begin with a few notes on the emergence of whiteness studies, then move to ‘the imperial turn’, before considering the category of ‘settler colonialism’. I then offer a few thoughts on how Australian history has contributed to broader understanding of historical constructions of whiteness, and conclude by speculating about how analyses of whiteness, including work on other settler colonies, might help to shape our understanding of the 19th century in Australia.

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Perhaps, at the end of such a rich and wonderful conference as this has been, a historiographical paper may seem rather redundant. And after Pat Grimshaw’s brilliant paper my comments on white-settler colonialism may seem quite superfluous. But I hope that I can at least frame a few questions that might help with our open discussion to follow. The study of whiteness as a racial category emerged roughly at the same time as historians became interested in postcolonial theory and subaltern studies and forged what became known as ‘the new imperial history’. Yet the two areas had different scholarly roots. Whiteness studies grew from labour history, sociology, cultural studies and feminist theory, among other fields. I want here to consider some connections between whiteness studies and ‘the new imperial history’ as they have evolved, and a few of their implications for each other.

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century, if not before, the white settler colonies have been key sites. Relevant questions, I think, include: has white settler colonialism been the breeding ground of specific forms of whiteness?; how has the whiteness created by white settler colonialism been connected to the whiteness constructed by slavery and post-slavery societies—or that of societies shaped by both slavery and settler colonialism?; how has Australian history, in particular, contributed to broader understanding of changing historical constructions of whiteness?; and how might analyses of whiteness contribute to future work in Australian history? All of which, arguably, begs the question: how can we analyse and subvert whiteness without reifying it—through our seemingly inescapable shorthand of speaking of white people? (Perhaps we should speak of ‘whitened’ people?).

I want to begin with a few notes on the emergence of whiteness studies, then move to ‘the imperial turn’, and then consider the category of ‘settler colonialism’. Finally, I will offer a few thoughts on how Australian history has contributed to broader understanding of historical constructions of whiteness. I will conclude with a bit of speculation about how analyses of whiteness, including work on other settler colonies, might help to shape our understanding of the nineteenth century in Australia.

The Emergence of Whiteness Studies

One of the first and most influential historians to study whiteness was the American labour historian David Roediger. Roediger’s insightful work on whiteness, the first book of which was published in 1991, was founded on his passionate commitment to radical politics and activism, specifically to the possibility of workers uniting across racial barriers. Through detailed research into the labour movement in late nineteenth-century America, Roediger argues that race and class were constructed together in a way that divided workers by privileging some workers through the category of whiteness. The social rewards of whiteness were sufficient to split the American working class and thus make it more tractable for employers, especially in the crucial decades following the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. In his close study of the 1877 General Strike in St Louis, for example, Roediger identified a moment of cross-racial protest that was quashed by a coalition of interests between the European-descended class of skilled workers, the local elite and municipal authorities. In opting to close ranks with the local elite, skilled workers allowed racism to set limits on the potential for the labour movement to improve conditions for all workers.1 Roediger’s work was influential because of its detailed historical specificity and his insistence that racism was not inevitable or immutable, but contingent and shifting.

I think it is germane to recall the crucial role of David Roediger’s work for American history, as we grapple with our current role as historians within whiteness studies. The field of whiteness studies in Australia was boosted in 2003 with the launching of the Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association (ACRAWSA). This interdisciplinary association is linked to cultural studies, anthropology, sociology and other fields. So we might well ask, what is the role of history? In the United States, where the study of whiteness was first taken seriously, other historians quickly followed Roediger’s lead. The field soon boasted wonderful titles like Noel Ignatiev’s How the Irish Became White; Karen Brodkin’s How Jews Became White Folks and
What That Says About Race in America; Matthew Frye Jacobson’s *Whiteness of a Different Colour: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* and so forth.2

Ruth Frankenberg’s 1993 study *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* made clear how valuable a sociological approach using interviews, could be.3 The first feminist works to reveal complicity between feminists, racism and imperialism did not use the term ‘whiteness’ per se, even though their work—such as Vron Ware’s 1992 study *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History*—raised crucial questions about what Antoinette Burton termed feminists’ peculiar *Burdens of History*.4 Louise Newman’s work was very important in raising these questions about the American women’s rights movement of the late nineteenth century, and I’m really delighted that Jane Carey has taken up these issues in relation to the Australian women’s movement.

