# The performance of whiteness: accounts of Aboriginal marginalisation and racism in Newcastle

**Dr Deirdre Howard-Wagner**
Lecturer, Socio-Legal Studies
Department of Sociology and Social Policy
School of Social and Political Sciences
University of Sydney
Email: deirdre.howard-wagner@usyd.edu.au

**Abstract**

There is no obvious racial divide in Newcastle, nor is there an evident race relations problem, as in other towns such as Wilcannia, Taree, Dubbo, Walgett. Federal and state anti-discrimination legislation provides a system of regulation and disciplinarity and the number of reported complaints in Newcastle are so low as to suggest racial discrimination is not an issue of concern.

Yet, in-depth interviews, participant observation of community events and informal discussions with local Kooris and Gooris living in Newcastle revealed racism in the form of racial vilification on buses, racial discrimination in shops, and derogatory references to Aboriginality and culture at work, as well as the more subtle forms of institutional racism evident in the education system and media, are a day-to-day reality.

Here though, the accounts of marginalisation and racism are examined through a different lens; that is, as the performance of whiteness. The objective is to expose the invisibility of whiteness, its dominance and marginalising effects, in order to understand how whiteness in and of itself is often received as an act of marginalisation and racism. The paper draws on data from fieldwork conducted in Newcastle, which commenced as a study of racism and became a study of whiteness.

**Key words**: Aboriginality, whiteness, marginalisation, racism.

## Introduction

Comparative studies of racism towards Aboriginal Australians have tended to focus on small concentrated communities, such as suburban areas like Redfern; or, rural or remote communities in north-west New South Wales, the Northern Territory, Far North Queensland (for example, see Calley 1957; Beckett 1958; Morris 1985; Cowlishaw 1988a, 1999 & 2004)[1]. 'Race relations' has been an important element of these studies, as too is the experience of racism, or perceptions of racism, and

dominance and power relations. Yet, despite acknowledging the importance of power relations for understanding of racism, whiteness has been historically represented as an unraced category within this work (Pugliese 2005: 356).

Over the last fifteen years, the interdiscipline of whiteness studies has stemmed from and extended the broader scholarship of race theory and studies of racism (Brodkin 2001), building from and adding to the broader historical work on racism and work on the racialised and/or colonised subject (Frankenberg 1997: 2). A key feature of whiteness studies, as Frankenberg (1993: 6) points out, is that it 'assign[s] everyone a place in relations of racism'. This scholarship has turned to the problematisation of whiteness as a position of privilege and the study of white people as active *participants* in systems of domination (Levine-Rasky 2000: 272). The naming of whiteness has also broadened 'the focus of study, first because it makes room for the linkage of white subjects to histories not encompassed by, but connected to, that of racism: histories of colonialism, and imperialism and, secondarily, histories of assimilation …' (Frankenberg 1993: 7).

Whiteness studies point to the importance of exposing the *invisibility* of power and domination in day-to-day social interactions and institutional operations to studies of whiteness (Frankenberg 1993 & 1998; Moreton-Robinson 2000, 2004a and 2004b; Howard-Wagner 2006, 2007 & 2009; Kelada 2008). This scholarship explores how power, domination and whiteness are embedded in everyday social relations, but that the power of whiteness is often *invisible* to *white* people (Frankenberg 1993 & 1999; Howard-Wagner 2006; Kelada 2008).

The purpose of this paper is to briefly demonstrate how whiteness studies can provide insights about the experience of Aboriginal marginalisation and racism. The paper

refers to data collected as part of fieldwork conducted in Newcastle, specifically local Koori and Goori accounts of marginalisation and racism.

While whiteness operates uninterrupted as ‘normative’ and ‘authentic’, for local Kooris and Gooris whiteness is not hidden. Describing the performance of whiteness as acts of racism renders visible racialised practices in a normatively ‘white’ world. Yet, making *whiteness* visible and analysing it within the framework of ‘race’ does not give credit to the essentialist status of ‘race’ as discrete, immutable and intergenerationally stable biological entity. ‘Whiteness’ as a set of ideological practices renders as natural what is an historical and contingent social construction. The importance of naming whiteness and also identifying its socially constructed nature is a central element of whiteness studies. It is the socially constructed nature of whiteness that makes it both dynamic and context specific (Brander et al 2001).

