Creating White Australia

Edited by Jane Carey
and Claire McLisky

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White, British, and European: historicising identity in settler societies

Ann Curthoys, University of Sydney

This chapter explores three key terms—white, British, and European—in order to ponder their connections and disconnections. My title pays homage to Catherine Hall, noted scholar of the 'new imperial history' especially in her path-breaking book, *Civilizing subjects*. The title echoes that of her earlier book, *White, male, and middle class*, which explored through a series of essays the connections between racial identity, gender identity and the operations of class. I want to explore these too. In addition, I want to tease out the connections and dissonances historically between white, British, and European identities, and the relationship of all three to the destructive impact of settlement in Britain's settler colonies. I want to investigate further the relationship between racial identity and colonising practice. Considering these questions means thinking about the ways in which the distinct fields of whiteness studies, the 'new' imperial history, and European political theory currently relate to one another, and the possibilities for further dialogue between them in the future.

White

First, of course, the term 'white', and the profound and enduring phenomenological and existential social condition that goes with it—whiteness. Many people have pointed to the origins of the field in American labour history, as historians like David Roediger reprised a brilliant idea of W.E.B. du Bois, the idea of the wages of whiteness. Du

Bois and Roediger pointed to the benefits for working class white people of being white, a psychological reassurance that helps compensate for the oppression and/or exploitation that goes with being waged workers. It was their sense of superiority, of having particular rights and entitlements, which led white workers to refuse to make common cause with black ones, and so weakened working class solidarity and bargaining power as a whole. At least, that is the general argument. Subsequently many scholars followed suit by examining groups that, for socio-political reasons, were seen to be on the margins of whiteness, which sought and eventually gained acceptance as white—Irish, Italians, and Jews, among others.[1]

In fact, my own introduction to whiteness studies was a little different. I was influenced by Ruth Frankenberg's wonderful book, *White women, race matters*, which appeared in 1993. I think for many of us, our introduction to whiteness studies came through our feminist scholarship, our attempts to think through the importance of race in dividing women. An American sociologist, Frankenberg interviewed a range of white American women about the continuing importance of race in American society. She found these white women had a wide variety of ways of conceptualising racial difference; together these ways of thinking constituted a contemporary spectrum of whiteness self-identity. Some of these ways of thinking were relatively new; others had a long history, having once been dominant and now surviving as a minority view. We should therefore understand whiteness, as an identity and a mode of

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[1] David Roediger, *The wages of whiteness* (London, New York: Verso, 1991); Karen Brodkin, *How Jews became white folks and what that says about race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish became white* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Stefano Luconi, *From Paesani to white ethnics: the Italian experience in Philadelphia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); Jennifer Guglielmo & Salvatore Salerno, eds., *Are Italians white?: how race is made in America* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a different color: European immigrants and the alchemy of race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

thinking about racial difference, as a palimpsest. Whiteness is composed of layer upon layer of thinking through, with, or about white privilege.

The other important point Frankenberg made was that white people often did not think of themselves as white, or see their whiteness as an important part of their identity or their social position. Where non-white people are constantly categorised in terms of their skin colour, white people see themselves simply as people, as an unmarked category against whom everyone else must identify themselves. As she put it, '"whiteness" refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed'.[2] This lack of marking was also a sign of lack of recognition of privilege, of a taking-for-granted of privileges that others might have to fight hard for, or perhaps never be able to achieve. As cultural theorist Richard Dyer put it in the same argument in 1997, 'other people are raced, we are just people'.[3] This point struck home to many, and there has been considerable scholarship exploring the idea of a white assumption of privilege, and the lack of understanding by white people of how race silently and pervasively operates as a form of power, status, and inequality.

Since then, the field has developed internationally, and moved beyond its initial focus on the United States. There have been two main arguments. The first is that we need to understand whiteness not only in relation to black and immigrant workers, but also in relation to Indigenous peoples, that is to say, in relation to the processes of colonisation and its aftermath. As such the *history* of whiteness needs to be specified, from the time of earliest contact between Indigenous peoples and European explorers and settlers, through to periods of frontier conflict and violence, and on through the history of segregation, incarceration, assimilation, and into our time with its notions of Indigenous self-determination. The second argument is that far from

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[2] Ruth Frankenberg, *White women, race matters: the social construction of whiteness* (London: Routledge, 1993), 1.

[3] Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 1.

being unmarked and invisible, whiteness in settler societies has been explicitly named and highly visible, as evident in the White Australia Policy and its counterparts in Canada, New Zealand, and the United States, and especially in South Africa with its policy of apartheid. From the late 19th century to the middle of the 20th, whiteness became something to be proud of, protected, and asserted, from official discourse to popular culture.

