

## White on White: local white reflections on local whiteness

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The place I write and study in is Lismore, a town on the land of the Widjabel people, in the Bundjalung nation, on the far north coast of New South Wales. My interest in Whiteness lies in my being white and in calling myself a local—a local of Lismore. It is the town in which I grew up, left to go to university, and to which I returned twenty years later. Now with a university of its own, it is the town where I recently commenced a project that began as an exploration of my local belonging. It was a white project and still is, but it has changed somewhat as I came to understand that my notion of belonging in this land, this land in which I have been planted, was predicated upon clearing the land around me of Aborigines.

This is not a unique or startling revelation, but what began to interest me was that in 2000 when I commenced thinking about this project on local belonging, I resisted notions that my worldview was linked in any way to white advantage or Aboriginal disadvantage. It was just about being local. My local belonging was definitely grounded in unmarked and unnamed whiteness.

With this new awareness my research question changed from ‘What does it mean to be a local?’ to ‘How did I come to install my-white-self as a local, an original of Lismore, thereby denying the Aboriginality of this land? How did I learn this denial and what ideologies and practices have sustained it?’

I have approached these questions from two strongly place-based directions. The first is self-critical, self-reflective journal writing. My project is personal and subjective, though I hope it has resonance for others. Secondly, I am attempting to balance my voice with historical narrative—narratives on record and those I gather through interviews with non-indigenous indigenous rights activists who work, or have worked, in Lismore. In these narratives I am interested to hear of how white Lismore has encountered the Bundjalung people through recent time, and also about how these white elders I am interviewing have come to terms with living on stolen land.

Also, as a white heterosexual male I am particularly dependent on theory to provide me with context, of showing up what cannot be known. While I might know whiteness like I know the back of my hand, and experience whiteness *as* the back of my hand, I have not experienced the back of my white male hand as an instrument of oppression: whether through an act of violence or a dismissive flick of the wrist. For this experience I rely on the Other expressed in Whiteness Studies, especially through feminist writing on whiteness (in particular: Moreton-Robinson, 2000a & 2000b; Frye, 1983 & 1992).

This paper is not theoretical, however. Instead I wish to explore the idea of local whiteness in Lismore, though I don’t intend to prove or disprove that there is a particularly local Lismore whiteness. I am more interested in the ideas that arise by bringing the words local and whiteness together in Lismore, particularly in white middle-class East Lismore in the 1960s and 1970s. The emergence of whiteness in a Lismore local arises somewhat sketchily from

this exploration—an exploration that threads together a voice from recent interviews and the voice of my journal.

***July 10, 2003 – Whiteness Paper – possible beginning***

*Before last November (2002) I did not know of my whiteness. A launch of a new online journal changed that, not because of the journal's subject matter, but because of a chat with another prospective doctoral candidate over a glass of bubbly.*

*“So what's your thesis about?” I asked Diana.*

*“I want to study whiteness in women's magazines,” she replied. Women's magazines I had some knowledge of, but whiteness?*

*“What is that?” I asked.*

*We had one of those staccato discussions that take place at noisy raise-your-glass style occasions, so I didn't leave the journal launch with a new theoretical construct, but I did leave with a new word—‘a fresh seed sewn on the ground of [our] discussion’ (Wittgenstein 1980: 2e).*

*Despite that lack of theoretical understanding I had about whiteness, the term resonated in an uncanny way. Like a desert bloom, this seed sewn on the ground of discussion germinated, grew and flowered quickly and the bloom drew to it experiences and feelings like a steady stream of bees hungry for its nectar. This word, ‘whiteness,’ drew to it experiences and feelings associated with being raised and of living in a country town: the town I write in, Lismore. It is as if I had been waiting for that word to appear.*

*I want to stay with that initial moment a while, in the realm of experience and informal theory. I want to reflect on those initial thoughts about whiteness, to remember what it is that excited me.*

*So here it is, July 10, and I am speaking to you from a present that has passed. I am wondering what this venue is like, how I am feeling before you, speaking naively about this whiteness I intuitively recognise: this 1970s white boy whiteness from Lismore in the white-self-proclaimed Rainbow Region, on the far north coast of New South Wales. I want to add list of disclaimers for what I'm about to write but I'll resist the apologies. So what was it that my body and mind were telling me about whiteness when I first heard the word?*