**Methods**

The site of the research was a regional post-industrial city going through significant change resulting, in part, from the closure of the major industry, BHP steel works, in 2000. Newcastle has a history of progressive politics, and is renowned for its trade union history. It is also a Federal and State Labor safe seat. Newcastle’s shared Indigenous and non-Indigenous history is unique in many ways to other parts of Australia. Unlike rural areas of New South Wales, Newcastle does not have a history of racial conflict between its Indigenous and non-Indigenous population. Smallpox, dispossession and violent conflict were responsible for the significant decrease in the number of Awabakal people in the Hunter region during the 1800s (Blyton 2002 & Roberts 2002). During the 20$^{th}$ century the Indigenous population recovered with large numbers of Kooris and Gooris relocating to Newcastle from outlying areas to the

north and west because of employment opportunities and lower levels of racism and discrimination. Today, the Newcastle Indigenous people are a 'mixed mob' comprised of traditional owners and Kooris and Gooris that have moved to the area. Newcastle's Indigenous population is growing at a greater rate than the national average (ABS 2002). It is also a regional centre servicing many of the outlying Indigenous communities to the north and west of Newcastle.

The specific qualitative data presented here is based on participant observation at public forums on racism, informal participant observation at public events, in-depth taped interviews with Kooris and Gooris living in Newcastle, different conversations that ranged from short taped interviews to brief discussions (to clarify observations and meanings, or to confirm people's experiences, were also what others had experienced more generally). Fieldwork was conducted from early 2001 to late 2003 and further fieldwork was conducted over a six month period in 2005.

The paper engages with this data, going beyond the application of social theories of race and racism, to understand acts of marginalisation and racism, as interpreted through the lens of local Kooris and Gooris living in Newcastle, as acts of whiteness.

**The possessive investment in whiteness – a normatively 'white' world**

It is what George Lipsitz (1998: 2) refers to as the possessive investment in whiteness that surreptitiously shapes Indigenous marginalisation and experiences of racism in Newcastle. Whiteness can be subtle, yet pervasive.

Whiteness and marginalisation are embedded in discursive accounts of racial vilification on buses, racial discrimination in shops and derogatory references to Aboriginality and culture at work. As one Indigenous woman who works for an agency administering employment programs in Newcastle stated:

> I myself have been discriminated against when I have been into shops, and things like that. It doesn't upset me. I have learnt to live with that. It does upset my two kids. It's probably happened more so than I'd like to remember. But, there is one particular incidence whereby we walked into this shop and this lady stood in front of me and turned her back and started to fix the shelves behind the counter, and there was a lady standing at the side of me who was counting out stock who wouldn't serve me. So I just stood there and looked at them and I couldn't believe it was happening. My girls started saying "mummy you said you were going to buy this." "Well, we're not going to get any service here girls, so let's go." That was last year that happened to me. [2]

Her experience reaffirms her perception that racism is potentially a daily experience, yet it also evidences her perception of whiteness as normative. As this Indigenous woman noted, although she is well dressed, educated and well spoken, she believed the colour of her skin, as a marker of difference, produced a different set of practices toward her. Her discourse does not evidence the 'in-your-face racism' of earlier generations, but the frustration of being made to feel unwelcome or ignored as one goes about one's day-to-day routines in a normatively 'white' world. Her account disrupts the illusion of equality.

At the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) Community Consultation on Racism in Newcastle held in July 2001 in the lead up to the United Nations World Conference on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, another Indigenous woman noted that: "I am often followed in shops". The woman referred to one particular incident in which she went into their local supermarket carrying some pre-purchased goods in plastic bags. She noted that:

> As I left, the security guard came up to me and asked to check all my plastic bags.

The woman frequents the supermarket and, as she noted, she is often well dressed, but believes that because she is obviously of Indigenous descent, stereotypes came into play. While we could consider this statement as an example of the 'victim', it also demonstrates how the identification as Aboriginal is in this case experienced as a marker of more intense surveillance – a marker of difference. In this context, surveillance by shop or mall security carries the capacity to stigmatise individual shoppers identified as belonging to a particular social group by shadowing their every movement. Importantly though, given the forum in which this statement is made, she is not simply the 'victim' of this surveillance, but is talking about the constitution of social relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Newcastle so, at the same time, her statement acts as a form of resistance.

This woman's account is, therefore, also disruptive in that it brings to our attention the everyday lived experience of difference; how those that are different can be treated differently in a normatively 'white' world. Again, she disrupts the illusion of equality.