Only with the end of the Second World War did whiteness begin to fade into the invisibility Frankenberg originally wrote about, if it did at all. In place of the aggressive attachment to whiteness characterising the period from the 1880s to the 1940s, the postwar period ushered in a new era of opposition to racial discrimination, as indicated in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted on 10 December 1948. Ruth Frankenberg, in a later essay, 'The mirage of an unmarked whiteness', critiqued her own earlier work. Whiteness she now saw as invisible to some white people some of the time, perhaps, but not to others and not most of the time.[4] The task of whiteness studies has been to demonstrate the continuing power of whiteness in a world in which it is not *supposed* to matter at all.

A new history of whiteness

The appearance in 2008 of Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds' book, *Drawing the global colour line*, has significantly augmented the history of whiteness as a form of identification and privilege. The book traces how, in what the authors call 'white men's countries'—that is, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, and their colonial forerunners—the world's multiplicity of peoples, nations, and religions came from the late 19th century to be understood through a binary distinction between white and non-white. The book argues that the

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[4] Ruth Frankenberg, 'The mirage of an unmarked whiteness', in *The making and unmaking of whiteness*, eds. Birgit Brander Rasmussen et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 73.

increased attachment to whiteness as a form of identification and power had serious practical consequences, including racially-based immigration restriction policies and other forms of racial discrimination. These racially constructed regimes ended, at least in theory, in the decades after the Second World War, with South Africa holding out the longest until the end of the apartheid regime in 1994. Whiteness, then, has a broad transnational history, and this is its story.

Lake and Reynolds also examine some alternative traditions and forms of racial identification, including an older British imperial tradition that valued British subjecthood across racial lines. The book traces the developing code of international law and ideas about racial equality, and its challenge to whiteness as a form of power and privilege. Political activists and thinkers, frequently of African and Asian origin—people like Lowe Kong Meng, W.E.B. du Bois, and Gandhi—opposed the claims of white people to dominate and control, and sought various forms of freedom and independence for themselves. In their campaigns for an end to racial discrimination in the immigration policies of these 'white men's countries', China and Japan looked to international law and emphasised ideas of freedom of movement.[5]

In developing their analysis, the authors consider debates within each of these countries and the ways they looked to each other for example, inspiration and ideas. The idea of a literacy test as a means of excluding non-white people from entering a country, or enjoying voting or other rights, circulates from the American South to Natal to Australia with remarkable rapidity. In this period the nation became the site of exclusion (and some of these nations, such as Australia and South Africa, were formed in the period of study) but each nation shared similar aims and technologies for protecting white privilege. One of the key insights of the book, shared with some other historians of race in settler societies, is that

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[5] Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the global colour line: white men's countries and the question of racial equality* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2008), 26.

a certain kind of egalitarianism and racism go together. While conservatives with a hierarchical view of society can envisage very well a lower social position for non-white people to occupy, especially as labourers, plantation workers, and so on, those who sought an egalitarian and democratic society envisaged no position for non-white people at all. As a result, liberals, radicals, and democrats insisted that democracy requires social homogeneity, so that all can participate. In their view, this meant it was necessary to exclude those thought unable to enter the society on equal terms. Both forms of thinking—the hierarchical and the egalitarian—rested in these white men's countries on notions of racial hierarchy, but only one, the democratic, became rigidly exclusionary. As the authors of this book say, 'white men's countries rested on the premise that multiracial democracy was an impossibility'.[6]

Australian racial exclusionism was taken up by German political theorist, Carl Schmitt, in the preface to the second (1926) edition of his book, *The crisis of parliamentary democracy*. Schmitt argued that democracy is inherently exclusionary in some way, and should not be confused with liberalism, which he saw as inclusive. In this context, he wrote:

> Every actual democracy rests on the principle that not only are equals equal but unequals will not be treated equally. Democracy requires, therefore, first homogeneity and second—if the need arises—elimination or eradication of heterogeneity.[7]

Australia, Schmitt thought, was an excellent illustration of this general principle. He noted that it used its immigration laws to exclude potential immigrants who are not the 'right type of settler'. And he drew on Myra Willard's classic book, *A history of the White Australia Policy*, which

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[6] Ibid., 6.

