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MASTER OF FINE ARTS
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RESEARCH PAPER

Challenging White Fantasies of 'post-Aboriginality': reading the work of Fiona Foley and Vernon Ah Kee

Jessie Czaban

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney.
Table of Contents

Chapter One - Introduction ........................................................................................................................................1

Chapter Two – Multiculturalism, Nationalism and the Arts in Australia .......................................................... 11

Chapter Three – White Desires and Narratives of ‘post-Aboriginality’ ............................................................. 31

Chapter Four – (White Desires of) Blackness, Bodies and Belonging in the Works of Fiona Foley and Vernon Ah Kee ........................................................................................................................................... 58

Chapter Five – Challenging White Desires for Place : Mapping Indigenous Sovereignty Through Language and Memory ........................................................................................................................................ 103

Chapter Six - Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................ 134

Bibliography ......................................................................................................................................................... 143
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## List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1:</td>
<td>Fiona Foley. <em>Nulla 4 eva VII</em>, 2009.</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2:</td>
<td>Fig. 2: Fiona Foley. <em>Badtjala Woman (Two Sets of Beads)</em>, 1994.</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3:</td>
<td>Fiona Foley. <em>Wild Times Call 2</em>, 2001.</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4:</td>
<td>Fiona Foley, <em>Nulla 4 eva IV</em>, 2009.</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5:</td>
<td>Vernon Ah Kee, <em>Anthony Jia</em>, 2004.</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6:</td>
<td>Vernon Ah Kee, <em>Annie Ah Sam (A)</em>, 2008.</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7:</td>
<td>Vernon Ah Kee, <em>mythread</em>, 2007.</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8:</td>
<td>Vernon Ah Kee, <em>born in this skin</em>, 2008.</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9:</td>
<td>Vernon Ah Kee, <em>Cant Chant</em>, 2009.</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 10:</td>
<td>Danie Mellor, <em>Topographical Shield</em>, 2002.</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 11:</td>
<td>Fiona Foley, <em>Witnessing to Silence</em>, 2004.</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 12:</td>
<td>Fiona Foley, <em>Witnessing to Silence</em>, 2004</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

How can we, as non-Indigenous persons, ethically engage in dialogue and honest criticism of Indigenous art? My thesis investigates this question in the context of multicultural Australia. I use a framework of critical race and whiteness studies to critique previous answers to my opening question that conclude we either should not engage in dialogue with Indigenous art, or alternatively, that this question is irrelevant as we live in a multicultural, post-race context in which categories of racial identity no longer matter. I argue that such conclusions are symptomatic of the invisible power of whiteness in our (post)colonial context. I read the works and practice of artists Fiona Foley and Vernon Ah Kee as challenges to these conclusions. Both of these artists engage with themes of identity, race and Australia’s colonial history. In so doing they weave narratives of resistance to the idea that we are post-identity, post-Aboriginality by examining the ongoing presence of such themes in our contemporary multicultural context. By exploring in detail the challenges to white assumptions of post-Aboriginality made by Ah Kee and Foley in their works I have found that there are opportunities for non-Indigenous (white desiring) subjects to interrupt the invisible schemas of power we inhabit. I propose that, in response to such challenges, we need to refocus the terms of debates regarding identity in the arts. This refocusing must come from a critically reflexive reading practice informed by ideas of responsibility to others.
Chapter One- Introduction

Three separate incidents.

An anti-Intervention rally on the outskirts of Alice Springs in 2008. The rally is part of a convergence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous supporters from all over the continent to discuss the experiences of peoples living under the *Northern Territory Emergency Response* (2007) measures, brainstorm activist strategy and create networks. The rally through the streets of Alice comes to a halt and we break by the side of the road for rallying speeches and discussion. Women living under the Intervention decide to create a speaking circle exclusively for Aboriginal women to share their experiences and invite Aboriginal men and non-Indigenous supporters to sit outside the circle and listen. At one point a white, male activist from Sydney steps into the circle, uninvited, takes up the microphone, and insists upon strategies he thinks are important for fighting the Intervention.

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A postgraduate classroom at a world class university in 2010. A discussion is occurring regarding the practice of Aboriginal artists. The discussion comes to an abrupt end when the senior academic facilitating the conversation suggests that Aboriginal artists have a form of ‘battered wives syndrome’ in that they rely on racism in order to produce works. She suggests that the practices and identities of Aboriginal peoples rely on racism and colonialism in order to have currency, that the works of Aboriginal artists which deal with themes of nationhood and race are repetitive, and that Aboriginal art would have no social currency if racism did not exist.

***

A public forum about Aboriginal art at the Sydney Opera House in 2012. This forum consists of two sessions. The first is composed of two non-Indigenous art academics, Rex Butler and Ian McLean, and two Aboriginal artists, Richard Bell and Vernon Ah Kee. The session begins by analysing Bell’s theorem, that is, that ‘Aboriginal art is a white thing’ and
conversely that ‘Australian art is an Aboriginal thing’. The session oscillates between the (white) critics arguing that we are entering an era of ‘post-Aboriginal’ art with the artists arguing that Aboriginality is still a constructed identity and that there is no way to be post-identity when the peoples who supposedly own this identity do not have sovereign ownership over its meaning. The second session involves the journalist Daniel Browning and curator Djon Mundine again discussing the assimilationist implications of the framing of Aboriginal art within the Australian art institutional and political context. In the question time for this session Mundine requests that the white members of the audience show himself and Browning the respect of not using the question platform as a place to promote one’s own knowledge of art as had happened in the previous sessions question time, but rather to use it to ask a question of the experts. Yet audience members still use this platform as a space for self-promotion despite the calls of ’promo’ from the audience and the speakers.

***

Each of these narratives, though distinct in their setting and intent, has a common theme. In all of the incidents listed above there is an assumption of the right to speak for, over and about Aboriginal peoples, identity, experiences and work. This subconsciously implies the reinscription of whiteness as invisible, knowing and free to roam into the spaces, experiences and practices of non-white peoples.

The final of the above three narratives explicitly introduces the tensions that occur when non-Indigenous peoples engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and artists. The acknowledgement of such tensions immediately raises questions such as: how can we engage in dialogue and honest criticism with art made by Indigenous peoples without “redoubling the effect of racism, of exposing hidden tensions, of being seen to argue in public or to inflict
hurt”, or without succumbing to the fears that art critic Daniel Browning identifies as part of the reason there is a “dearth of criticism” in the Aboriginal arts scene today? How do we speak to Aboriginal art and artists while at once understanding the concept of ‘Aboriginal art’ as a white construct, but not wanting to reinforce the discourse that art made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is somehow more ‘noble’, is mysterious and unknowable (is ‘Ooga Booga’ in Aboriginal artist Richard Bell’s words)? Is there a way to give up the power of the white know-it-all while engaging critically with Aboriginal art?

These questions come out of an ongoing inquiry into the forms and structures of Australian whiteness and its manifestations on a national level and a personal level. In the following chapters my inquiry is triggered by the art practice and objects of Fiona Foley and Vernon Ah Kee. These artists have been chosen not only for the content and mastery of their practice in the field, but also because their work is politically compelling and aesthetically interesting. It is through this perplexing desire to understand, to know their works that I have achieved the very opposite – I have come to the understanding that there are limits to my knowing. This thesis, then, is about tracing the encounters I have with the works of Foley and Ah Kee on a personal, academic, historic and political level in order to understand the limits of whiteness and to develop ethical suggestions for new ways for settler and migrant citizens of Australia to enter into dialogue with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The framework and impetus for this project and my approach to it comes from two significant questions. The first is from critical race and whiteness scholar Alison Ravenscroft: “What new ways of seeing might be possible if a white subject were to approach Indigenous cultural practices as a stranger or a foreigner might, not now to trespass or colonise but instead

2 *Loc. cit.*
acknowledging radical difference - sovereignty?"\(^4\) The second comes from Aboriginal critical whiteness scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s critique of white Australian feminism as complicit in colonialism and her requirement that for Indigenous women to engage with white women in feminist struggles “requires white feminists to relinquish some power, dominance and privilege”\(^5\). She goes further in describing this relinquishment as based upon the requirement of “white race privilege to be owned and challenged”\(^6\). From these challenges arises the question “How do I relinquish and challenge my own situated power when it is always reinscribed through the embodied contexts in which I read? What possibilities are there for answering this challenge and taking it seriously?”\(^7\)

The field of visual art offers interesting arenas of research for exploring this question. Primarily the field of visual art is of interest in our sight-privileged society in that it points to the act of reading, an act which I will argue is significant to interrogate because through it a subject forms herself. Therefore critically engaging with the act of reading itself is the point from which art criticism should begin. Reading is significant in that, as Ravenscroft points out:

> Reading is a visual practice, it always involves a scene, and like other visual practices is performative in the sense that in reading we produce the scene we say is already there, waiting for us to discover...

> It is in these acts that a reader is made. The reader is made in the act of reading-making, marking- an other.\(^8\)

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\(^5\) Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and White Feminism*. (St Lucia, Qld: Univ. of Queensland Press, 2000), xxv.

\(^6\) Ibid,149.

\(^7\) While I use personal pronouns (I and we) throughout this thesis my analysis is intended to come from a position critiquing the general structures of whiteness and white engagements with Indigenous art rather than as a personal, subjective perspective. As a white woman I refer to ‘I’ and to my intended non-Indigenous audience as ‘we’ to point out the embodied and personal ways in which we as subjects are both personally and structurally involved in the challenges to white reading practices I draw out.

\(^8\) Ravenscroft, *The Postcolonial Eye*, op.cit. 25.
It is in the acts of reading that the subject is produced and the subject produces (gives meaning to objects, signs, designs etc.) what we know as visual arts. In this interaction the reader also produces the artist as she reads the work as made by another subject and simultaneously reads her perspective of who the artist-subject is through the work. The reader, however, is always embodied and situated and this is where the power (of who reads and the desires of the reader in what they read) comes into play. I will be concerned with tracing the power of whiteness through reading practices by looking at works by visual artists who deal with themes of Australian history, racism and nationalism with specific references to the experiences of Indigenous peoples in colonial Australia. This concern makes an interjection into debates in art theory about the role of non-Indigenous players in the field of ‘Aboriginal art’, as will be discussed in Chapter Three.