From its first emergence, the study of whiteness was applied to literature (not least by Toni Morrison5), film and other areas of cultural production. If some commentators worried aloud that whiteness studies was a re-privileging of the white subject (just as some also worried much the same thing about the rise of masculinity studies and the universal male subject), for many historians around the world interested in race relations, identifying white as a constructed racial category was a germane step. In Australia, the terms ‘whitefella’ and ‘White Australia’ became newly resonant.6

‘The Imperial Turn’

In Britain, the field of cultural studies was central to the rise of critical race theory, while many historians were far more conservative. As we speak, there is a strong school of historical thought in Britain which resists postcolonialism, the critical study of Orientalism, whiteness studies and ‘the new imperial history’, especially the notion that the empire shaped the metropole itself. Playing on the epithet ‘the linguistic turn’—used to denote the arrival of poststructuralism and deconstruction on the shores of the historical discipline—Antoinette Burton has defined ‘the imperial turn’ in historical scholarship as: ‘accelerated attention to the impact of histories of imperialism on metropolitan societies in the wake of decolonization, pre- and post-1968 racial struggle and feminism in the last quarter century’. Further, she contends that it has not been: a turn toward empire so much as a critical return to the connections between metropole and colony, race and nation, which imperial apologists and dissenters have appreciated at least since the nineteenth century, if not before. In the context of Euro-American colonial histories, then, what we might properly call the return to empire is one symptom of the pressure of postcolonial social, political, and demographic realities on the production of modern knowledge.7

Burton’s focus, of course, was on the impact of postcolonial approaches on the study of the European and other metropoles that emerged in the wake of Said’s *Orientalism*, and the field of subaltern studies.

For historians of the antipodes, the phrase ‘the imperial turn’ may at first glance seem nonsensical. Hasn’t Australian and New Zealand history always been contextualised within a broader picture of British Empire history? Yet increasingly—and as has been in evidence here at this conference—in fact, there has been a recent ‘return to empire’ that has challenged the
nationalist framework dominant in recent decades. Tony Ballantyne, in his study of the circulating and contingent ideology of Aryanism in the nineteenth century, for instance, uses what he calls ‘the disruptive power of empire’ and its ‘cross-cultural engagements’ to refute historiographical adherence to national boundaries in favour of studying ‘the cultural and intellectual transformations enacted by colonialism both in the colonies and in Europe itself’.8

‘The imperial turn’ has included new attention to the historical relationship between metropole and colony, and metropole and dominion, but it has also meant raising new questions about race relations and colonialism within our shores. Becoming more aware of the empire, then, has returned our gaze not just outward, but also insistently inward, with new questions about the continuing structures of colonialism. For us, Ania Loomba’s warnings have had particular pertinence. Loomba has pointed out that the ‘post’ in ‘postcolonialism’ does not mean that colonialism has been supplanted, and that ‘it is premature to proclaim the demise of colonialism’. Rather, she says, we need to see postcolonialism as ‘the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism’.9 Thus, in the Australian context, ‘the new imperial history’ has broached the territory mapped out by the field of Aboriginal history since the 1970s. In so doing, it is much indebted to, and has joined forces with, historians of Indigenous people in their critical approach to the history of Australian race relations. At the same time, it has brought some slightly different or renewed emphases to the historical study of race in Australia. For example, while the term ‘settler’ has been used in Aboriginal history since the 1970s, there is now a reinvigorated interest in the meanings and workings of white-settler colonialism here.

The Category of ‘Settler Colonialism’

The very interesting recent collection on Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century edited by Caroline Elkins and Susan Pedersen suggests commonalities and differences among states that have not, to my knowledge, previously been compared. They look at Korea and Manchuria under the Japanese, the Jewish settlement of Palestine, Angola and Mozambique under the Portuguese, German settlers in occupied Poland, the French in Algeria, South Africa, Kenya and Rhodesia, all as case studies of twentieth century settler colonialism. Elkins and Pedersen posit differences between these twentieth century cases and what they term ‘new world states’ such as America and Australia. The differences include that in the twentieth century cases, the settlers mostly did not become majority populations; and the metropole continued to wield more power, including military power.10 The book is very useful in its broadening of the category of settler colonialism beyond the white-settler colonies of the European empires.

A basic question then, is: is white-settler colonialism categorically different from other settler-colonialisms? I think the answer must be no. Penny Edwards, in her work comparing antimiscegenation policies and child removal in Western Australia, Burma and Cambodia argues against distinctions between crown colonies and settler colonies.11 Colonialism, its racial hierarchies and their intersections with other categories, and its regulatory and discursive regimes, operated in ways directly comparable across such typologies. Yet there are specificities to white-settler colonial histories that offer us insights into the contingent construction of whiteness as the superordinate racial category. In white-settler colonies, there have been specific regimes in which whiteness itself accrued legislative, regulatory and cultural substance. This is where linking
whiteness and settler colonialism can provide us with telling insights. Needless to say, although my focus is on the British Empire, Algeria and other non-British examples of white settler colonialism are in the same frame. Similarly, Kat Ellinghaus makes clear the value of comparing Australia and the United States in the modern period when the latter was no longer part of the British Empire.