[7] Carl Schmitt, 'Preface to the second edition (1926): on the contradiction between parliamentarianism and democracy', in Carl Schmitt, *The crisis of parliamentary democracy* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985), 9.

defended the policy as it narrated its history, and which had appeared just three years earlier. He quotes from Willard in an endnote:

> National self-preservation is the object of the policy. Australians feared that non-European immigration … might radically alter, perhaps destroy, the British character of the community. They knew that racial unity, though not necessarily racial homogeneity, was essential for national unity, for the national life. The union of a people depends on common loyalty to common ideals … to preserve the unity of their national life, a people can admit emigrants from alien races only if within a reasonable time they show a willingness and a capacity to amalgamate ideally as well as racially with them … [Australians] believed that at present non-Europeans of the labouring classes have neither this willingness nor this capacity.[8]

This quote from Willard draws our attention not only to the racial basis of immigration exclusion, but also to something else, something that is a key point in this essay. Notice the easy slide from the terms 'non-European' to 'British' to 'alien races' to 'Australians'. In 1923, when Willard was writing, the identity 'white' was jostling with many competitors. Indeed, it had always done so. In the mid-19th-century Australian colonies, for example, as both Leigh Boucher and Penelope Edmonds have indicated, the identities 'white', 'British', 'Anglo-Saxon', and 'European' were all significant and used interchangeably.[9] This observation neatly leads me to my next major term, 'British'.

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[8] Schmitt, 90.26. Thank you to John Docker for drawing this discussion to my attention. See John Docker, 'Dissident voices on the history of Israel/Palestine: Martin Buber and the bi-national idea, Walid Khalidi's Indigenous perspective'; and Alexander Reilly, 'The inherent limits of the Australian Government Apology to the Stolen Generation', both in *New worlds, new sovereignties: frontier of possibility in the emerging global order*, eds. Julie Evans, Ann Genovese, and Alexander Reilly, forthcoming.

[9] Leigh Boucher, '"Whiteness" before "White Australia"?'; and Penelope Edmonds, 'White spaces? Racialised geographies, Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism and the location of empire in Britain's nineteenth-century Pacific rim colonies', both in *Historicising whiteness: transnational perspectives on the construction of an identity*, eds. Leigh Boucher, Jane Carey, and Katherine Ellinghaus (Melbourne: RMIT Publishing, 2007).

British

In the Australian context, as in similar societies with large populations of British descent, Britishness is both salient and elusive. For over a century but especially since the Second World War, a sense of Britishness has often been suppressed in favour of the identity 'Australian'. That is, a new inclusive Australian identity is held to supersede the sense of Britishness felt by those of British descent. In the particular kind of egalitarianism of mid-20th-century Australian society that existed when I was growing up, there was little interest in or indeed knowledge of one's British descent. While we could speak of class differences and conflicts, we did not speak of ethnicity, in my world at least, and our particular British origins were lost in the mists of time. The Cold War, for all its bitter divisiveness, did not seem to suggest strong ethnic identifications. Many of us did not even know if our ancestry was English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish, or other European, much less where our ancestors had come from in narrower regional terms or when they arrived. There was, in retrospect, a certain kind of Australian nationalism that insisted on being Australian and *not* British. It was this kind of nationalism that chafed at the continuing Britishness of many public institutions, such as the playing of the British national anthem in cinemas, and made it such a daring thing to keep sitting down as the anthem played. It had academic consequences as well. When New Zealand-born political theorist J.G.A. Pocock called in 1974 for a new British history, which saw the Dominions as an integral part of British history, he met only a limited response. The British were not interested in us and we in the former Dominions—the Australians, Canadians, New Zealanders, and so on—were more interested in distinguishing ourselves from them. More national histories and identities were the order of the day.

By the 1970s, and even more so by the 1980s, this denial of Britishness had created a problem for Australians confronted with the history of the devastating consequences for Indigenous people of colonisation. Being 'Australian' rather than 'British' provided an alibi, an

ability to say, 'We were not there'. After all, it was not *Australians* (who did not yet exist as such), but mainly *Britons* who seized the country and then sought to displace and replace the Indigenous population with wave after wave of migration. When acknowledgement of a destructive colonial history came into public consciousness, especially around the time of the bicentennial in 1988, insistence on being Australian and not British increasingly looked like an evasion, a failure to acknowledge the history of colonisation that brought so many of us here. In some versions, an assertion of Australian nationality became a statement of belonging in Australia and nowhere else, of feeling indigenous to the country.