*I am transported to 1978 or thereabouts. I am in East Lismore walking home with three mates from high school on a mild sub-tropical afternoon at about 3:30pm. As happens nearly every afternoon on this way home, we stop at the bottom of the Melody Street hill under the shade of a large spreading jacaranda, to sit, talk, and for no reason I can explain, throw our left over lunches, all packed in plastic bags high into the tree until they stay there, caught amongst the branches.*

*I am not a part of this ritual. The other three guys are much cooler than I am, and I never have a lunch to throw up there. In fact I am feeling extremely uncomfortable. We are sitting under the Golden's jacaranda. The Golden's are an elderly couple. Up the hill from the Golden's are the Hockeys, then the Sparks. Across the road from the Sparks is my house, and at the top of the hill, above our house, are the Tutts. This is my street. I know it and it knows me. As we sit beneath the lunch-festooned jacaranda, Mrs Tutt makes a chink with her*

*finger in the white venetian blind in their dining room and I can sense a beam of judgement sweeping across the land. The data gathered in each sweep is encoded and collated for transmission to relevant interested parties at an opportune time.*

*My first reaction to whiteness, East Lismore whiteness, is to feel a gaze. This gaze judges to a standard and the standard dwells on what can be seen: on appearance, on behaviour, an appearance of being good, and of associating with apparently good people. My discomfort from the gaze eventually overcomes peer group bonds. "I'll see yuz later," I say, and with smartarse comments trailing after me I walk the 50 metres or so uphill, until I'm out of sight in the safe enclosure of home.*

*By high school, I need no longer see the white venetian open and close to experience the gaze. I had an internalised white venetian of my own at the top of the hill, and my own Mrs Tutt judging each movement, each action, each thought, each situation, each person, each place: all surfaces and appearances arranged against a set of criteria that approximate the essence of whiteness, an essence submerged and barely discernible, lurking in my unconscious like the great white whale.*

*As I contemplate this form beneath the surface I find myself wandering the streets of East Lismore of my teenage years looking for representations of the criteria that approximate this essence of whiteness. It is just past midday. There is no cloud in the near-purple summer sky. The sunlight is hard and dazzling and clears the streets of people. The streets are eerily vacant of people on this hot sunny Sunday afternoon. Along with radiated heat, silence rises from the asphalt road. As I wander this neat and tidy part of town here is the quiet whiteness I find. Whiteness is smooth and hard like well-laid concrete. It has neat edges, sharp corners and an even height like a well-mown lawn. It is weatherboard with a tasteful paint-job that does not stand out. It is a garden without weeds. The hose is neatly rolled up. This whiteness prefers trees that don't drop their leaves. Each surface it presents to the world is an object of discipline. It doesn't make trouble. It is obedient and quiet. It is prosperous through restraint. It is all for the best. It is heterosexual but not sexual. It is white sheets on the line without stains; it is 'too clean for dandruff'. It has clear lines of separation into yours and mine. It is neighbourhood; people like us; self-same-Others; safe and secure. It bows to the trinity: clean, neat and tidy. It is personal mastery; patriarchal control over the chaos of nature; a Phallus-like symbol of omnipotence. Each white house here is under control.*

That, edited, is a narrative of my initial response to the idea of whiteness. Questions arise for me as to why these particular images come to my white, male mind as a response to 'whiteness' and what it is that is described in this way. Is this whiteness, or protestant, or Anglo-Celtic, patriarchy, western? Maybe all, or any, of the above. These questions have at times paralysed my thinking on the issue of whiteness. Here, I'll slip past them to focus on my central concern: What might this narrative of whiteness in East Lismore say about how I came to install myself as an original of Lismore denying the Aboriginality of the local land?

### **Emerging in the white zone**

East Lismore emerges in this narrative and these images as a space devoted to the pedagogy of whiteness. It teaches how to observe whiteness and how to be observed as white. If there is an image that I would to emphasise it is the quietness and the heat. In the quietness much goes

unsaid, and similarly goes unseen. Appearances are all important—smooth surfaces presented to the world, no offence intended in words quietly spoken.

Yet in this quiet world of appearances there is heat. Heat in opinion, heat in observations exchanged between trusted neighbours, in back yards, over fences. This heat is born of friction, of rubbing against the rough edges of difference. Problems with people stirring up trouble: hippies from Nimbin; long haired university students on the TV; Labor Party supporters; neighbours who don't mow their lawns; and wayward children. The quiet appearance was accompanied by quiet hostility to minutely observed white otherness.