By contrast, the following example is a case of how whiteness produces a more normative treatment. To demonstrate, another Indigenous woman told of how she was renting a house from a particular real estate agency in Newcastle and of how she sent her niece along to the same agency to find a rental property. Her niece found a property that she wanted to rent. The account is as follows:

> My niece wanted to rent a property and I offered to give her a reference. I went into the office and mentioned to the staff that I would give a reference. And, one woman said but she's an Aborigine. Yes, and I'm an Aborigine. The woman was obviously surprised because I too had rented a property from them, but she obviously hadn't realised that I was a Koori. She asked questions like: "They won't have any other people there? … Will they be clean? ..."[3]

This local Koori woman's account evidences how whiteness confers both dominance and constitutes social practices of everyday life (Moreton-Robinson 1999: 35). Whiteness here is more than identity; it is a practice (Levine-Rasky 2000: 280). The experience of discrimination for local Kooris and Gooris is also deeply embedded in social practices.

Koori and Goori discourses communicate the experience of living with their Indigeneity. They evidence how whiteness functions as normative. Whiteness positively constitutes social relations.

**Capillaries of power and omnipresence of whiteness in the local press**

Local Koori and Goori discourses evidence a normative, yet dominant, standpoint also exists in the media in Newcastle about Aboriginal issues. The media standpoint on Aboriginal issues is presented as a general and neutral standpoint - they are viewed 'through a form of tunnel vision of which their experiences of the world are at the centre' (Moreton-Robinson 2000b: 348). This is what hooks' (1990) refers to as the experience of marginalisation as an experience of 'otherness', which is always on the periphery in relation to the centre; here it is about one's experience of living on the periphery of whiteness.

For example, the fact that the local newspaper does not run stories submitted as press releases from local Aboriginal organisations reinforces the view that Indigenous issues are marginal to dominant mainstream interests. One key Indigenous spokesperson remarked that:

> even so-called media portrayal of issues is not well researched and the media do not take the time to understand the issues – this creates tensions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people because non-Aboriginal people cannot make an informed decision about the issues.

In the eyes of local Kooris and Gooris, these practices serve to reinforce the sense of the marginal and disinterested nature of mainstream society. It also reinforces the sense that Aboriginal issues serve a sensationalist purpose.

The local newspaper has a particularly poor reputation amongst local community groups and the Aboriginal community for its coverage of events and issues and the content of the articles run. Indigenous issues are only of marginal concern. At the HREOC Community Consultation on Racism in Newcastle held in July 2001 in the lead up to the United Nations World Conference on Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, for example, a general complaint of local Kooris and Gooris concerned the trouble they had getting the local media to report good news stories. A representative from the local land council noted: “There is a proliferation of racism through the media – they focus on the bad news stories, particularly in relation to Aboriginal people and refugees”. The then Acting HREOC Race Discrimination Commissioner made a similar observation. He noted: “I have done up to eight interviews a day in all the other places that we have visited as part of the national process of community consultation, and have sent out a media release for Newcastle and followed these up with calls and have not got responses from the media.” A local Councillor turned up late to the event and commented that they had been late because they were trying to get media to cover the event, but, as usual in relation to such issues, they had had little response. These comments elicited a number of similar complaints from people representing local Aboriginal organisations. Another Koori involved in the organisation of NAIDOC week events locally noted that: “Not one paper focused on reporting local NAIDOC Week events this year”. A former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Regional Councillor noted that: “Media alerts from ATSIC never get used - like the release about thirty Aboriginal

students accepted to study medicine at the University of Newcastle". A local Koori woman, who is a representative from a local Aboriginal community organisation, stated: "I get calls from a young woman at the *Newcastle Herald* who rings me each month to do negative stories – only interested in alcoholism, domestic violence and bad issues and who won't report good news stories."

At a local forum on racism organised by the Newcastle Aboriginal Support Group (NASG) in 2001, a long-standing member of the NASG noted:

> *Newcastle Herald* ran an article on native title and the Newcastle Aboriginal Support Group sent a letter in correcting the information presented in the article. The *Newcastle Herald* edited the letter removing sections and changing the content around misconstruing the information we sent them. We took the matter to Media Watch and they showed all the disparities on television.

The local media seeks to exercise its authority over Aboriginal affairs and gives shape to public representations of Indigenous people.