While Elkins and Pedersen draw distinctions between what they call ‘new world settler states’ and their twentieth century case studies, it was in the twentieth century that whiteness was overtly enshrined and empowered. In South Africa, of course, the Apartheid regime from 1948 to 1994 articulated white racial privilege in a myriad of legal, economic, political and social forms. The twentieth century also produced the full emergence of a legislatively entrenched White Australia. The point was made in discussion yesterday that we should look more closely at connections between South Africa and Australia. As Fiona Paisley has argued, Australian history shows the complex relationship between colonialism, nationalism and empire, such that:

national history cannot be so directly read as signalling “separation” from empire. In the Australian case, post-federation nationalism emerged hand-in-hand with, and not in opposition to, empire. In fact loyalty to the British Empire increased in the first decades of nationhood as strengthened race ideology provided for both a White and an Imperial Australia.¹²

As Paisley suggests, contrary to what has been at least implicit in some nationalist histories, Australians’ identification with the British Empire, and the concomitant articulation of whiteness, may in fact have been most overt and marked in the first half of the twentieth century.

**How has Australian History Contributed to Broader Understanding of Historical Constructions of Whiteness?**

I was a bit appalled, in working on this, to realise that it’s been ten years since I wrote my article on ‘Australian Women’s Voyages “Home” and the Articulation of Colonial Whiteness’. One problem I sought to work through in writing that piece was the complexities of Australians’ positioning in imperial hierarchies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: their simultaneous status as colonials and colonisers. I suggested that: ‘Occupying an in-between ranking in imperial hierarchy, Australian women sought to elide the inferiority inherent in their colonialness by emphasizing their whiteness and their economic and cultural privileging’. My focus was on the sea voyage Australian women and men took to en route to England and their status as white colonials in the imperial metropolis. It seemed to me that ‘while whiteness may have been so normative as to be partly invisible in Australia itself, exposure to different colonial racial structures [at the ports of call] at times compelled women to articulate notions of themselves as white that were integral to developing Australian national identity but usually tacit’. My reading of women’s records from the period—such as their accounts of their visits to Colombo, Bombay, Durban and other ports—suggested that: ‘during the decades in which Australians established and first interpreted national Australian identity, the whiteness that was crucial to that identity was premised on a shared British heritage …, on notions of England as “home,” and on belonging to the stratum of imperial rulers’.¹³

My own focus is now turning to the articulation of whiteness and settler colonialism within Australia’s shores, and I’m delighted and excited by the work that has been done on that subject.
in recent years, and is now flourishing, as the last few days have demonstrated. I am finding particularly useful and stimulating the work that looks carefully at historically specific constructions of whiteness, racial power and privilege in the settler-colonial context.

I have been especially pleased to hear Leigh Boucher’s work, which brings together careful archival research, a biographical approach, and discourse analysis. Leigh’s work on settler colonial men, their ‘othering’ of Chinese and Indigenous subjects, and their construction of their own privilege and entitlements is a wonderful model of empirically-grounded, specifically contextualised work on whiteness. Also, Penny Edmonds’ paper this morning raised very interesting questions about Anglo-Saxonism, whiteness and settler colonialism. Through such detailed work, we are gradually accruing informed insights into the operation and evolution of settler-colonialism here in Australia.

A relevant question is: can a study cast insight into whiteness without using the term? And I think the answer must be yes. I have in mind two studies in particular. I have greatly enjoyed reading Julie Evans’ book on Edward Eyre, race and colonial governance. With detailed attention to the contexts of each stage of his career, and his own actions, as well as careful analysis of his writings, Evans mounts an argument that Eyre’s ultimate repressiveness in Jamaica was the product of colonialism itself. Evans traces the evolution of Eyre’s thinking and policies towards colonised peoples, and the ways in which he responded to the specific circumstances of each of his positions and the exigencies pertaining to the different colonies. This in turn builds her argument about his ultimately repressive policies being the systemic results of colonialism, of the intractable opposition of imperial interests and the rights and interests of colonised peoples. Without specifically addressing whiteness, she helps us to see the contingent operations of colonial rule that directly contributed to ideas of white racial superiority and authority.14 Like Penny Edwards’ work, Evans’ study cuts across typologies of colonies with its focus on historical specificity and organic interconnections.

Another book that speaks to whiteness studies, though it does not use exactly that term, is Vicky Haskins’ One Bright Spot.15 By telling the story of her great grandmother as an employer of indentured Aboriginal domestic servants under the Aborigines Protection Board of New South Wales, Haskins presents us with a richly detailed story of individual women, their lives intertwined across racial and class boundaries. She shows in vivid detail how white women’s social and racial positioning was created through this government-run system of exploitation, and discusses the complex politics surrounding the system at the time, as well as its historical legacies. These studies and a number of others have contributed recently to our understanding of white racial privileges, power and identities in Australian history—and by extension to the history of settler-colonialism and whiteness transnationally.