At times, Indigenous commentators were clearer than we were that we came from elsewhere, pointing out that our ancestors had come from Britain, not so very long ago; for them our forefathers and mothers were emissaries from another country who had seized the land and displaced its Indigenous inhabitants. We can see this awareness in Hobbles Daniyarri's account, given to anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose in the early 1980s, of colonisation from 'Big England'. As Daniyarri succinctly explained: 'Lotta man in Big England, and they start there looking for 'nother land'. They were colonisers who came and stayed without permission: 'He should have come up and: "hello", you know, "hello"'. The white man should have sought permission to stay, and if he did not gain it, gone away.[10] We can see the same awareness of British colonisation in Burnam Burnam's claiming of England for Aboriginal people by standing on the beach at Dover and raising the Aboriginal flag on Australia Day, 26 January 1988, an event widely covered in both the British and Australian media. In the face of stories and statements like these, we can no longer avoid the British nature of the invasion. Thinking about

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[10] Deborah Bird Rose, *Hidden histories: black stories from Victoria River Downs, Humbert River and Wave Hill Stations* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1991), 15, 17. See also Maria Nugent, *Captain Cook was here* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 120–27.

Britishness becomes part of the process of acknowledging and understanding colonisation.

So I have been thinking about Britishness, both personally and academically. Personally, it's meant getting into family genealogy, and tracing the English convicts, one a Yorkshire weaver convicted of treason for rioting and sentenced to transportation for life, and another convicted of theft, both arriving at Van Diemen's land in the early 1820s; then finding the Cornish tin miners who came to the gold rushes in the 1850s; the mechanics from the west of Scotland who set up a coach-building business in Mittagong in the 1860s; and the middle-class educated immigrants from Bristol and Staffordshire and Wales in the 1870s and 1880s. This meant recognising both the regional mixture that migration brings about, blurring distinctions between English, Scottish, and Welsh and thus reinforcing the identity 'British', yet also noticing the tendency of these mainly west country immigrants to find each other and stick together, at least for a generation or two. It meant also a deeper understanding of the history of migration.

Academically, in the 1990s, the study of diasporic Britishness that Pocock had advocated in the 1970s finally came onto the historical agenda. In Britain and the US, this was influenced by the work of historians like Linda Colley, who explored the complex nature of Britishness around the world. A focus on Britishness has also been important in the international shift in British imperial historiography that has been going on now for 15 years or more. This new imperial history has been strongly influenced by feminist scholarship, just as whiteness studies has been. It is marked by an interest in gender in colonial situations, recognition of the two-way interaction and influences between periphery and centre, a tracing of transnational networks and circulation of ideas, people, and goods, and its emphasis on race, specifically on whiteness and its construction. A key figure here is Catherine Hall, whose book *Civilizing subjects* demonstrates the creation

of consciousness of both Britishness and whiteness in the context of colonialism in Jamaica.

Also important for understanding settler identities and the circulation of ideas around the British Empire is the work of Tony Ballantyne. Those who study intellectual history, he argues and demonstrates, should not continue to focus their analyses on the imperial centre, but should rather ground their study, at least in part, in the ideas and life in the colonies. 'We must', he writes, 'be especially vigilant to strike a balance within the historiography of Britain and its empire so that we do not privilege metropolitan perspectives and thus, even inadvertently, marginalize the brute realities of colonial power and cultural change in the periphery'.[11] As he puts it, we need to study horizontal (colony-to-colony) as well as vertical (Britain to colony and back to Britain) connections, and much of his own work traces these horizontal connections in detail. Ideas about Britishness are thus produced not only in Britain and by British settlers themselves, but also in other parts of the empire, notably in India, and by Indigenous peoples in the British settler colonies.

Britishness has also come under scrutiny from 'four nations' historiography, which refuses to equate Englishness and Britishness, as has so often been done, and productively investigates the mutual interactions of Scots, Irish, Welsh and English histories in British society and the British imperial project since the 16th century. There is now a considerable body of scholarship in Scotland considering just why Scots were such willing foot soldiers of the British empire, as administrators, soldiers, medical men, and educators and in many other ways; in Ireland, scholars are considering the ways in which the Irish were both victims and beneficiaries of British imperial adventures. Suffering the effects of colonial occupation themselves, many Irish migrated to the settler

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[11] Tony Ballantyne, 'Religion, difference, and the limits of British imperial history', *Victorian Studies* 47.3 (Spring 2005): 447.

colonies and, after initial difficulty, did rather well in the process.[12] It is a challenge for historians, now, to meld 'four nations' and the new imperial history to come to a nuanced understanding of Britishness both at home and abroad.