In examining, reading and writing these questions I am implicated as a subject forming herself, and so this project is about tracing the ways in which whiteness forms and reforms itself. This emphasis on the ‘I’, on how I am positioned in the writing of this paper, is in response to the impetus of critical whiteness literature which in exposing the invisibility of whiteness calls for the writer to be aware of how they might also be writing themselves white. In this I am aware of the idea that whiteness is never a fixed category of subjectivity, but rather it is a norm which is desired and reinstated by subjects, a call which we answer (however imperfectly). This is the notion that we might rethink the white subject, my white self, as the “subject-who-desires-whiteness”9. As Ravenscroft argues, this understanding of the white subject as always being constituted as a reading effect, that is, reading (implying visual analysis and meaning making) is one of the ways in which a subject attempts to perform herself- the subject “reading becomes what she has read”10. This thesis then is not

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10 Ibid.
about reading the works of the artists I have engaged with as aesthetic objects only, but to read these objects as invitations for dialogue and challenges to the constitution of the white reading subject.

The emphasis on dialogue is significant. I will argue, using postcolonial theory, that it is the act of knowing, of orientalising (in Edward Said’s analysis) which constitutes whiteness as an invisible norm and forecloses the possibility of dialogue by defining the other as object. These knowledges are monologues of colonising logic that, as Michael Dodson writes, are “weapons and symptoms of the oppressive relationship that exists between Indigenous peoples and colonising states”\(^\text{11}\). These forms of knowledges negate spaces of intersubjectivity and dialogue through the violently consuming gaze of the subject-who-knows. Richard Bell contributes to this idea when he argues that the dispossession of Aboriginal artists is through the ethnocentrism of Western definitions of art and the appropriation of Aboriginal imagery and land in white Australian art discourses\(^\text{12}\). This dispossession denies Aboriginal artists a voice that is separate and equal to the system of Western art discourses\(^\text{13}\).

I am examining this in the context of Australian multicultural discourses of nationhood, which position Indigenous, migrant and settler bodies in certain ‘post-racial’ relations. As I will trace in the following chapter, state sanctioned multiculturalism, while nominally advocating a ‘colour-blind’ approach to ethnic diversity (and thus possesses a progressive veneer), maintains whiteness as norm by making invisible the racial focus and anxieties which were/are the foundation of the Australian nation-state. As a result, we have moved from discourses of ‘race’ to discourses of ‘ethnicity’, from the material focus on racialised bodies to the abstract focus on diversities of culture. This discourse works by disavowing the


\(^\text{13}\) *Ibid.*
discursive and material realities of discrimination as racialised by utilising logic of being beyond the racial discrimination of the ‘past’. We can see this narrative of ‘post-race’ returning with vigour in contemporary political discourses of reconciliation and more particularly when examining the dynamics of former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s 2008 National Apology to the Stolen Generations on behalf of the Parliament. In particular the spirit of ‘post-race’ discourse is captured in the statement: “It is time to reconcile. It is time to recognise the injustices of the past. It is time to say sorry. It is time to move forward together”15. There is a logic of progress in this statement within which recognition and acknowledgement of past wrongs then allows ‘us’ (whoever ‘us’ is defined as by the speaker) to leave the “[racial] injustices of the past” behind as we “move forward together”16.

It is particularly important to locate the work of Vernon Ah Kee and Fiona Foley within this context, not only to understand the nuances of their references to Australian multiculturalism, but in order to understand the larger implications to how we understand whiteness and nationhood playing out in the visual arts. Their work is significant for interrogating the debates that come out of the contemporary Australian art world from the 1980s about the ethics of viewing and writing about art made by Indigenous artists. I will be examining these debates and critiquing their conclusions from a critical whiteness standpoint.

It is my contention that the artworks of Fiona Foley and Vernon Ah Key act as spotlights which illuminate the ongoing racial dynamics that lie at the heart of contemporary Australian society and thus critique and counter the attempt at whitewashing the dynamics which result from the policies and discourses of multiculturalism. This has implications for the questions raised above concerning the ethics of non-Indigenous engagement with Indigenous art, as

15 Ibid, p. 3.
16 Loc. cit.
these artists are putting forward an explicit political intervention into contemporary issues, which implicates, and demands engagement from, a non-Indigenous audience.

To come to art discourses about Aboriginal artists is then inherently caught up in contexts of nation, colonialism, race and power in that we read objects and images created by Indigenous artists as ‘Aboriginal art’ (as opposed to just art). In so doing, we (the readers) create ourselves as white in the colonial binary logic of self-other. Thus, this thesis is an inherently political project because it has implications beyond myself. It is a project that intends to understand the complicity of the subject-desiring-whiteness contributing to discourses about and reading art objects created by artists who are Indigenous in contexts of white nation building. In so doing it is a project that intends to analyse and contextualise the ways of knowing these objects rather than the objects themselves. In reading these objects from this lens there are momentary spaces in which the art objects (and the artists who have created the objects and themselves through them) assert that there are things I cannot know, that I cannot see and challenge desires for whiteness.

These gaps in the desires of the subject-desiring-whiteness and the anxieties of these desires are played on by Fiona Foley and Vernon Ah Kee in the art objects which I discuss in the following chapters. Chapter Two considers the contemporary context of desires for whiteness that the criticisms by Foley and Ah Kee will be made in by exploring the discourse of multiculturalism in the (re)articulation of the Australian nation-state and how this has impacted on readings of art made by Indigenous artists and the artists themselves. Chapter Three considers specifically the theoretical implications of the context discussed in Chapter Two, looking at postcolonial theories and the debates about engaging with Indigenous art that come out of these theories. The critical intervention I make to these debates comes through
the application of critical whiteness studies to challenge the conclusions of being ‘post-race’
that are advocated for by contemporary art theorists.

Chapter Four applies this theoretical framework to an analysis of the use of bodies in Vernon
Ah Kee and Fiona Foley’s work. This chapter considers the idea of blackness (as the other of
whiteness) and explores how Aboriginal bodies are read by subjects-desiring-whiteness
through this logic. I argue this process has been an embodied visual practice key to the logic
of colonialism. It then examines the photographic practice of Fiona Foley and focuses in on
her Nulla 4 eva (2009) series to discuss how she positions racialised bodies on the beach and
presents gaps in the embodied claims to sovereignty made by white Australia through this
series. This chapter also looks at the portraiture of Vernon Ah Kee and in particular his
and George Sibley from the *Annie Ah Sam* (2008) series and the *neither pride nor
courage* (2006) triptych. These images are examined again for the challenges to white desires
for blackness that they present.

Chapter Five takes this further by looking at how Foley and Ah Kee both mine the anxieties
of white Australia by playing with the geo-spatial and linguistic maps that make up the social
and cultural landscapes of the nation-state. This chapter examines Ah Kee’s *Cant Chant*
(2007) show with a particular focus on the way in which Ah Kee’s use of text in his practice
interrupts the colonial reading logic of the English language. This chapter also looks at Fiona
Foley’s public art practice to examine how she exploits moments of absence in the historical
memory of white Australia with a particular focus on the public installation *Witnessing to
Silence* (2004), the process of its making, and its effect on the embodied reader. I will argue
that both Ah Kee and Foley exploit the anxieties of whiteness in Australia in order to point
out the gaps in the claims to sovereignty made by the nation state and rearticulated by
subjects-desiring-whiteness. This chapter argues that these works reveal and offer alternative
maps of sovereignty in the cultural and historical memory of Australia. My analysis in these chapters will examine the moments of absence offered by Ah Kee and Foley as the stories of their works. In drawing out these narratives I am examining the challenges to desires of whiteness, inherent to claims of post-Aboriginality, which are presented in these works.

Like all projects, this too has limits. This is a project which starts from the point of recognising that the norm of whiteness is inherently possessive and violent in that it denies spaces for humanity, for ‘inbetweenness’ by defining and consuming the other in binary logic. Yet this project is hopeful in that it recognises this norm of whiteness (which I am implicated in) as contestable, however momentarily, because it is performative is reinscribed in the ways in which we read. It is contestable by taking seriously the moments when those we read as other place limits on the spaces we can ‘roam’ into, assert their incommensurability and are thus unintelligible\(^\text{17}\). I wish to find the moments that make us profoundly uncomfortable and speechless, the moments in which I see myself in the images of objects I gaze at and the frustrating unknowability of these objects. The purpose and value of this thesis is in tracing the moments when these desires of whiteness are misread as potentially useful in undermining the power of normative whiteness.

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Chapter Two- Multiculturalism, nationalism and the arts in Australia

Both Vernon Ah Kee and Fiona Foley practice in and respond to a political context in which multiculturalism is the dominant principle shaping relations between racial difference in Australia. Ah Kee and Foley reference this context in their practice which interrogates themes of history, race and white nationalism as scripted on the bodies and spaces of Australia. But what does multiculturalism mean in the contemporary Australian context? How does it shape the desires of the Australian nation-state, particularly when such a state was explicitly founded on racialised ideals of whiteness? Does multiculturalism signal that we are ‘post-race’ or does race still define the material and ideological realities that we exist in? And if so, how does this discourse position Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, nations and aesthetics? In this chapter I wish to examine these questions by outlining the current discourse of multiculturalism within a history of the racialization of Australia in order to understand the broader historical and discursive context which the works of Fiona Foley and Vernon Ah Kee critique through their practice. The context of contemporary Australian multiculturalism will be analysed and historicized in order to form the backdrop of my critical discussion of Fiona Foley and Vernon Ah Kee’s works. I will be arguing that the discourse of multiculturalism in Australia reinforces normative principles of whiteness\(^\text{18}\). To illustrate this I will be discussing the history of race relations in the colonial Australian context and linking this to the emergence and practice of multiculturalism on a national level as well as considering the emergence of national consciousness of contemporary Indigenous art in concurrent to this period and the implications of this.

\(^{18}\) The critique of the exclusionary politics of multiculturalism I argue below is not intended to diminish the impact of multicultural policy and it realisation in the important increase of social policy initiatives targeted to culturally diverse peoples or the redistribution of state resources to include migrant Australians. It is however intended to critique multiculturalism from an ideological standpoint through the lens of critical whiteness theories in order to understand and interrupt the power relations that multiculturalism re-normalises.
The contemporary political context of Australia has seen a re-emergence of multiculturalism within the structures of the state. Following what was deemed the ‘failure’ of multiculturalism and the subsequent removal of it from government policy during the Liberal-Howard era of politics, there has been a return to it within government discourse. Bipartisan support for multiculturalism was demonstrated by the Australian government in 2011 with the re-endorsement of a policy of multiculturalism on 16th of February 2011 and the release of *The People of Australia – Australia's Multicultural Policy* (C’th Government) alongside the creation of the independent Australian Multicultural Council in August of the same year. This re-emphasis on multiculturalism as government policy has arisen in a context of broader public debate and growing public hostility towards asylum seekers and immigrant based population growth. It also occurs while there is an ongoing government intervention into Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory aimed at ‘normalising’ these communities.