How Might Analyses of Whiteness Contribute to our Understanding of the Nineteenth Century in Australia?

The wonderful papers we have been listening to for the last two and a half days show that work on whiteness is providing new insights into Australian history, across a range of time periods and topics. As historians, we know that racial categories including whiteness, have been to a large extent historically contingent, and that we must look freshly at different periods. Adrian Carton’s
and Mark Dawson’s papers yesterday on whiteness in the early modern period were really intriguing and a valuable lesson for those of us who are modernists. I am currently trying to educate myself about the mid-nineteenth century. As someone whose work has not much ventured earlier than the 1870s, I’m finding this a fascinating challenge. I find I am learning both from those who have focused on the Australian colonies, and those who have pursued connections and comparisons with other colonies, such as Julie Evans, and also Kirsten McKenzie in her evocative work on status, respectability and class in New South Wales and the Cape Colony.

As we seek to understand the construction of whiteness in Australia in the mid-nineteenth century, I suspect that work on other imperial locations—particularly if not only other white settler colonies—will prove valuable. For example, in exploring how whiteness may have shaped social and legal hierarchies in the period following the end of convict transportation, Pamela Scully’s work on the period of and after slave emancipation in the western Cape Colony may offer clues. In Australia, whiteness may well have been invoked to leverage the social status of emancipated convicts, as they struggled against material challenges and social prejudice. From Scully’s work, we know that racial categories were re-imagined after the emancipation of the enslaved in the 1830s, and as social and legal categories were rearticulated in conjunction with new patterns of labour and landholding. Conceptions of gender, respectability and the family were all newly articulated to shore up a system of continuing racial hierarchy and oppression that needed new underpinnings to reflect the new legal realities. Scully shows powerfully how discourses of race and sexuality intertwined such that, for women, ‘virtue’ became synonymous with ‘whiteness’ in a continuing subordination of black women. For the Australian context, similar questions could be applied to the effects of the ending of convict transportation on the linked categories of race, morality and sexuality.

Alan Lester’s work on the eastern Cape Colony in the nineteenth century emphasises imperial connectedness. ‘British colonial discourses’, Lester contends, ‘were made and remade, rather than simply transferred or imposed … between Britain and settler colonies like the Cape’. Lester suggests that, just as the empire’s material base consisted of an articulated worldwide trade in commodities, imperial production of knowledge also flowed between colonies and metropole and globally around the empire. ‘Settler newspapers and letters, … official dispatches and travellers’ reports’, parliamentary commissions, their ‘minutes of evidence’ and reports, all circulated among the colonies, not least via the metropolitan and colonial presses. Lester finds these imperial networks illuminating for his study of the colonisation of the Xhosa in the mid-nineteenth century because, during:

moments of imperial crisis in particular, colonial representations of the Xhosa were considered in the light of Australian settlers’ images of the Aborigine, New Zealand colonists’ constructions of the Maori, Indian officials’ notions of the ‘Hindoo’, West Indian planters’ portrayals of former slaves and not least, British bourgeois ideas of the labouring classes and other domestic ‘subaltern’ groups.

This circulating compendium of racialised images, Lester contends, shaped metropolitan racial discourse and images as much as that of the colonies.

While Lester does not himself speak of whiteness, here, I think, we have important insight into the connections between settler colonialism and whiteness. A racial lexicon forged in multiple colonial sites, especially the confrontational and violent sites of settler colonialism, shaped British
and hence Euro-American conceptions of racial hierarchy, even before the rise of so-called scientific racism. The violent struggles over land and for colonial control were narrated by the winners in multiple kinds of records that would become the colonial archive so influential in the later writing of histories. At the time of the creation of this circulating imperial discourse, the racial hierarchies it forged were crowned by the stratum of imperial rulers: the white settlers, colonial officials and all who claimed British identity and status. Justifications for dispossession of Indigenous peoples, for colonial rule and violence, were articulated in specific ideas of white-settler racial and cultural superiority. The whiteness of settler colonialism has been forged in multiple and importantly diverse sites and times, and of course it must not be seen as any monolith, or more significant than definitions of whiteness constructed in other sites such as the United States. What it illustrates is the globally-circulating nature of this toxic racial fiction, its plasticity and its historical reach.

Notes


13 Angela Woollacott, “‘All this is the Empire, I told myself’: Australian Women’s Voyages “Home” and the Articulation of Colonial Whiteness’, *The American Historical Review* 102, no. 4 (October 1997): 1006-08.


18 Ibid., 7.
19 Ibid., 189.
20 Ibid.