Historians in both Australia and New Zealand have in recent times emphasised the scale and impact of these waves of British migration to the settler colonies, and later the independent nations that arose from them. New Zealand historian James Belich's study of British settlement in North America and Australasia emphasised the explosive population growth resulting from British expansion and migration in the late 19th century and early 20th century, and its huge impact on the world economy and social, political, and natural environments. He noticed also the strengthening rather than the weakening of the relationship between Britain and the rest of the Anglophone world via trade and culture in the early 20th century.[13] Eric Richards has charted the history of British migration to Australia in considerable depth, and emphasised the longevity and ubiquity of British emigration generally.[14]

Britishness in the Australian colonies

Britishness was not only a foundational aspect of settler identity in the mid-19th-century Australian colonies, but also a means of claiming political rights. In his study of the movement for responsible government in New South Wales, *Colonial ambition*, Peter Cochrane points out that British entitlement was a vital aspect of the demand for self-government and democracy: 'entitlement was an insistence on inclusion, not

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[12] T.M. Devine, *Scotland's Empire 1600 to 1815* (London: Penguin, 2003); Kevin Kenny, ed., *Ireland and the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[13] See James Belich, 'The rise of the Angloworld: settlement in Australasia and North America 1784–1918', in *Rediscovering the British world*, eds. P. Buckner and D. Francis (Calgary: Calgary University Press, 2005), and also his book, *Replenishing the earth: the settler revolution and the rise of the Angloworld* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[14] See Eric Richards, *Britannia's children: emigration from England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland since 1600* (London: Hambledon, 2004).

rebellion; an expression of loyalism rather than republicanism'.[15] Recent research work by Jessie Mitchell and me on the relationship between Indigenous-settler history and the coming of self-government to the Australian colonies in the 1850s supports this view. During the 1840s and 50s, we find again and again that when colonists claimed their rights to local, representative, and eventually responsible government, they did so on grounds of equal British subjecthood.[16] At a banquet held in Sydney in 1856 to mark the beginning of responsible government, for example, Richard Thompson's account of the evening reminded readers that many Australian colonists were 'the equals in education, and general intellectual habits, of those who ordinarily find their way into the British House of Commons'.[17]

Feelings were similar in the other colonies. In Tasmania, influential writer John West, after acknowledging that the colony's convict beginnings had prevented representative government at first, went on to point out that colonists' British character and heritage prevented the government from sliding into disgraceful European-style tyranny. 'The genius of British freedom', West writes, 'has ever overshadowed the British colony, and awed the despotic ruler, while it has encouraged and sheltered the feeblest colonist'.[18] In South Australia, the *South Australian*

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[15] Peter Cochrane, *Colonial ambition: foundations of Australian democracy* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2006), 8.

[16] The research reported in this section was undertaken by Jessie Mitchell, and parts of it are reported in three articles: '"The Gomorrah of the Southern seas": population, separation and race in early colonial Queensland", *History Australia*, 6.2 (2009).; '"The galling yoke of slavery": race and separation in colonial Port Phillip', *Journal of Australian Studie*s, 33.2 (June 2009), 125–37; and '"Are we in danger of a hostile visit from the Aborigines?" Dispossession and the rise of self-government in New South Wales', *Australian Historical Studies*, 40.3 (2009), 294–307.

[17] Richard Thompson, ed., *Report of the proceedings at the National Banquet, held at the Prince of Wales Theatre, Sydney, on the 17th of July, 1856, to celebrate the establishment and inauguration of responsible government in the colony of New South Wales* (Sydney: Thomas Daniel, 1856), 4.

[18] John West, *The history of Tasmania*, 2 (Launceston: Henry Dowling, 1852), 339–40.

Register in 1843 described representative government as 'a right to which every Briton has an indefensible and an indisputable claim'.[19] One landowner, speaking at a public meeting in 1849 about the proposed new constitution, objected to the prospect of an unrepresentative legislature: 'They were Britons; and they felt the spirit of Britons as much in South Australia as they had done when they were in Old England itself'.[20]

In Port Phillip (Victoria) and Moreton Bay (Queensland), those campaigning for separation from New South Wales strongly expressed similar ideas. In Moreton Bay, the *Courier* rallied its readers in 1853 against the threat of NSW retaining portions of the northern districts, declaring that this must 'meet with that resistance which any man of British spirit aught to oppose to those who seek his enslavement'.[21] Without local government, the paper stated, colonists were left in an 'un-English political condition'; 'What we want is no more than the birthright of every Englishman—a voice in the making of our own laws, and a power to dispose of the public revenues to which we contribute'.[22] In Port Phillip, an 1844 petition to the House of Commons requested separation on grounds of 'the spirit which should pervade every people who have inherited the feelings of which the British Constitution is the parent and guardian'.[23]

When Victoria's independence was finally declared in November 1850, the celebrations combined passionate regional and imperial loyalty with a nascent hint of federation, as well as an interestingly gendered tone. This was apparent in the public celebrations in Melbourne, which

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[19] *South Australian Register*, 21 September 1839, 4; 21 December 1839, 5; 26 August 1843, 2; 20 August 1851, 2.