Multiculturalism in the broadest sense refers to an ideology which is concerned with the management of diverse populations within nation-states. Thus this ideology is translated into policy, programs and legislation specific to the national context it is conceived in. The re-emergence of discourses of multiculturalism at the same time as maintaining and extending government intervention into Indigenous communities through the *Northern Territory Emergency Response Act* (2007) and the *Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory* (2012) policy demonstrates the Australian Government’s interpretation of the place of

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20 Since the election of the Abbot-Liberal Government in September 2013 there has been a weakening of multiculturalism in practice. While the 2011 policy is still in place, the Abbot government has announced it is moving the Multicultural Affairs portfolio into the Social Services portfolio in order to ‘streamline’ service delivery to new migrant communities. However, this has been a debated and controversial move which demonstrates the ongoing currency of principles of multiculturalism to both sides of government in their articulations of Australian nationalism. See Idi Amon, “Query over future of multiculturalism”, *SBS World News Australia Radio* [transcript], December 3rd, 2013.

Indigenous peoples as dysfunctional minorities which need ‘normalising’ within its idea of a ‘multicultural nation’.

The current policy of multiculturalism *The People of Australia – Australia's Multicultural Policy* (2011) frames Indigenous peoples as ethnically diverse others (Indigenous *Australians*) in this multicultural nation while maintaining the invisibility of structurally normative ‘white’ Australia. One of the first statements this policy makes is that “Multiculturalism is in Australia’s national interest”\(^2\) clearly articulating that Australia’s commitment to a policy of multiculturalism occurs because it supports and reinforces the interests of the sovereign nation-state rather than questioning the structural legitimacy of the way this state defines and relates to demographics. The policy refers specifically to the place of Indigenous peoples in Australia as supporting the policy of multiculturalism through the engagement of the Australian Government with ‘them’ on issues such as constitutional recognition\(^3\). While this policy does refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as First Peoples it qualifies this as “Australia’s First Peoples”\(^4\). The possessive pronoun ‘Australia’s’ maintains a colonial logic of claiming Indigenous peoples as ‘ours’ and thereby denouncing any possible recognition of sovereignty that may have been engendered by acknowledging Indigenous peoples as First Peoples. It also works to maintain an otherness inscribed upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as an ethnic minority (they are ‘ours’, not ‘us’) and perpetuate the invisibility of the migrant nature of the Australian settler states beginnings. This is further reinforced when the policy, describing Australia’s multicultural makeup, refers to the seven million multicultural people that have migrated here since 1945 (not since 1770)\(^5\). There are numerous other examples throughout this policy.

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\(^3\) Loc. cit.

\(^4\) Loc.cit.

\(^5\) Loc. cit.
document which articulate ideas about the racial otherness of Indigenous peoples and migrant settlers and maintain an invisible norm of whiteness through references to the common Australianness which this policy seeks to strengthen through supporting diversity within the limits of social cohesion.

This policy of Australian multiculturalism fits a model of conservative cultural pluralism. Cultural pluralism refers to a conceptualisation of society as ethnically and culturally diverse whilst institutionally and morally unified within an overarching idea of the liberal nation-state. This translates to a support for the development and preservation of ethnic cultures through policies based in ideals of equal opportunity, anti-discrimination and mutual-obligation. Conservative Multiculturalism is a dialectical form of multiculturalism, which has its historical roots in colonial administrations and racialising ideologies. This form of multicultural ideology posits monocultural norms as dominant and focuses on the ethnic diversity of others. This form of multiculturalism, with its history in race theories, refocuses ideas of lack on the ‘environmental’ differences of ethnicised others (e.g. cultural deprivation equalling an unsuccessful ethnic community). It views difference as a threat to national unity and harmonious citizenry and therefore focuses on assimilating ‘diverse’ populations into mainstream values and institutions (such as the enforced speaking of English language rather than supporting bilingual education or other such institutions).

Sneja Gunew discusses the norms of nationalism and the relationships between subjects put in place through the socio-historic process of colonialism. These relationships are defined through an imagined binary of the idealised white hegemony as Self and the ethnic/racialised other, centre and periphery, implied by the discourse of multiculturalism as an ideology that

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28 Ibid. 49-50.
“purports to deal with minorities”

She discusses the history of multicultural discourse and its necessity for nation states, which formally ascribed to race theories in order to manage populations, turning to a discourse of ethnicity. This idea of ethnicity is a category ascribed to avoid the discredited discourses of race theories whilst implying racialised differences (understood through a lens of cultural and community difference). Gunew warns against this national ‘forgetting’ that the erasure of the category of race through multicultural discourses achieves. This is due to the invisibility that the cultural baggage of race theories now has, and the importance of understanding race as a shifting concept ascribed to those whose cultural difference is deemed un-absorbable and essentialised, thus becoming an othered “problem to be solved.”

In Australia the introduction of policies of multiculturalism signalled our governments move away from racial categorisation (and the abolishment of the White Australia policy) and a focus on the ethnic (socio-cultural) diversity of peoples. In this framework Aboriginal peoples are defined as an ethnic other. Gillian Cowlishaw makes the point that this move in discourse from race to ethnicity allowed for not only a negating of Australia’s racial history but also made invisible the way that racial histories have created the realities of inequality and privilege that bodies live in today. It serves also to make the norms of Australianness (whiteness) invisible (avoiding an analysis of the racial source of white citizens’ privilege) and situating the disproportionate disadvantage that racialised others experience at the level of ‘their’ cultures and inherent shortcomings. The denial of race inherent to discourses of multiculturalism serves to create borders of an imagined community, that is a community of

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31 Loc. cit.
32 Ibid. 20.
those that meet the norms of the community as imagined in the stories of nationalism propagated within and between the State and citizens\textsuperscript{34} (Anderson, 1992:5-7). It also serves to place limits on the membership of such a community, namely restricting entry to those who are defined as outside of the normative borders of a society as demonstrated in the 2011 policy:

\textit{Australia’s successful multicultural society and our democracy are built around shared rights and responsibilities that are fundamental to living in Australia.}

\textit{[...] Multiculturalism is our shared future and is central to our national interest}\textsuperscript{35}

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are placed on the outside of this “shared future” if their claims to belonging are counter to the imagined sovereignty of the Australian community. To gain citizenship, belonging and a sense of place in this community, Indigenous peoples must submit to the ownership of their status as First Peoples by the nation-state of Australia, arguably a continuation of the logic of colonisation and an example of contemporary dispossession.

Multiculturalism has been an important ideological moment in Australia’s conceptualisation of itself as a nation. It attempts to signify a break from a racist exclusionary past and promote the idea of Australia as a tolerant, equitable, inclusive and diverse nation (we are one, but we are many)\textsuperscript{36}. This, however, is highly problematic and it is questionable as to whether Australia’s rhetoric and its policies of multiculturalism achieve any of these aims. To explain this I will outline a brief history of Australian policy in regards to populations and how these have informed the taking up of Multicultural policy in the 1970s and the continuing rhetoric of multiculturalism today.


The beginning of Australia’s nationhood is marked by its imagined creation of itself as a racially ‘pure’, white nation. It is this construction of itself as a racially homogenous nation which demonstrates how the Australian State collapses policy into culture and creates nationalisms. It is also important to note that this emphasis on Australia as a racially defined nation (race as biological difference) allowed for the paradigm shift of multicultural policy in the 1970s in which policy emphasises *ethnicity* (nationalised cultural characteristics)\(^3\). This is an important distinction to note in tracing the privileging of whiteness and its invisibility in the history of Australian nationalism.

State based interventions into Australian nationalism begin with the first act of Australian parliament. This was the passing of the *Immigration Restriction Bill (1901)*. This bill, known as the White Australia policy, prohibited the immigration of all ‘non-European’ races\(^3\). As critical whiteness studies scholar Ien Ang points out, this is a particularly significant moment in Australia’s history marking the passing of a nationalist policy, that is, a policy reflecting and setting in motion the construction of a white (racial and cultural) hegemony:

*In other words, philosophically speaking, the White Australia policy implied the official and explicit racialisation of Australian national identity, based on a discourse of homogeneity that collapses culture into race.*\(^3^9\)

This racialisation of the Australian nation state served to create race as the ‘absent centre’ of Australian nationalism. Through the White Australia policy and the creation of a virtually white population, Australia imagined itself outside of the politics of race\(^4^0\). Informed by race theories that spoke of the inevitable extinction of Aboriginal people and the orchestrating of


\(^3^9\) *Loc. cit.* Original emphasis.

\(^4^0\) Compared to, for example, other colonial nations such as the United States, where the history of slavery made race an issue confronted in everyday life and central to internal national politics.
immigration, race defined the imagined borders of Australia as a nation\textsuperscript{41}. Thus the absence of race from Australia’s cultural imagination points to the centrality of race in shaping all levels of Australian nationalism from policy to cultural representation of Australianness. This problem of the absence/presence (the invisible centrality) of race within Australian nationalism was key to the formation of multicultural policy in Australia and is a legacy that continues to inform Australian nationalism. This reinforced when considering that the adoption of multiculturalism in the early 1970s was informed and necessitated by the changing (racial) demographic of Australia in the post-World War Two period.

Australia’s economic development and national security relied upon sustained immigration. This intensified in the period post World War Two marked by the rhetoric of ‘populate or perish’ in order to recover from the loss of men in military action and in response to public panic about Australia’s position as a white nation threatened by invasion from an ‘Asian’ force to its north\textsuperscript{42}. Thus Australia began to weaken its immigration restrictions and allow migration firstly from Northern and later Southern Europe. It is important to note though that although this policy marks the beginning of a weakening of the Immigration Restriction Bill (1901), it did not undermine the ideology of Australia as a white nation. Rather, it introduced cultural diversity into the category of ‘whiteness’. Although the stratification of Australia as a white nation was not undermined, this moment in history is important for understanding the forms that later multicultural policy took in that it marked a break from whiteness (racial homogeneity) being conflated with cultural homogeneity (British culture)\textsuperscript{43}. This period also marked an international disavowal of race theories (post-Holocaust) and the move away from biological essentialism to a focus on cultural approaches to understanding and managing

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid. 104.
\textsuperscript{43} This is not to say that cultural homogeneity and a British core culture of Australianness was not still sought after by the government. Policies of assimilation for new migrants were enforced until the 1960’s.
human diversity. It is this shift that moves discourses of difference from speaking of racialised difference to ethnic diversity.