Race did not form part of this observation. In East Lismore in the 1960s and 1970s there was no need. Aboriginality, in particular, belonged to other places—out of town and out of sight—lumped together as a collective noun. No, to be content in the quiet heat of East Lismore one needed to comfortably white, and unaware of being white. This was a place that was a comfortable distance from all but the most minutely observable difference; a place for possession without knowledge or thought of dispossession; a place to develop a local (white) state of mind; a seedbed of whiteness.

### **Defending the boundaries of the enclave**

While East Lismore quietly basked in whiteness, enjoying neighbourhood barbecues and a sense of community and inclusion, this depended on maintaining a geographical white zone. Boundary incursions were, therefore, one instance where quiet hostility was provoked into becoming open and vocal.

Independence and distance from white Lismore was also a Bundjalung concern. Until the early 1900s Bundjalung people preserved their independence by avoiding being brought under the oversight of the Aborigines Protection Board, however, access to schooling proved difficult through repeated efforts of townspeople to keep schools segregated (Goodall 1996:143-4). By 1928 the Bundjalung people had negotiated a reserve and school without managerial oversight that was to become known as Cubawee. In the late 1950s and into the 1960s, however, concern at the conditions of Cubawee coincided with the Aborigines Welfare Board's implementation of a policy of assimilation. Plans, agreed to by the majority of the Cubawee community, though with significant dissension, were made to resettle Cubawee residents in Lismore itself.

In a recent interview Tess Brill, a non-indigenous indigenous rights activist who worked in Lismore from the late 1950s to the late 1970s, recalled the time when sites were being sought in Lismore. She says:

*What happened was it got that way that the [Aborigines Welfare Board] Area Officer had a blue Holden, and if that blue Holden came into any street in Lismore all the alarms bells went up. He was looking for a house or a site.*  
Brill, 2003.

Eventually a site was found, on the edge of East Lismore, opposite the sewerage treatment works. Tess continues:

*When it was mooted ... you had all the residents out along Wyrallah Road [in East Lismore] up in arms. Well, there's...quite a big hall there... so a public meeting was called ... The hall was packed. You couldn't fit - there were groups of people outside and they had the windows open... and someone relaying [proceedings].*

*They opened the meeting... well if only it could have been recorded... a number of residents were getting up and speaking and one man was in tears because ... he wouldn't be able to go to work because of fear of leaving his wife and children while [Aboriginal children] walked to school. Another*

*argument was that it would lower the value of their property – oh, that was a very common one. And of course the lazy dirty one came up and they all gave examples....*

*[T]hese arguments went on and then [the chairman] ruled that the arguments that had been put were not valid on the grounds that [a]ll [the white residents] were expressing were their fears. He said the only thing they could do was to close that meeting, ... call another meeting and present valid arguments that ... recognised the needs of the Aboriginal people ... So the meeting was closed.*  
Brill, 2003.

To resolve the issue, the white East Lismore community resumed quieter tactics, as Tess relates:

*So ... three weeks later I noticed a little advertisement in the press saying there was a public meeting called [at a hall downtown] to discuss the site out along Wyrallah Road. That was all, no more was heard. So I went down and I think there were five or six in the committee [on the stage] and two or three other people seated in the hall... The meeting open[ed] and they said the [the Wyrallah Road] site had been discussed [by the committee] and the decision was made to oppose it on the ground that it wasn't in the interests of Aborigines. [T]hey called for a [show of] hands and it was passed and they declared the meeting closed.*

*That [public opposition] was accepted [by the Aborigines Welfare Board].*  
Brill, 2003.

The boundary crisis in East Lismore was averted and its white ways preserved. Eventually a site was found on the other side of Lismore, outside the Lismore City Council boundary, on the road where the tip was located at that time.

### **The boundary of time**

The comfortable space, both geographical and mental, in which whiteness resides, is aided by another practice that distances white local being from the Aboriginal other: the definition of historical time. To explore this further I return to my journal and a second beginning for this paper.