[20] W. Snell Chauncy, *A guide to South Australia* (London: E. Rich, 1849), x; *South Australian*, 25 December 1849, 3.

[21] *Moreton Bay Courier*, 13 August 1853, 2.

[22] *Moreton Bay Courier*, 15 September 1855, 2; 27 October 1855, 2.

[23] Committee of the Separation Society, *The petitions of the District of Port Phillip (Australia Felix) for separation from the territory of New South Wales* (Melbourne: W. Clarke, 1844), 20.

promoted the message that British loyalty could best be enjoyed and expressed through colonial self-determination. The Mechanics' Hall featured a picture of the Queen with the words 'Loyal, Separate, and Free'. The Bush Inn displayed a transparency of Britannia separating two quarrelling children (NSW and Port Phillip) and saying 'Phillip, my boy, go, and be sure you behave like a man'.[24] Victorian anthems written for the occasion by colonial political commentator Nathaniel Kentish implied similar messages. One of his works, *Commemoration national anthem* ('respectfully inscribed to the Ladies of Victoria'), featured repeated phrases like 'Rule AUSTRALIA, VICTORIA rule the waves—For BRITAIN'S SONS shall ne'er be Slaves!' and 'Rule BRITANNIA—AUSTRALIA rule the waves,—VICTORIA'S Sons shall ne'er be slaves!' The song also implied that Britain's best traditions could be enjoyed and strengthened in the colonies—'All Nature's seeds from BRITAIN cold, in this mild climate but improve'—and implied a certain reinvigoration of gender in this pioneer setting.[25]

All this assertion of Britishness did not mean colonials were uncritical of Britain itself. Some colonial commentators complained that while they were loyal Britons, they were unimpressed by the treatment they received from the Home government. When the Australasian League protested against the continuance of transportation, they threatened that colonists, possessing a natural superiority inherited from Britain, were losing their patriotic attachment to the home country 'which has hitherto been their pride and boast'.[26] They and others saw

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[24] *Argus*, 14 November 1850, 2.

[25] Nathaniel Kentish, *Commemoration national anthem. Victorian-Australian 'Rule Britannia', composed in celebration of the glorious separation, respectfully inscribed to the Ladies of Victoria* (Melbourne: S. Goode, 1850).

[26] Australasian League, *Sessional papers, etc etc, of the Australasian League Conference held in Hobart Town and Launceston, Van Diemen's Land, in the month of April and May 1852* (Launceston: 1852), 16.

colonisation itself as developing qualities of initiative and determination, perhaps making the British colonist a superior form of Briton.

Britishness arises with a special urgency in the context of Indigenous Australian history. As Angela Woollacott has pointed out, the return to imperial perspectives in Australian history joined up with more inward-looking studies of the history of Indigenous-colonial relations, leading to comparative and transcolonial approaches.[27] The study Jessie Mitchell and I are undertaking into the relationship between Indigenous-settler relations and the granting of self-government to the Australian colonies necessarily connects imperial policy, settler identity, and Indigenous dispossession. With independent government for the colonies seen as depending on their quintessential Britishness, Aboriginal people were by definition seen as outside the polity, beyond the scope of those seeking self-government. Colonists acknowledged Indigenous people as British subjects, but only in a technical sense. In the many debates over separation and self-government, speakers scarcely ever addressed the possibility of their inclusion in the political process.[28]

Woollacott has focused on the nature of masculinity in the British colonial situation. She questions 'the legend that self-government in the Australian colonies was won by a progressive reform movement that operated in a purely political realm divorced from the messy realities of the frontier'.[29] Leading advocates of self-government for the white colonies, such as Henry Chapman in New Zealand, Van Diemen's Land, and Victoria and Thomas Murray-Prior in Queensland were, she demonstrates, either involved in or approving and aware of frontier violence themselves. Her research, and ours, into the connections

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[27] Angela Woollacott, 'Whiteness and "the imperial turn"', in *Historicising whiteness: transnational perspectives on the construction of an identity*, eds. Leigh Boucher, Jane Carey and Katherine Ellinghaus (Melbourne: RMIT Publishing, 2007), 10.