Despite this ‘diversifying’ of the Australian demographic in this period there was still an emphasis on the ideal of a homogenous modern nation state. This was enforced by policies of assimilation which had three essential political assumptions:

- *Australia was a culturally homogenous society based on British values and institutions.*
- *This homogeneity would not be disturbed by mass European immigration.*
- *It could not survive any Asian migration.*

This form of assimilation, with its focus on the adoption of cultural practices rather than the exclusion of races, was still aimed at preserving one culture, the distinctively ‘Australian way of life’ (the principles and values enshrined within ideas of a culturally homogenous, pure, white nation). It is here we can see the orchestration of Australian nationalism stays the same as it was at Federation, it merely changes discourse from a focus on race and biology to a focus on ethnicity and culture. This idea of the ‘Australian way of life’ becomes a key moment in which Australia starts to define itself away from Britain, while still valuing whiteness as the norm. The ideal of the ‘Australian way of life’ as the discourse for assimilation (the creation of a unified national community) was a move away from discourses of colonialism (links to Britain) and became a celebration of an imagined community brought together by the pursuit of common values, standards of living and visions of ‘progress’.

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44 Ang and Stratton, *op. cit.* 105.
45 Stephen Castles as quoted in Ang and Stratton, *op. cit.* 152.
46 Ang and Stratton, *op.cit.* 152.
47 Note especially the fear of ‘Asianess’ that Castles (1998) points to in the above quote. There is still an imaginary boundary placed around the space/place of Australia, especially with its dubious state as a white nation in the Asian Pacific region. The emphasis on European migration and assimilation points to the continued valuation on whiteness, this value being described now as cultural measures of whiteness (ability to assimilate to privileged norms) vs. racialised whiteness (biological characteristics and places of origin).
48 Think of the ‘Australian’ ideal of the nuclear family and the ¼ acre block in the suburbs.
With Australia’s population becoming increasingly diverse and policies of assimilation failing to create a culturally homogenous nation the government needed to take a different approach to managing the diverse demographics of Australia and maintain a cohesive sense of Australian nationalism. Ang discusses the intervention of the state through multicultural policy as significant in the development of nationalism and concepts of the nation-state. Multiculturalism is a response to the failure of the project of the modern nation state, which emphasises unity, sameness and the ideal of homogenous ‘national-unity’\textsuperscript{49}. To deal with cultural pluralism, policies of multiculturalism intervene and invest in the valorisation of ethnicised difference as good for the nation (e.g.- economic consumerability) and thus ethnic difference becomes absorbed into nationalism. The intervention of the state in defining Australian national identity through multicultural policies occurred in the 1970s. This intervention shifted the conception of the nation as a racially and culturally homogenous community, attached to Great Britain, to a focus on the nation of Australia as an autonomous space for ethnically defined difference to live and interact\textsuperscript{50}. It is significant to reflect on this moment in the evolution of Australian nationalism as a moment when Australia imagines itself as tolerant and anti-racist, in an attempt to break from the racially defined policies of the past\textsuperscript{51}. This is important to note as it continues this trend of race as the absent centre of Australian nationalism, racially defined difference here being defined as ethnic difference. This invisibility is significant in order for us to understand the invisible privilege of whiteness.

\textsuperscript{49} Ang and Stratton, \textit{op.cit.} 139.
\textsuperscript{50} Ang and Stratton, \textit{op.cit.} 141.
\textsuperscript{51} This history led to the White Australia policy being officially dismantled, with all references to race removed by the Whitlam government from immigration law in 1972. This move, along with the adoption of multiculturalism as official government policy was adopted by the Whitlam government in the early 1970s has lead to the idea that multiculturalism equates to anti-racism.
Multiculturalism was introduced in 1973 as official government policy, a State intervention into national identity. As discussed before, multiculturalism in Australia marked a shift from race as the marker of national identity and placed emphasis on the ‘the productivity of cultural difference’ for national identity, allowing the Australian nation-state possibilities for “continual reinvention through the interaction of a plurality of ethnically defined, imagined communities”. Through this policy of multiculturalism the many ‘cultures’ of ethnically diverse communities in Australia are absorbed into Australian national culture, allowing the State to maintain its role as “guarantor of historical continuity” of national identity. It also dissolves the potential threat of separatist community identities threatening the invisibility of norms of Australianness by incorporating this difference into an idea of Australia as ‘unity-in-diversity’. Thus in the redefinition of Australian national culture multiculturalism as a policy gives the Australian state the status of:

\[
\text{the site where the overarching ideological principles that legitimise and vindicate the diversity of cultural practices in Australian territorial space are formulated...[the state becomes the] institutional container of principles which are instrumental to the encouragement and management of cultural diversity.}
\]

This represents the Australian State as having a moral imperative in the re-creation and management of populations and promoting the values of this imagined community. This idea of the nation-state as morally responsible for its citizens corresponds with George Lakoff’s idea of the state as the ‘strict father’ responsible for looking after the ‘family’ of the nation.

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52 See the pamphlet put out by the Australian Council for Population and Ethnic Affairs, *Multiculturalism for all Australians* (1982) which as noted by Ang and Stratton defines cultural diversity as at the heart of this new ‘Australianness’: “Most of all, multiculturalism requires us to recognise that we each can be ‘a real Australian’ without necessarily being ‘a typical Australian’” (Ang and Stratton, *op.cit.* 154).

53 Ang and Stratton, *op.cit.* 154.

54 Ibid. 154-155.

55 Ibid.155.

What this emphasis on the moral imperative of the State does is naturalise the State’s role in population management as unquestionable and fundamentally necessary for the imagined community of Australia’s wellbeing. It thus displaces emphasis from the institutional disadvantage embedded in the structures of the State and normalises the overarching norms and principles of Australianess that the State is now morally required to make sure is upheld. These norms I would suggest are continuous with Australia’s imaginings of itself since 1901 and are the norms of whiteness. This privileging and invisibility of whiteness is embedded in multicultural policy and is based on the unquestioned/continually reasserted sovereignty of the Australian state through the structural othering of Indigenous Australian’s and ethnic minorities.

As Ang and Stratton argue, the policy of multiculturalism ‘freezes’ the potential of identity by disavowing the incommensurability of cultural difference through a discourse of unity-in-diversity, and it is this containment of difference that is the basis for the imagined community

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57 The Strict Father model is defined by conservative politics and morals, and a belief in the danger of the world, thus requiring the authority of the ‘father’ to set strict rules for the protection of values of right and wrong (the moral order) (Lakoff, op. cit. 65-66). This moral order is based on a naturalised order of authority that its subjects self-discipline themselves to follow. The order is conceived of as:

- **God has moral authority over people.**
- **People have moral authority over nature (animals, plants, and natural objects).**
- **Adults have moral authority over children.**
- **Men have moral authority over women** (Ibid, 81).

This hierarchalised model of morality, and the politics that follow from it, is based on the idea that that there is ‘evil’ (in this case, the evil of separatism which threatens to undermine the economic, social, cultural and political determination of the imagined nation) in the world, and that these rules and enforcing authorities are in place to defend right from wrong, defend our way of life- we thus have a moral obligation to adhere to this system (Ibid, 163). In the case of Australia and its implementation of multiculturalism, I would suggest that this ‘evil’ is the threat of disunity that difference and separatism poses to the idea of the imagined liberal community of Australia and its values of Australianess. Evidence of this fear of a crisis of identity induced by difference can be evidenced by looking at border anxiety and refugee debates today, Islamophobia, and the term of the Howard government (1996-2007) based on the pervasiveness of his rhetoric of oneness- “We are one people and one nation, with one future” (Jane Robbins, “A Nation Within? Indigenous peoples, representation and sovereignty in Australia” in *Ethnicities* 10:2, 2010, 145).
of the Australian nation-state\textsuperscript{58}. Hence, multiculturalism is an exclusionary ideological construct, with the limits of State ‘tolerance’ for cultural diversity marking the borders of the nation. These limits depend on the ethnicisation of minority cultures by placing them within a centre-periphery relationship with the invisible norms of ‘Australian-ness’ imagined as pre-existing such ‘ethnicised’ cultures\textsuperscript{59}. Thus, culturally different others are imagined as both included in the nation-state but excluded from attaining Australian-ness as the essential other which this tolerant, ‘white’, nation depends upon:

\textit{Their belonging to the national environment in which they come to exist is always a precarious one, for they never exist, they are allowed to exist. That is, the tolerated are never just present, they are positioned}\textsuperscript{60}.

Not only are minority cultures excluded from the multicultural nation, so too are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The disavowal of race that discourses of multiculturalism perform (again, race is the absent centre of the imagined nation-state) leads to a national silence on the racialised history of the Australian state’s engagement with Indigenous peoples. Indigenous memories and voices about the racial categorisation of Australian-ness and the enactment of this through state policies that lead(s) to the hidden history of dispossession and genocide, interrupt the seamless discourse of “unity-in-difference”\textsuperscript{61}. Thus, Indigenous histories, and the political implications of these histories (such as the need to address continuing Aboriginal sovereignty and re-constitute the state of Australia), are silenced as the absent, excluded other to the paranoid reassertion of white state sovereignty through multicultural policy.

\textsuperscript{58} Ang and Stratton, \textit{op. cit.} 157-158. See also Hage, \textit{op. cit.} 102.
\textsuperscript{59} As has been argued before however, this ideal of ‘Australian-ness’ is able to be located in a continuum of national ideals and mythologies arising from the imagining of the state in 1901.
\textsuperscript{60} Hage, \textit{op. cit.} 90. Emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{61} Ang and Stratton, \textit{op. cit.} 159.
The exclusionary politics within the inclusionary rhetoric of multicultural tolerance is, as anthropologist Ghassan Hage writes, “a strategy disguising power as egalitarianism”\(^\text{62}\). The power relation Hage is referring to is the power of confirming the image of Australia as a white nation through the privileging of whiteness (those that can tolerate) and the objectifying of others (those that are tolerated)\(^\text{63}\). Those that assert this power to tolerate “are claiming a dominant form of governmental belonging and are inevitably white Australians”\(^\text{64}\). The emergence of the category of Aboriginal Art, firstly as an anthropological, primitive art and later as a form of contemporary art occurs at this moment of State tolerance.

The history of the emergence of the recognition of Indigenous art as art corresponds to the history of multiculturalism outlined above and mirrors its dynamics. Ian McLean traces the reception of Aboriginal Art in the Australian arts world and argues that it has two key moments in its birth\(^\text{65}\). The first of these is the ethnographic, primitivist reception of Aboriginal art objects that can be seen in the early 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century beginning with the framing of Kakadu bark art as cubism by anthropologist Baldwin Spencer. These art objects were displayed in an exhibition organised by anthropologists at the National Museum in Melbourne in 1929 called *Australian Aboriginal art*\(^\text{66}\). Non-Indigenous artists (such as Margaret Preston, Len Lye and Imants Tillers) in this period pre-1980s acknowledged and appropriated Indigenous art designs into their practice as modernist artists, speaking to a global trend in modernism of drawing upon so called ‘primitive’ designs and iconography to comment on contemporary society. In Australia, McLean argues that Australia’s ‘birth of fire’ in World War II led to an emerging desire for a distinctively Australian aesthetic and

\(^{62}\) Hage, *op.cit.* 87.