Local media practices reaffirm the marginal status of Aboriginal issues. It repeats the paradox inherent in the practices of dominance. The firmness with which its authority seeks to exercise control of Aboriginal issues is matched by its reluctant; some would say neglectful, interest in such matters. Here whiteness functions in a generative form of power in that it generates effects through particular social relations (Cooper 1997: 150). The expression of discontent too has a discursive effect; it is a counter discourse that exposes this as a locus of power and provides an alternative viewpoint of the portrayal of Indigenous issues in the media.

The reality is that Indigenous news is given a small, or often limited, space in the local media. The common pattern to media stories on Indigenous issues are constructed as controversial, rather than giving a regular space for Indigenous news. This is not specific to Aboriginal issues. Yet, the only substantial and consistent

space for Indigenous news is in Aboriginal newspapers or newsletters, such as the *Koori Mail*.

**Conclusion**

In exploring marginality and race relations in the context of whiteness, it has not been my objective to 'romance the margins' through emancipatory rhetoric in a way that Muecke (1992: 192) suggests 'loads the dice so firmly that we have to assume that the truth lies on the side of the minor' or that some institution 'is bound to be "oppressive" because it is on the side of "power" …'. This is simply a complementary inversion of the Aborigine as 'victim' of an oppressive system. The paper argues instead that marginality is not a passive position that the 'other' occupies. Discourses of marginality and racism operate to discursively disrupt the everyday taken-for-granted white world and operate as a form of resistance.

hooks' (1990) theorising of marginalisation as an active subject position is especially useful for understanding how Kooris and Gooris in Newcastle experience and resist whiteness as a performative act of racism or race relations. hooks (1990: 149) identifies 'marginality as much more than a site of deprivation… it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance …'. So, for hooks, marginality is 'a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist … It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds' (hooks 1990: 150). It is this relationality in the context of marginality that enables resistance, which hooks particularly draws our attention to. A position that allows one to move beyond interpreting the Aboriginal subject positions experience of marginalisation and racism as an experience of the 'passive' victim. The binary position of marginal in relation to the centre is no longer conceptualised as a

passive or oppressive state but it becomes a positive state in that it becomes a site of resistance. In the examples described above, resistance makes whiteness visible and decenters everyday normative practices of whiteness that cause marginalisation. Conversely then, discourses of marginality and racism have broader meaning and context in that they expose and disrupt the normalisation of whiteness and its dominance. Discourses of marginality and racism are positive in the constitution and practices of self and they resist and expose and disrupt taken-for-granted everyday social practices and arrangements and institutional operations and represent the world in a different way, providing counter discursive representations of existence.

**Notes:**

1. The words Aboriginal and Indigenous are used interchangeably throughout the paper

2. Extract from in-depth interview.

3. Statement made at a local forum on racism held by the Newcastle Aboriginal Support Group in 2001.

**References**

ABS – Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002) *ABS 2001 Census Data – Newcastle (SSD110005)*, accessed 25 April 2005, <http://www.abs.gov.au>

Beckett, J. (1958) *A Study of a Mixed-Blood Aboriginal Minority in the Pastoral West of New South Wales*, Thesis (MA), Australian National University.

Blyton, G (2002) Dispossession and Violence: A Brief Note on the Newcastle-Lake Macquarie Region in the 1820s-1830s, D.A. Roberts, H.M. Carey and V. Grieves, Awaba: A Database of Historical Materials Relating to the Aborigines of the Newcastle-Lake Macquarie Region, University of Newcastle, 2002, <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/group/amrhd/awaba/>.

Brander Rasmussen, B., Klinenberg, E., Nexica, I.J., and Wray, M. (2001) *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness,* Duke University Press: Durham and London.

Brodkin, K. (1999) ‘Studying Whiteness: What’s the Point and Where Do We Go From Here?’, in B. McKay (ed.), *Unmasking Whiteness: Race Relations and Reconciliation*, The Queensland Studies Centre: Griffith University, Brisbane: 7-27.

Calley, M. J. C. (1957) ‘Race Relations on the North Coast of New South Wales’, *Oceania*, Vol.27 (3): 190-209.

Cooper, D. (1997) 'Strategies of Power: Legislating Worship and Religious Education' in M. Lloyd and A. Thacker (eds.), *The Impact of Michel Foucault on the Social Sciences and Humanities*, Macmillan Press: Basingstoke; St Martin's Press: New York: 147-172.

Cowlishaw, G. (1988a) *Black, White or Brindle: Race in Rural Australia*, Cambridge University Press: Melbourne.

Cowlishaw, G. (1988b) 'Australian Aboriginal Studies: The Anthropologists' Accounts', in M. de Lepervarche and G. Bottomley (eds.), *The Cultural Construction of Race*, Meglamedia: Annandale: 60-79.