[28] *South Australian Colonist* 1.3, 24 March 1840, 41; *South Australian Register*, 2 July 1851, 2.

[29] Angela Woollacott, 'Frontier violence and settler manhood', *History Australia*, 6.1 (2009), 11.4.

between the demand for and granting of self-government on the one hand, and Indigenous-settler relations on the other, promises a reworking of the history of Australian democracy which has the potential to place racial identities and relationships in the centre of the story.

European

British settlers and colonists were not only, in their own eyes, white and British; they were also European. Their Europeanness meant they shared with other Europeans—French, German, Italians, and others—a history of thinking about the non-European. 'European' in this context meant not only people who had arrived in the colonies directly from Europe, but also Americans of European, including British, descent. What mattered was not where people now lived but rather their descent and their political and cultural heritage.

In recent years, political theorists have been probing the history of European thought since the 18th century, investigating the changes in thinking about human difference and its implications for political freedom and autonomy. Generally, they have traced the nature and timing of the shift in European thought from some kind of universalist appreciation of human difference and variation towards racialised understandings. Influential here have been two books, one by Sankar Muthu, entitled *Enlightenment against Empire* (2003) and the other by his wife, Jennifer Pitts, *A turn to Empire* (2005). Where Muthu traces the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and anti-racist strands in Enlightenment thought, Pitts investigates how these largely gave way to a full embrace within European thought of colonialism, imperialism, and racism by the mid-19th century.

Muthu explores in depth just what Enlightenment intellectuals in the later 18th century thought about colonisation and the differences between peoples. One of his interesting arguments is that while we find strands of anti-imperial thought in a wide variety of thinkers, it is only in continental European thought, in people like Diderot, Kant and Herder,

that we see thoroughgoing forms of critique of colonisation. British critics nearly always focused on the particular forms of colonisation here or there, as with Edmund Burke on India, but they rarely if ever mounted the wholesale attacks that some continental thinkers did. We are reminded what anti-imperial and anti-colonial thought actually looks like when we read Diderot. Diderot wrote sections of the *History of the two Indies*, which came out in several editions, the most important in 1780. The book was extremely popular, in French and in English, until the 1820s, when it sank into oblivion, rediscovered only in the late 20th century. The 'two Indies' in the title are the East Indies (meaning India and East Asia), and the West Indies (meaning North and South America).

Writing in the 1770s, Diderot ridicules the absurdity of the New World conquests in which Europeans claim lands to be their rightful property not because they are uninhabited but because they are unoccupied by anyone from the Old World. The creed of the coloniser, he says, is as follows:

> Let all perish, my own country and the country where I rule, the citizen and the foreigner, even my associate, provided that I grow rich on his remains. All places in the universe are as one to me. When I have laid waste, sucked dry and exhausted one region, there will always be another to which I can take my gold and where I can enjoy it in peace.

He sees the effects of this European expansion as everywhere catastrophic: 'ruins have been heaped on ruins; countries that were well-peopled have become deserted'. Europeans, says Diderot, typically use corrupted principles of international law and fantastical half-baked theories to justify mass injustice, such as expropriating American Indian land. He is especially devastating on the role of the British in India, and makes the point that even countries that are not despotic at home will act despotically abroad.

To the colonised peoples, he says, beware. Beasts, he says, 'are less fearsome than these colonisers … The tiger may tear you apart, but it will take from you only your life. These creatures will steal your innocence

and your liberty'. You are too trusting 'and you do not know them'. The answer is to confront the Europeans with brute force. 'Do not waste your time with protests about justice to which they will pay no heed; it is with your arrows that you must speak to them'. Of the settlers, he says, 'Living in lands to which they have come in order to grow rich, they easily forget to be just'. They enter into a 'spirit of depredation' manifested in horrible violence. The only solution is to decolonise and give up imperial holdings, and to refuse to colonise any further.

Diderot was writing in France in the 1770s, living under an autocratic regime. His antipathy to his own society is thoroughgoing, and lays the basis for his opposition to imperialism. In Britain, as indicated earlier, there was no real equivalent; the tendency was not so much to criticise imperial and colonial projects *per se* as to urge they be carried out with humanity and justice. We can think here of Andrew Fitzmaurice's book, *Humanism and America*, which explores English ideas of colonisation in early modern England. Since early modern times, the English have wished to see themselves as kindly, caring, and honourable colonisers.[30] Jennifer Pitts in her *A turn to Empire* considers British thinkers such as Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, Bentham, James and J.S. Mill, alongside the French theorists de Tocqueville and Condorcet. Her narrative is one of increasing attachment for both British and French to racial paradigms. Europe's progressive civilisation, these thinkers argued, gave Europeans the authority to suspend their usual moral and political standards when dealing with non-European societies.