\(^{63}\) *Ibid.*94.

\(^{64}\) *Ibid.*88.


consequently “Aboriginal inspired designs became a fad”\(^67\). We have to remember that this is the early period of Australia becoming a ‘multicultural’ nation (as signalled in the 2011 *The People of Australia – Australia’s Multicultural Policy* document) with the policy of ‘populate or perish’ and the influx of non-British displaced European refugees. There was a general push for a recognition of an ‘Australian way of life’ to be the unifying factor that assimilated both new migrants and Aboriginal peoples and articulations of what this way of life looked like\(^68\). The 1950’s, in McLean’s genealogy of Aboriginal Art, is the decade in which this first period of recognition comes to its peak with the collection of Aboriginal Art by major national galleries. Exhibitions of this ‘new’ art form took off and notably Albert Namitjira became a household name\(^69\). This period, however, still does not include Aboriginal arts within the Australian fine arts cannon as these objects were still framed in terms of ethnographic, primitivist tropes\(^70\).

It is not until the 1980s that Aboriginal art comes to be defined and accepted as contemporary fine art. McLean writes that this second creation of Aboriginal art shifted focus from bark paintings to Desert acrylics (‘dot paintings’)\(^71\). The 1980s sparked a focus of interest on Western Desert art with James Mollison, the Exhibitions Officer of the Prime Ministers Department, announcing on Australia Day 1984 that Papunya Tula paintings were “possibly the finest abstract art achievements to date in Australia”\(^72\). Here there is a shift articulated between the framing of Indigenous art through an anthropological lens to the inclusion of these art objects within the Australian artworld cannon. Another significant moment in the 1980s which signals the permanence of this shift of framework is the 1988 bicentennial exhibition *Creating Australia*. This touring exhibition, clearly an articulation of Australia’s


\(^{68}\) See for example the 1959 film *The Way We Live* filmed for the Department of Immigration, directed by John Gray designed to attract migrants to Australia and give an indication of the ‘everyday’ life of Australians.


\(^{70}\) *Ibid.* 27.


imaginations of itself in the controversial bicentennial year, included works by Aboriginal artists, putting their works in conversation with the Australian art canon. It is interesting to pause here and note the way that race has played out as an ‘absent centre’ in the reception of Aboriginal art and consider how this is linked to broader racialised policy moments and moments of nationalist anxiety in the Australian nation-state. We have the first recognitions of Aboriginal art occurring in a period in which is marked by the diversification of Australia’s demographic makeup with influxes of non-British refugees and articulations of a nationalist ‘Australian way of life’ in order to create a distinct and controlled imagined national community. We also have the second recognition of Aboriginal art occurring following the introduction of official policies of multiculturalism in 1973 by the Whitlam government, the politicisation of Aboriginality through land rights campaigns in the 1970s and the increased focus on a sense of united nationalism cumulating in the 1988 bicentennial. In both these instances we can observe the way in which ‘ethnic’ (racial) diversity is the anxious focus of broader State strategies of control and in both instances there is a greater awareness and acceptance of Aboriginal art. While these are important moments in the advancement of Aboriginal arts these political contexts continue to frame such arts as outside of the (racial) norm, as arts of ethnically diverse others, and thereby legitimate the claims to sovereignty being made by the Australian nation-state. Indeed, the many critiques of multiculturalist discourse in Australia come from the position of examining the way that this discourse positions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as ethnic minorities, effectively skipping past the claims of sovereignty that Indigenous peoples still hold. Multicultural policies work against Indigenous sovereignty in that they work to produce imagined histories of colonial settler states as tolerant, egalitarian

73 Ibid.40-41.
and innocent. This line of critique echoes the discussion of Hage above which argues that the ideal of tolerance promoted by multicultural discourse works to reinstate an exclusionary white nationalism in that it put limits on who belongs (who has the sovereign right to tolerate others) and who does not (those who are to be tolerated). This logic is based upon the exclusion of Indigenous claims to sovereignty.

As argued before discourses of multiculturalism function to locate Indigenous peoples as ‘ethnic’ minorities within the nation-state. This works to erase the unique and specific status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as First Nations peoples effectively erasing the legitimacy of claims to sovereignty as well as denies that the history of colonisation and dispossession in Australia has disproportionately affected Indigenous peoples. Significantly it ignores that there has never been a formal treaty with Indigenous peoples in Australia and as an extension of that there has been no process whereby Indigenous peoples can negotiate the form and character of the Australian nation-state (or whether they would like to be involved in it). In doing so, multiculturalism fails to recognise that Indigenous peoples have claim to unique rights that are distinct from other racialised minorities in Australia. Significantly this dynamic also makes invisible the dynamic whereby racialised minorities within Australia are also complicit in the ongoing dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by participating in, and thereby legitimating, the Australian nation-state. Migrant settlers have chosen to become citizens of the Australian nation-state and this citizenship is based upon the theft of Indigenous lands whereas Indigenous peoples have never consented to the colonisation of their lands. As Vera Denis writes: “Aboriginal peoples assert the need for nation-to-nation negotiations, and refuse multiculturalism’s attempts to reduce them to one of many competing “minority” or “ethnic” groups within the nation.”

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75 Hage, op. cit. 78-116.
These critiques of multiculturalism and the way that it frames Indigenous peoples in Australia have currency from Indigenous critiques within the arts world. The discourse of Australian multiculturalism serves firstly to ignore that the continent of Australia prior to 1770 was multicultural with over 250 separate nations, speaking over 500 different languages and dialects. Indigenous peoples continue to live in multicultural contexts with ranges of heritages and living situations, however the designation of Indigenous peoples as an ethnic minority under the policy of multiculturalism serves to homogenise these contexts, leading to ideas of ‘authentic’ vs. ‘inauthentic’ Aboriginality. Henrietta Fourmile further argues that the policy of multiculturalism denies Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples equal rights to cultural survival and promotion of identity through the denial of self-determined control of cultural privacy, ownership and control of cultural heritage, underfunding and lack of Aboriginal community cultural facilities and institutional barriers which have their roots in colonialism. She also makes the critique that cultural policies regarding Indigenous peoples tend to focus just on the arts and that the commodification of this aspect of Indigenous cultural expression, monopolised by non-Indigenous art dealers and curators undermines the ability for Indigenous peoples to control and participate in this industry. Importantly she argues that this reduces Indigenous cultures to being represented by ‘artefacts’ rather than real participation by Indigenous peoples, free from outside control, in the creation, distribution and maintenance of all forms of cultural expression. All of these dynamics stem from a lack of recognition of Indigenous peoples as First Nations peoples and the definition of them as ethnic minorities of the Australian nation-state.

77 Denis, op.cit. 311.
79 Ibid.73.
80 Ibid.75, 80.
81 Ibid.77.
As has been demonstrated above, the discourse of multiculturalism and logic of this discourse works to maintain the legitimacy and cohesion of the white Australian nation-state while disavowing the significance of race to the structuring of this state. Thus it feeds arguments that we are post-race and legitimises the idea of being ‘post-Aboriginal’ which will be critiqued in the following chapter. Multiculturalism positions Indigenous voices and claims them as those of a minority cultural group within the liberal democratic state and, rather than requiring the restructuring of the state in terms of how it relates to Indigenous peoples, it posits that Indigenous peoples simply require greater recognition within the state itself.\textsuperscript{82} It sidesteps the realities of Indigenous peoples unique status and contexts as First Nations peoples and avoids the ongoing contestation of sovereignty that are made by Indigenous peoples and nations. It also diffuses the potential power that difference has in a logic whereby the state, acknowledging and placing limits on cultural difference of populations through multicultural policies, works to define all differences as only cultural (rather than political, social, economic, historically-situated, complex and involving the state in responsibility for disadvantage). Therefore, the logic of multiculturalism “dismisses the arts as an unimportant area of socio-political struggle”\textsuperscript{83}. Through the discussions of the work of Fiona Foley and Vernon Ah Kee I will frame their practice as being an important site of socio-political struggle in the ways that they interrupt white ways of knowing, comment on our current ‘multicultural’ context and implicate audiences as situated readers and therefore responsible for responding to the claims to sovereignty which underpin their art practice. The artist’s assertion of their identities as First Nations Peoples is central to these claims of sovereignty and to their critiques of the politics of whiteness, which play out in claims of post-

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\textsuperscript{82} Short, \textit{op. cit}, 271.
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Aboriginality in the Australian artworld. The invisible racial norm at the heart of multiculturalism, namely whiteness, will be discussed in the following chapter. I will trace the evolutions of the concept of whiteness in postcolonial and critical race studies and examine the implications of this concept for making my critical interjections into the debates of Australian art critics regarding the politics of engaging with Indigenous art.
Chapter Three- White Desires and Narratives of ‘post-Aboriginality’

My analysis of the works of Fiona Foley and Vernon Ah Kee is framed by significant critiques made by postcolonial, feminist and critical whiteness theorists levelled at colonising cultures in (post)colonial contexts. These critiques will be examined in relation to arguments circulating in contemporary art theory and applied to the study of “Indigenous art” in Australia. The problematic I will be interrogating is how can a white audience engage with art made by Indigenous artists on a critical level without subsuming the artist into their own voice and thus reallocate the artist as ‘other’? It is important to locate this question within our particular context, that is, multicultural Australia (as discussed in the previous chapter).

Multiculturalism values (within limits) the otherness of culturally different peoples and at the same time works to manage these populations. It is the dynamics of this context which effects the perception and critical reception of art deemed as Indigenous art. The scholarly work of critical race and whiteness studies offers tools for understanding and critically engaging with this dynamic and its manifestations in art criticism. In so doing I will apply the theoretical material overviewed here to an understanding of the power relationships involved in looking at contemporary Indigenous art and make the argument that non-Indigenous art criticism needs to fundamentally shift the position from which it engages with this art. I will conclude by discussing the necessity of acknowledging the way in which whiteness is created in non-reciprocal relationships with its ‘others’ and propose models of critical art reading informed by politics of responsibility. It is through these frameworks that possibilities for interrupting the violence of the all-knowing white perspective are presented.