#### ***August 14, 2003***

*I've been writing recently about whiteness and being local... My idea is to discover and describe the local whiteness of Lismore... I am without a map like the great explorers before me. I am Captain Rous in 1828 entering the Richmond River in my 28-gun frigate The Rainbow, past 'the dense forest ... teeming with life', 'peer[ing] out at the fairylike scene noting every detail of the river which no white man had found before...' (Daley, 1966:5, 12).*

How easily the image of Captain Rous is conjured in my white imagination, and how easily I imagine myself into his skin. As a child I walked the paddocks at the bottom of the Melody Street hill, with a close friend and our dogs in just the same way: the way of the explorer, the discoverer, the namer, the mapper. There wasn't anything of public significance in our wanderings of course, but through our schooling we understood the importance of 'first times'—of seeing for the first time, of being the first, of how important it is to white experience to claim originality. The time most open to regulation by white power, and that

which gives me a white historical experience of ‘originality’ is that colonial moment when the local landscape is seen by white eyes for the first time. By placing time zero at such a point, colonial time begins. Before whiteness is timelessness—an ontological absence—a time before being; and an epistemological absence—before white knowing.

Time zero has particular relevance for local history. In Lismore, historical time is measured from 1828—the year when Captain Rous became the first white man to see the mouth of Richmond River into which Lismore’s Wilson River flows. The keeper of local history in Lismore, the authority on local time keeping, is the Richmond River Historical Society. Designed in the late 1950s, the Society’s logo, featuring a woodcut depiction of *The Rainbow* above the date 1828, is a commemoration of time zero, marking time into forgotten and remembered. This white practice of defining historical time supports the façade of white originality, of the coming of the light into the darkness.

Memorialising time zero remains a white practice. In 1996, in an effort at targeted marketing, Lismore City Council placed Lismore at the focus of the newly named Rainbow Region. The name is intended to refer to local strengths, interests and history. Amongst these references are the alternative ‘Rainbow’ culture that spilled over the hills from Nimbin following the 1973 Aquarius Softlick festival and of course Captain Rous and *The Rainbow*. Effort was made to include Aborigines and the Rainbow Serpent was contrived as the linking idea. Yet it is clear from tourist literature that Lismore is no longer in the region of The Rainbow Serpent, but instead is in the region of *The Rainbow*. In the 2003 24-page promotional brochure *Experience Lismore’s Rainbow Region* settler imagery dominates, with one reference to ‘aboriginal history’ in the Arts and Culture section under the Richmond River Historical Society entry (Lismore Visitor Information Centre, 2003: 20).

### **The Tyranny of Distance**

In this paper I have attempted to describe some of the props that have aided my East Lismore whiteness to go unmarked and unremarked, until hearing of Whiteness 10 months ago. I have not attempted to be exhaustive. I hope, however, to have shown how it is possible for a white man to emerge from East Lismore regarding himself as a true local—comfortably situated in a normative enclosure, fortified, regulated and patrolled to keep Aboriginality at a safe distance. This distance enables comfort in local white belonging, and also distances white Australians from the injustices inherent in Australian society that many Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders experience daily. It would seem this safe white distance ‘shape[s] Australian destiny’, to use Geoffrey Blainey’s words (Blainey, 1966: 37), and in seeking safety in distance, a tyranny of distance\* has been brought into being. Developing strategies for the overthrow of this tyranny, in time and place is I believe, part of the white work in reconciliation.

#### ***10 September 2003***

*Genealogy and origins neatened—an East Lismore paper, neatness itself. Neatness and distance. Whiteness, writing, rightness: theorising and knowing, claiming truth and agency. Quietened words expressed in neat flows. This too is my male East Lismore whiteness. I start local yet I want to generalise, explain things. Say how it is. Put it right. Be powerful when I am one actor amongst many. A paper so whole and self-contained it makes me want to return to my teenage years, get drunk and smash one silky smooth surface after another and puke into the cracks. Months spent writing whiteness when a spoken hello may have been what was needed to put a break in this tyranny of*

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\* My thanks to Dr. Baden Offord for his insightful reinterpretation of Geoffrey Blainey’s phrase. The tyranny of distance is not solely an issue in everyday white practice, but is also a consideration for white scholars engaged in theorising whiteness. White theorists’, in their desire for ‘objectivity’ through maintaining a ‘critical distance’, risk positioning themselves in such a way that distance is favoured over critical reflexivity.

*distance. And yet again in that sentence the seductive conclusion. Everything settled.*

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