In the Australian colonies, non-British Europeans were included within colonial public life. British colonists generally welcomed non-British Europeans as valued colonists and settlers with shared values and customs. As Jessie Mitchell has noted, the *Argus*' coverage of the celebrations to mark Port Phillip's separation in 1850 emphasised the joyous coming together of all ages and classes of colonial society. She

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[30] See John Docker, *The origins of violence* (London: Pluto, 2008), passim.

notes local authorities permitted and even encouraged a certain multicultural inclusion; in the grand parade held in Melbourne to mark the opening of Prince's Bridge across the Yarra, the German Union carried German and British flags together and the St Patrick's Society displayed Irish and British symbols.[31] A few years later, during the gold rushes, British, Germans, Italians, French and other European goldseekers intermingled freely.

The sense of European brotherhood was especially clear in the hostility European goldseekers expressed towards the Chinese. The Lambing Flat riots of 1861, where European goldseekers drove Chinese goldseekers away from the Lambing Flat goldfield, involved a German band, and the joint action of British and other European goldseekers. As one of the goldminers involved in anti-Chinese agitation on the goldfields in New South Wales so eloquently put it, they welcomed 'men of all nations except Chinamen'. By 'all nations', they meant 'all European nations'; Europe was in this assured view the site of civilisation, as in the idea of European civilisation that superseded all previous cultures and civilisations.[32] The anti-Chinese movement prompted some puzzled debate at times over how to distinguish who was acceptable and who was not. After the Lambing Flat riots, for example, a Bill was presented to parliament aiming to restrict the immigration of Chinese into New South Wales. The original Bill provided for the exclusion of 'aliens', that is, it distinguished on the basis of nationality rather than race. Yet the colonists did not want to exclude immigrants from Europe and the US and there was a lively discussion in the Assembly over the virtues of aliens such as Germans and Americans; as one member of parliament put

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31 *Argus*, 13, 14 and 19 November 1850, cited in Mitchell, 'The galling yoke of slavery'.

32 See Ann Curthoys, 'Men of all nations, except Chinamen: Chinese on the New South Wales goldfields', in *Gold: forgotten histories and lost objects of Australia*, eds. Iain McCalman, Alexander Cook and Andrew Reeves (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 103–24.

it, 'although aliens in country [they] were not so in blood and civilisation'. After further discussion, the Bill was amended to exclude only Chinese.[33]

It is important to remember, though, that despite this sense of European brotherhood, Britishness (and British subjecthood) was to remain primary. While European civilisation was important, the colonies would not become 'European' in the sense of a fusion of all European nationalities into a new 'European' colonial society. They were to remain undeniably British in character and allegiance, and adaptation could only be one way. Ultimately, it was the colonial expansionist mission of Britain, rather than that of Europe, which was to be consolidated and vindicated.

Conclusion

A focus on British imperial and colonising history helps strengthen the insight that whiteness has always to be understood relationally, and in process. The appeal to whiteness does not necessarily displace other identifications, such as British and European and Western, though it certainly can and does change the ways in which they were deployed in given circumstances. Whiteness faces competition not only from alternative forms of identification such as European and British, but also from long-standing ideals of equality and mutual respect. While there is a long history of racism dominating the relations between white settlers and various others, there is also a significant history of resistance, opposition, and critique. White settler societies generally have liberal and humanitarian traditions and sets of institutions that at times come into direct conflict with racial thinking, action and policy.

It is important to keep connecting the study of the past and the present. Just as Ruth Frankenberg found layer upon layer of historical race thinking in contemporary white American thinking about race, so we find similar layers in Australian consciousness of race and colonialism. No racial idea remains dominant forever, and no racial idea

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[33] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 May 1861.

ever quite goes away. The shock that many in Australia felt in response to Pauline Hanson in the late 1990s and Keith Windschuttle in the early 2000s is one of realisation that there is no secure progressivist narrative for race relations in Australia. Ideas that had been thought long defunct, such as the denial of rights relating to prior occupation, or belief in the noble coloniser who was too civilised and Christian to destroy the foundations of life of Aboriginal people or to attack Aboriginal people themselves, continue to have purchase. Whiteness as an assumption of destiny, nevertheless, is especially under pressure in the new millennium. In world terms, with the presence of a black President of the United States and the rise of China and India as world economies and powers, it will be interesting to observe just what happens in future to white people's so-far-resilient fantasies of being the bearers of history.