Cowlishaw, G. (1999) *Rednecks, Eggheads and Blackfellas: A Study of Racial Power and Intimacy in Australia*, Allen and Unwin: St Leonards.

Cowlishaw, G. (2004) *Blackfellas, Whitefellas, and the Hidden Injuries of Race*, Blackwell Publishers: Malden, MA.

Frankenberg, R. (1993) *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, Fifth printing, 1995, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis

Frankenberg, R. (1997) 'Introduction: Local Whitenesses, Localizing Whiteness', in R. Frankenberg (ed.), *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, Duke University Press: Durham:1-33.

hooks, b. (1990) *Yearning, Race, Gender and Cultural Politics,* South End Press: Boston MA.

Howard-Wagner, D. (2006) 'Practices of Inclusiveness' in Newcastle: protocols of whiteness, Indigenous protocols and power relations', The Australian Sociological Association Refereed Conference Proceedings, December 2006.

Howard-Wagner, D. (2009) 'Whiteness, power relations, resistance and the practical recognition of Indigenous rights in Newcastle', *Theory in Action, US Journal of Transformative Studies*, Volume 2 (1): 40-65.

Kelada, O. (2008) 'White Nation Fantasy and The Northern Territory Intervention', *Australian Critical Whiteness Studies Association e-journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1, accessed 13 August 2009 <http://www.acrawsa.org.au/ejournalVol4no12008.htm>.

Levine-Rasky, C. (2000) 'The Practice of Whiteness Among Teacher Candidates', *International Studies in Sociology of Education,* Vol.10 (3): 263-284.

Lipsitz, G. (1998) *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, Temple University Press: Philadelphia, PA.

Moreton-Robinson, A. (1998) 'Witnessing Whiteness in the Wake of Wik', *Social Alternatives*, Vol.17 (2): 11-14

Moreton-Robinson, A. (1999) 'Unmasking Whiteness: A *Goori Jondal's* Look at Some Duggai Business', in B. McKay (ed.), *Unmasking Whiteness: Race Relations and Reconciliation*, Griffith University: Brisbane: 28-38.

Moreton-Robinson, A. (2000a) *Talkin' up to the White Women: Indigenous Women and Feminism*, University of Queensland Press: Brisbane.

Moreton-Robinson, A. (2000b) 'Troubling Business: Differences and Whiteness in Feminism', *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol.15 (33): 343-352.

Moreton-Robinson, A. (2002) 'A Possessive Investment in Patriarchal Whiteness: Nullifying Native Title', in P. Nursey-Bray, and C. L. Bacchi (eds.), *Left Directions: Beyond the Third Way*, University of Western Australian Press: Crawley WA: 162-177.

Moreton- Robinson, A. (2004a) 'The Possessive Logic of Patriarchal White Sovereignty: The High Court and the Yorta Yorta decision', *borderlands e-journal*, Vol.3, No.2, accessed 13 June 2005,

<http://www.borderlandsejournal.adelaide.edu.au/vol3no2_2004/moreton_possessive. html>

Moreton-Robinson, A. (2004b) 'Whiteness, Epistemology and Indigenous Representation', in A. Moreton-Robinson (ed.), *Whitening Race: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, Aboriginal Studies Press: Canberra: 75-88.

Moreton-Robinson, A. (2005) 'The House that Jack Built: Britishness and White Possession', *Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association Journal*, Vol.1: 21-29.

Morris, B. (1985) 'Cultural Domination and Domestic Dependence: the Dhan-Ghadi of New South Wales and the Protection of the State', *Canberra Anthropology*, Vol.8 (1/2): 87-115.

Muecke, S. (1992) *Textual Spaces*, NSW University Press: Kensington, NSW.

Mayer, V. (2005) 'Research Beyond the Pale', in *Communication Theory*, Vol. 15 (2): 148-167.

Pugliese, J. (2005) 'Necrological Whiteness: The Racial Prosthetics of Template Bodies', in *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, Vol. 19 (3): 349-364.

Roberts, D. (2002) Aborigines, Commandments and Convicts: the Newcastle Penal Settlement in D.A. Roberts, H.M. Carey and V. Grieves, Awaba: A Database of Historical Materials Relating to the Aborigines of the Newcastle-Lake Macquarie Region, University of Newcastle, 2002 <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/group/amrhd/awaba/>.