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84 The term ‘(post)colonial’ signals the idea that colonialism is an ongoing process in Australia. This is for several reasons including, but not limited to, the fact that Australia is still the only colonial nation which has not engaged in a formal treaty making process with the Indigenous peoples who still maintain sovereignty here. It is also reflective of the fact that self-determination (as policy or principle) for Indigenous peoples in Australia has never been realised and this is indicative of what Larissa Behrendt coins as “psychological terra nullius” (Behrendt, Larissa. "Home: the importance of place to the dispossessed." South Atlantic Quarterly 108, no. 1 (2009): 71-85).
This project owes much to the work of Edward Said and his concept of Orientalism. Said’s central thesis, that the Orient is the “contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” to Europe, is a discursive creation of European colonisation. The study and subsequent knowledges of the Orient are Orientalism, “a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient”. It is important to note that the Orient is not a free agent, it is rather the product managed and produced by a network of interests. These interests are imposed through various mechanisms (militarily, ideologically, politically etc). This does not mean that there are no peoples/societies/cultures/nations in the non-European world which do not have agency. Rather, it means that the knowledges and imaginings of such peoples as they appear in the western sphere are embedded in colonial power relations, controlled and reinforced by us. Thus the significance of these Orientalist discourses is that they reveal the character of our world- they are ultimately discourses about us. That is why Orientalism, although being a circulating set of discourses about an imagined other, is not without reality. It is fundamentally significant to “European material civilization and culture”. These ideas are taken up and applied to the Australian colonial context by Michael Dodson in his forceful analysis of representations of Aboriginal peoples. He asserts that throughout the history of colonial representations the voices of Aboriginal peoples themselves have been absent in the “historical landscape” of discourses about Aboriginality. These discourses, as he goes on to illustrate, have served “to meet the various and changing interests and aspirations of those who constructed them, the colonising or ‘modern’ state”. The value of postcolonial studies is that it has been concerned with mapping the trajectory of such discourses and considering the effects they have had on colonised peoples.

86 Ibid.2.
87 Ibid.12.
88 Ibid.2.
89 Dodson, “The End in the Beginning”, op.cit. 30
90 Ibid.33.
Postcolonialism as a field of study is concerned with interrogating colonial pasts and presents, historicising and denaturalising the power relations it sets in play. This involves a representation of colonised peoples which postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak problematises in her question “Can the subaltern speak?” In Spivak’s discussion the subaltern is one who is represented in the double sense of the word “representation as speaking for as in politics and representation as “representation” as in art or philosophy. It is important to recognise that these forms of representation, although they can work to reinforce each other and silence the represented, are distinct. In posing the question of “Can the subaltern speak?” Spivak reveals that intellectuals involved in representing others are engaged in a doubling of such representation in that they “represent themselves as transparent.” That is, these intellectuals while critiquing the imperial project are involved in reinstating its power by making their own power invisible and further silencing the colonised person, “mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization.” The challenge that Spivak poses for postcolonial feminists is to learn to speak to rather than speak for. Integral to this challenge is the need to critique postcolonial discourse in order to undermine the construction of the imperial subject and the systematic institutionalisation of privilege.

This challenge is taken up by critical whiteness scholars who seek to investigate the invisible privilege identified by Spivak. This privilege is represented as whiteness. Whiteness is a term introduced by Ruth Frankenberg and is used to analyse the raced experience of white persons which mirror and reinforce dynamics of social systems that racially position people. This system creates the (white) normative person as non-raced and therefore frames others who do not fit into this norm as raced others. The point of the term of whiteness is to acknowledge

93 Ibid. 275.
94 Loc. cit.
95 Ibid. 295.
this system of racialisation as integral to our society and attempt to undermine it by
documenting “the ‘racialness’ of white experience”96. The concept of whiteness comes from
a recognition that race, although scientifically defunct, has a multitude of realities in the lives
of those who are racialised.

Gillian Cowlishaw traces the use and politics of race in academia since the 1970s. She argues
that during the 1970s race was replaced with the concept of ‘culture’ to describe differences
in defining peoples. This, however, disregards the embodied level in which the differences of
culture would be ascribed to ‘blackened’ or ‘primitivised’ bodies (bodies othered through
discourses of blackness or primitiveness). Ignoring race as a meaningful concept also serves
to further mask structural racism and the way it fixes difference on the level of the body, as
well as ignoring the complex ways in which racialised subjects and bodies resist and/or
reclaim the racialised identities ascribed to them. Furthermore, the concept of race is
necessary for undermining the invisible power that white persons have by assuming that race
has no reality. As Cowlishaw argues, the idea of a ‘colour-blind’ society is highly
problematic as it denies the reality of structural inequality experienced by raced peoples. By
not recognising the realities of race, white persons avoid analysis of their own racialised
experience and therefore deny the ability of undermining race as a universal principle97.

Denying race also means that white persons disavow the possibility to engage in responsible
intersubjective dialogue with those affected by this invisible race privilege. Thus Cowlishaw
argues that “bringing the fact of whiteness into salience is thus an anti-racist strategy which
forces the meaning of race into view”98.

This ‘fact of whiteness’ can be seen to have three dimensions, as defined in Frankenberg’s
seminal work White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness:

96 Ruth Frankenberg, White Women, Race Matters: the social construction of whiteness, (Minneapolis:
University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 1.
97 Gillian Cowlishaw, “Racial positioning, privilege and public debate” in Whitening Race: essays in social and
98 Ibid, 61.
First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a “standpoint”, a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, “whiteness” refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed. These dimensions of whiteness will be explored and discussed, specifically where possible, in terms which situate these dynamics on the context of Australia and the interplay of whiteness as a terrain of power with Indigenous peoples in a (post)colonial nation.

Firstly, addressing Frankenberg’s description of whiteness as a “location of structural advantage” means that we need to outline the concept of race and of whiteness as a racialised terrain of power, as historically situated phenomena. Postcolonial theorist David Goldberg (as discussed in Jan Larbalestier’s work) argues that race became normalised through the Enlightenment period occurring with the shift from medieval pre-modernity to modernity. In this period the subject was defined not as a religious person (as in medieval pre-modernity), but as a racially defined identity. Eurocentric knowledges were the central focus in Enlightenment modernity’s search for a rational ordering of the world, including the definition of ‘humanity’, and these knowledges were represented as scientifically objective and impartial. These claims to knowledge occur simultaneously and indeed reinforce Western processes of imperialism and colonisation in this period. As Jan Larbalestier writes, Western knowledges of the world are “embedded in relations of domination- of conflict” and are key to legitimising the process of colonisation wherein colonists made the world in their own image and this image is naturalised as the objective order of things. Whiteness in the Australian context is implicated in these global processes of Western hegemony but the maintenance and expression of whiteness has locally specific forms. Ien Ang describes


See discussion of race theories as ‘objective’ orderings of humanity and the invisibility of the white knowing gaze in the Australian context in relation to colonial photography in chapter 3.

Larbalestier, *op.cit.*
Australian whiteness as fitting the basic principles of whiteness that Frankenberg identifies above but that within global understandings of networks of whiteness Australia is situated ambivalently on the ‘periphery of the Euro-American core’. Ang uses Meaghan Morris’s term ‘white settler subjectivity’ to discuss the ambivalence and ambiguity with which self-conscious whiteness is experienced in Australia. She describes the way that this historically specific whiteness works through the maintenance of historic amnesia and the repetition of claims to home and belonging predicated on everyday otherings of non-white subjects. Ang describes a personal recollection where she was othered based on her physical appearance as a person of Chinese descent by a woman in the shopping centre who exhorted “Why don’t you go back to your own country!”105. Her analysis of this everyday instance of the negotiation and reinforcement of whiteness is that this woman simultaneously was naturalising her belonging, claiming the sovereign right to call Australia ‘home’ at the exclusion of all others. Additionally this claim to home works to erase Indigenous histories and belongings by reproducing, through historical amnesia or psychological ‘terra nullius’, the dynamics of colonialism and dispossession.

The concept of whiteness as a privileged standpoint from which white persons know themselves and others in society (Frankenberg’s second point in the description of whiteness) means understanding whiteness as a perspective which is given cultural and symbolic value which forms the basis of subject-formations. This recognition includes understanding that there are multiple perspectives and ways of knowing (part of what Nicoll refers to when she speaks of being in, rather than having a perspective of, Aboriginal sovereignty). This recognition seeks to understand why white ways of knowing are privileged (and invisible) as

105. Ibid., 70.
106. Loc.cit.
well as the material affects of subjects defined as ‘not-white’ in these communities\textsuperscript{108}. Aileen Moreton-Robinson describes the functioning of whiteness in this sense as an invisible gaze, whiteness becomes a universal principle representing humanity, and the gaze of those who are identified as white (access institutional power within this system) affects the knowledge of things and their order in so far as other knowledges are silenced\textsuperscript{109}. Whiteness as a form of power and ‘knowing’ is invisible through the atomization of the power of whiteness by white subjects. The category of the individual works to distribute the power of whiteness amongst historical actors and hides the larger disciplinary regime of whiteness as a form of privileging and normalising certain subjects and epistemologies. This category of the individual works also to differentiate those that are different and so discipline these subjects by defining them firstly as a function of group belongingness\textsuperscript{110}. Therefore non-white peoples will be firstly defined as a ‘type’ of person and judged accordingly, whereas white persons, although implicated within group identities, regimes of power and intersecting disciplinary forces, will firstly be identified as peoples (universal humanity) and secondly as white. Understanding whiteness as a form of group belonging and using it as a framework for understanding individualised actions as those of a regime of power is not only useful in undermining the invisibility of whiteness (and therefore making it able to be recognised and analysed) but it also opens up spaces for listening to voices silenced by the invisibility of whiteness.


The responsibility of recognising whiteness as a disciplinary force of power is recognising how it is predicated on the normalising of exclusionary discourses of belonging. In recognising this we need to engage with the effect such a discursive regime has on non-white others and interrogate our own racialised subject positions. For white peoples within a white colonial state this means a responsibility to understand what white sovereignty does to Indigenous sovereignty and rights. Fiona Nicoll argues this is both a political and intellectual responsibility meaning that our role is not to analyse, evaluate and critique Indigenous claims to sovereignty, but rather to examine the “innumerable ways in which white sovereignty circumscribes and mitigates the exercise of Indigenous sovereignty”\textsuperscript{111}. Nicoll describes this as a space where the white subject is trying to be \textit{within} Indigenous sovereignty. Being within Indigenous sovereignty is distinct from having a perspective on Indigenous sovereignty. Whiteness is maintained because white Australians have an investment in white sovereignty as the basis of our national identity. Nicoll and Moreton-Robinson argue that this compulsory investment in white sovereignty is enacted and reinforced through the “performatve assumption of perspective” or occupying the subject position of the “white know-all”\textsuperscript{112}. Knowing is dependent on our proximity to intersections of power (how we are gendered, raced, classed, sexualised etc). The knowing perspective, which is reinforced by access to power and the ability to speak, works to undermine all other epistemological and ontological claims. When white Australians claim the right to assess Indigenous declarations of sovereignty, claim perspective on Indigenous sovereignties, they enact a performance which “effectively make[s] white sovereignty a non-negotiable to which Indigenous people must be

\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Ibid}. 19.
\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Loc. cit}. 

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reconciled”. Thus Nicoll is asserting that we need recognise that knowledges, perspectives and epistemologies are racialised and imbued with power. Aileen Moreton-Robinson takes this acknowledgement as a starting point from which to challenge non-Indigenous ‘knowers’ to “theorise the relinquishment of power”.

Within the Australian art world postcolonial theory and the ideas of relinquishing the power of the white art critic sparked debate in the 1980s. The spark for this debate came initially from claims made by Anne-Marie Willis and Tony Fry about the exploitation of Indigenous artists in the then emergent ‘Aboriginal arts’ scene. Willis and Fry take the idea of Orientalism and the critiques levelled at postcolonial intellectuals and argue that the commodification of art made by Aboriginal peoples is an instance of imperialistic violence. In this understanding ‘Aboriginal art’ becomes a sign of Australian identity, with the international focus on the talent of Indigenous artists being subsumed into our national projection while the artists themselves remain essentially voiceless, exploited and living in a country where the prerequisites for an equal playing field (such as a formal acknowledgement of First Nations sovereignty) have not been achieved.

Fry and Willis level several different critiques of the First-World art scene. They contend that the reception of Aboriginal art is Eurocentric and that the acknowledgement of Aboriginal art occurs within mainstream schools of art history, where Aboriginal people are spoken about and for, a framing device which means that Aboriginal art is “never allowed to function in a way that would challenge the dominant culture’s values”. They argue that this acknowledgement of difference by the mainstream art world is actually a reappropriation of Aboriginal forms of expression into a binary of West - other which in turn means that

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112 Ibid. 20.
114 Moreton-Robinson, *Talkin’ Up to the White Woman*, op. cit. 186.
Aboriginal art becomes a signifier of the West’s conception of itself\textsuperscript{117}. This is reinforced by the focus on the art object itself, rather than what they advocate which would be a complex understanding of the art object as linked to the artist and their economic, ideological and political contexts\textsuperscript{118}. The concept of Aboriginal art is in their perspective a reiteration of the colonial dynamic, for it is impossible for white art ‘experts’ to distance themselves from the legacy of colonialism because:

\textit{Aboriginal culture is something manufactured within the parameters of the professional norms of careerists; it becomes a culture from which Aboriginal people are excluded either literally or by having to assume subject positions made available only by “the oppressor”.}\textsuperscript{119}

They conclude that the field of Aboriginal art is a case of assimilationist ethnocide\textsuperscript{120}. In some ways Richard Bell’s famous 2002 critique of the field of Aboriginal art corresponds with the arguments made by Fry and Willis. Bell claims that there is no Aboriginal art industry, rather, “Aboriginal Art it’s a white thing!”\textsuperscript{121} By this Bell is critiquing the function of non-Indigenous critics, collectors, curators, anthropologists, gallery owners and distributors who have built up an industry to cater for the commodification of art made by Aboriginal people. It is this industry that Bell argues exploits Aboriginal art makers, this exploitation an echo of the paternalism and denial of Aboriginal sovereignty at the structural level of Australian society. He asks “Why can’t an Art movement arise and be separate from but equal to Western Art- within its own aesthetic, its own voices, its own infrastructure etc?”\textsuperscript{122}

\textsuperscript{117} Willis and Fry, \textit{op.cit.} 7; Fry and Willis, \textit{op.cit.} 115.
\textsuperscript{118} Fry and Willis, \textit{op.cit.} 116.
\textsuperscript{119} \textit{Ibid.}, 159.
\textsuperscript{120} Willis and Fry, \textit{op.cit.} 10; Fry and Willis, \textit{op.cit.} 160.
\textsuperscript{121} Bell, \textit{op.cit.}
\textsuperscript{122} \textit{Loc. cit.}
Anthropologist Fred Myers critiques this line of thinking, in particular the case of ethnocide proposed by Willis and Fry, in his defence of anthropological discourse and vision in the field of Aboriginal art. He contends that their argument, which concludes that engaging in criticism of Aboriginal art is a form of colonial ethnocide, a silencing of the other, is itself a replaying of the colonial dynamic. This assumption made by Willis and Fry is instead a return to the representational practices they themselves critique: “here are the outsiders that know more than the participants...showing little interest in finding out what the Aboriginal people are doing, saying or understanding in these events which are addressed partly to us”123. This is an important point, for while the commodification of Aboriginal art occurs in a colonial context to discount the agency of artists in choosing to put these works into an art market dominated by white consumers is again to silence the artists and impose some sign of ‘authenticity’ against which Aboriginal artists are again measured. Myers argues that instead we should interrogate the stories/contextual frameworks we use to make these art works meaningful and engage in analytical dialogue when our frameworks are contested by the artist124. Therefore, the fact of debates by Willis and Fry and others validates the necessity and value of engaging in dialogue about Aboriginal art. It is this dialogue which Myers argues is important in that it has the “potential to make us nervous”125. Aboriginal art critic Hetti Perkins agrees with the sentiment of Aboriginal art as a dynamic space, describing it as an interventionist practice that challenges models of representation such as ‘traditional’ or ‘urban’126. It is the limited ways that Aboriginal art is discussed, such as Willis and Fry’s economic analysis and subsequent washing their hands clean of it, which “disempower the art and the artists involved”127 by ignoring the perceptions of artists as cultural activists

123 Fred, R. Myers, “ Representing Culture: The production of discourse(s) for Aboriginal Acrylic Paintings” in Cultural Anthropology, 6:1, 1991, 45.
125 Ibid, 48.
126 Hetti Perkins and Victoria Lynn, “ Blak artists, cultural activists” in Australian Perspecta, (Sydney:Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1993), xii.
interrupting the performance of the white, colonial present through dynamic and challenging practices. Both Ian McLean and Rex Butler, prominent Australian art critics, also disagree with the revisionist perspective of Aboriginal art. McLean, in a reply to Bell’s Theorem, claims that Aboriginal art is a “rainbow thing”, that it creates a space of dialogue between strangers beyond postcolonial politics of representation and race. In McLean’s view the power of the art objects themselves transcend the postcolonial context in which they are conceived and marketed in and “eludes ownership, be it by individuals, institutions or ideologies.”

Butler too takes up the claim that Aboriginal art is a reproduction, that is, it is reproduced by artists with intent and agency for a commercial audience, and that the concept of Aboriginal art would not exist were it not for the desire of a white audience. Butler uses the work of Enlightenment philosopher Emmanuel Kant to expand on his understanding of the relation between Indigenous artists, objects and non-Indigenous audiences and what the meaning of these art objects is. He theorises that when approaching a work of art an audience takes on an assumption of intentionality. That is, an object framed within an art context is no longer a simple object but must have meaning; it must be (re)produced. It is this assumption which is the starting point for the audience to engage with deciphering the meaning (making meaningful) a work of art. What Butler proposes here is that although the concept of Aboriginal art is a construct which comes out of the desires of white audiences, the making/affirming of Aboriginal art objects as meaningful occurs in the relational dynamics between the artist, the object and the audience all governed by the assumption of intentionality. It echoes Marcia Langton’s oft quoted idea that “‘Aboriginality’, therefore, is

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127 Ibid, xi.
128 Ibid, xii.
130 Ibid, 282.
a field of intersubjectivity in that it is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, of representation and interpretation. Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people create ‘Aboriginalities’”. However Butler takes this one step further by concluding that in this relational encounter between Aboriginal art objects and audiences “we are Aboriginal”. He comes to this conclusion by interrogating the idea that there is a hidden meaning in Aboriginal art which is not accessible to some viewers (here he is critiquing the discourse of secret/sacred Dreaming knowledges embedded within artworks). What he concludes is that the secret of Aboriginal art is not what revisionist or postcolonial theories would say (that it is beyond our ability to know) but that it “ultimately lies within us”. It is a thinking of the gap between the artist, object and audience that produces the ‘real’ (changeable meaningfulness) of the object as art. As explained in a later paper by Butler, the thing that comes between the ‘truth’ of the art object and the object itself is us. In such a way we at once create the object as Aboriginal art and in Butler’s reasoning thus create ourselves as Aboriginal.

Despite the problematic nature of this application of European, Enlightenment theory to understanding the layered intentions behind the production and reception of Aboriginal made art objects, what is most significant to critique for my purposes is how Butler himself manages to perfectly reproduce the dynamics of representation which Spivak warns of. In his speaking for Aboriginal artists and their intentions Butler not only represents (re-produces) an image of the Aboriginal artist which is decidedly Europeanised (an artist produces works for the economic consumption of an audience) and neglects that there might be layers of intended audiences, meanings and reasonings in the making of an art object from an artist’s

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132 Marcia Langton, “Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television”: an essay for the Australian Film Commission on the politics and aesthetics of filmmaking by and about Aboriginal peoples and things, (North Sydney, NSW: Australian Film Commission, 1993), 33-34.

133 Butler, op.cit., 111.

134 Ibid., 110. Original emphasis.

perspective and that this art might draw on different epistemological paradigms. He also reproduces the idea that the art object is only art within the (white) eyes of the audience. It is inconceivable in this reasoning that Aboriginal art could be reproduced to engage solely with Aboriginal peoples and their experiences. While not suggesting that this is the case for all art in the white construct of Aboriginal art, it is important to undermine the assumption that all cultural productions are there waiting to be given meaning by the eyes of the white art audience/institution. Butler also succeeds in representing the white, art audience/critic as invisible by assuming the right to claim sovereignty, to claim “we are Aboriginal” simply by engaging with an art object made by an Aboriginal artist. This is a privilege denied to artists who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander when they constantly have to defend, prove, clarify, justify and explain their Aboriginality and their right for their works to speak to other works by Aboriginal artists; or alternatively have to fight to be able to define themselves as artists outside of the public’s presumption of their heritage and assumption of how this must inform and frame their work. In assuming we have the (sovereign) right to roam into the space of Aboriginality, Butler echoes the ideas of post-Aboriginalism touted by Australian artist Imants Tillers.

Tillers suggests that Aboriginality is both assimilated and non-exclusive in the reception of ‘Aboriginal cultural forms’ into the category of contemporary art and with this the quality of Aboriginality no longer is the “exclusive domain of ‘black’ Aborigines”. He writes this in an attempt to distance Aboriginal art from discourses of primitivism by arguing for it as a fluid, globalised trend. Tillers suggests that Aboriginality is a form of cultural capital which can be accrued by association (e.g. making art which deals with issues affecting Aboriginal

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136 Such as Djon Mundine’s idea that Aboriginal art occurs within a paradigm of art objects as social actors: “All art has to be social and meaningful to the society it comes from, and if it does that it has to be criticised or examined by that society” (in Browning, op.cit. 33).
137 For an overt example of this dynamic propagated in popular discourse see Andrew Bolt’s diatribe “White Fellas in the Black”, August 21, 2009 in the Herald Sun.
communities) and in so doing creates a circular logic which justifies appropriating Aboriginal art in his own practice. The framing of Aboriginal art within contemporary art paradigms (abstract, expressionist etc) is seen for Tillers as evidence of the post-Aboriginal, when in effect all art made by Aboriginal artists is Australian art. In this argument there is no longer a need to consider issues of identity, and assuming that the issue of identity dissolves in the broader context of global flows and trends Tillers here performs the silencing function which Spivak warns of and takes up the invisible privilege of whiteness. It is the dynamic pointed out by Dodson when he writes “We are constantly defined as ‘other’, but we are never permitted to be genuinely independent, genuinely different”. It is premature and dismissive to assume that there is an ability for a post-Aboriginal arts scene when the frameworks for this scene are Eurocentric, the people arguing for this framework are non-Indigenous and when Aboriginal art and artists are reallocated a subaltern position in our society by these very arguments. Dodson’s captures this argument when he writes:

Because Aboriginality has been defined as a relation, Indigenous peoples have rarely come into a genuine relationship with non-Indigenous peoples, because a relationship requires two, not just one and its mirror. Our subjectivities, our aspirations, our ways of seeing and our languages have been largely excluded from the equation, as the colonising culture plays with itself.

It is this which Richard Bell rallies against in his Theorem by asserting the right to speak within the field of visual arts, to and for Aboriginal artists. Vernon Ah Kee too takes up this point in this controversial statement: “The only authentic Aboriginal people in this country are the urban Aboriginal people, they’re the only ones that behave autonomously. We’re the

139 Ibid, 268.
141 Dodson, op.cit. 36
142 Ibid. 37. Original emphasis.
only ones whose lives aren’t wholly and solely determined by white construction”143. While this statement is problematic it is purposefully contentious. In it Ah Kee undermines the ideas of ‘authenticity’ and ‘Aboriginality’ that are ascribed by imposed discourses. He speaks to the way that these frameworks limit the experiences of Aboriginal artists and their practices as well as placing limits and boundaries between Indigenous artists which works to undermine the very conditions necessary for an honest and productive culture of dialogue and criticism.

The discourse of ‘post-Aboriginality’ that Rex Butler and Imants Tillers propose speaks to the ideas of post-identity that have come from contemporary American theorists and have been taken up extensively in the art world there. The idea of post-identity is itself a critique of the binaries of identity which the feminist, post-structural and post-colonial theorists of the 1980s and 1990’s used in what has come to be known as ‘identity politics’. The position of post-identity theorists is summed up well by this quote from Judith Roof:

Using identities as a means to fight the ideologies that underwrite oppressions is not so much an example of using the "master's tools." Rather, it is an acceptance of the master system, which can never result in anything more than the oppressive recirculation of the same categories, playing one off against the other (women v. blacks, blacks v. Jews, first world v. third world), producing temporary reversals (affirmative action), inspiring reactionary behaviours (white supremacy, Promise keepers, fundamentalisms), constituting consumer target groups (gays, Hispanics), and providing a distraction that preserves the status quo.144

The critique of the identity politics of difference at risk of naturalising the unequal power relations they seek to undermine is useful. It echoes ideas that the signifier of ‘other’ placed

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on those who are culturally different is used to assimilate and pacify othered peoples. In the art world Ian McLean sees this as a symptom of economic globalisation, although is ambivalent as to what the outcomes of such will be: “Are we witnessing the McDonaldisation of Indigenous art – what Rex Butler has called ‘post-Aboriginal art’ – or the triumph of Indigenous identities?” As useful as this critique of postcolonial identity politics is, the proposal that we are post-identity is not.

Amelia Jones, an American art writer, in recent work presenting a genealogy of art as imbricated with the concept of identity, argues that there is no art object that stands on its own without processes of identification, i.e., art is a relation between ourselves, the object and our imaginings about the intended meaning behind such an object. Jones echoes both the argument made by Butler above and earlier thoughts of relational aesthetics made famous by Nicolas Bourriaud. She argues that art is a concept that arises out of the “modern European notion of the subject as an expressive individual”. Recognising the historicity of art as a concept means that we need to understand that art is the product of specific bodies and subjects of this world, and therefore the very idea of art is entangled with the idea of the artist - the subject who produced the work. She makes an important point as to the significance of both the identifications of the artist we perceive when looking at work and our own identifications. Jones uses the example of Robert Mapplethorpe to critique the contemporary turn to the post-identity phase in American art criticism (a call which is echoed in calls for ‘post-Aboriginality’ in the Australian context). Speaking to her discussion of Mapplethorpe’s photographic work and the possibility of multiple interpretations that his photographic work offers she argues “what one believes about Mapplethorpe and how one

146 Ibid. 295.
149 Jones, op.cit. 238.
150 Ibid. 137, 238.
identifies in relation to these beliefs determine what one will feel and say about his work”151.

Jones critiques the turn to discourses of post-identity in the visual arts as motivated by a desire to maintain the racialised ‘status-quo’. She argues that the avoidance of ‘political correctness’ and ‘theory-think’ in the art world comes from a desire of (white, male) art critics to “no longer take responsibility for his value judgements and […] return to the old structures of belief, positing that the indifferent critic need only let the artwork speak for itself to determine the true meaning and value of the work”152. She critiques post-identity politics generally for failing to acknowledge that the concept of being post-identity still relies on the concept of identity as its foundation; that it undermines and devalues ideas about the intersections of identifications (gender, class, race, able-bodiedness, sexuality etc)153. She does, however, call for new models to “see differently”, models which she thinks will come out of ideas of queer durational subjectivity, that is, a seeing which considers that subjectivity is relational and always in a state of becoming154. This conclusion has much in common with the work of Alison Ravenscroft and her concept of the “the subject-desiring-whiteness”155 which I will return to in my concluding thoughts. For now, I will outline the work of Australian critical race and whiteness studies scholars and their thoughts on post-identity politics, demonstrating the significance of these ideas to interventions in debates of ‘post-Aboriginality’.

Aileen Moreton-Robinson critiques the post-racial appeal to sameness inherent in discourses of ‘post-Aboriginality’ as evidence of white, male epistemic violence that characterises the claims of patriarchal white sovereignty of the colonial Australian State. She argues that such

151 Ibid. 138, original emphasis.
152 Ibid, 141.
153 Ibid, 229.
calls are effectively calling for the erasure of Aboriginality and that they put the blame on Aboriginal people and ‘cultural difference’ for the inequality in access to political, social, legal and economic forms of power while making the benefactors of such power (white men) invisible, erasing the continuing colonisation of Aboriginal peoples and lands. The claim that we are post-Aboriginal, or that “we are all Aboriginal” in Butler’s words, is the claim of the white-know-it-all and is a form of epistemic violence which discounts the experiences and works of Indigenous peoples that suggest otherwise. This claim also simultaneously disavows the responsibility of privileges conferred in varying degrees on normalised white bodies by systems of patriarchal white sovereignty.

This is the violence of perspective warned of by Fiona Nicoll (discussed earlier). She argues that the reduction of Indigeneity to a single perspective (such as the perspective of being post-Aboriginal) is epistemologically violent and serves to reinforce the power of whiteness as the ‘one[s] who tolerates’, while Aboriginal peoples are left defending their right to self-identify (a right intricately bound up in the sovereignty of Aboriginal peoples and nations) from the consuming perspective of whiteness. As a starting point to counter the violence of perspective Nicoll proposes that we need to approach Indigenous sovereignty from our own subjective positions rather than what we think we know of it: “Indigenous sovereignty exists because I cannot know of what it consists; my epistemological artillery cannot penetrate it”. In order to do this we need to ‘come out’ with our subjectivity, recognise and own how we are positioned in relation to Indigenous sovereignty. The idea of ‘coming out’ is interesting in that one does not only come out once, but must always reaffirm ones subjectivity in varying contexts and interactions. Coming out does not produce a stable

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157 Butler, op.cit. 111.

158 Ibid. 426.


160 Ibid. 370. Original emphasis.
identification but rather one is always in a state of becoming. This echoes Amelia Jones’ ideas of acknowledging that subjectivity is relational and dynamic and speaks to the concept of the subject-desiring-whiteness as articulated by Alison Ravenscroft.

Australian art writer, Terry Smith, takes the recognition of the diverse and challenging practices of Aboriginal artists as the starting point for his argument for ethical art-writing. While he agrees that the question of “who speaks, with what authority and with whom is fundamental” he does not agree with Willis and Fry’s argument of the field of Aboriginal art as ethnocide. Like the above critiques he impresses the need to recognise the invitations for dialogue being made by the artists in their works. He argues that art-writing in the field of Aboriginal art needs to occur and writers need to engage in critical dialogue. This art-writing needs to take into account the specifics of power and speaking positions, recognising the incommensurability of position between Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists and writers, while seeking the “positive potentials of difference” – the moments of genuine dialogue-should be the main point of such writing.

While the critique of the postcolonial arguments made by Smith are significant he misses a crucial aspect in the project of displacing the unequal power relationships involved in the engagement with Aboriginal art from a non-Indigenous viewpoint. Taking the seriously the challenges of Spivak and Moreton-Robinson, namely unlearning the “performative assumption of perspective”, involves more than the learning of an ethical writing practice. From the significant point made by Smith, that to choose not to engage in dialogue with Indigenous artists and art objects is to reinforce a silencing colonial dynamic, an idea of responsibility is raised. By acknowledging these objects are invitations to dialogue there is then an inherent responsibility for viewers to interrogate their responses to them (even if their

162 Loc. cit.
163 Nicoll, “Reconciliation in and out of perspective” op.cit. 19.
responses are to turn away). Yet the project of interrogating response involves more than a situating of the responding/writing subject. It involves a step which must come before ethical art-writing practices, the step of interrogating how the reading of visual objects involves the (re)creation of these subject positions, the subject-desiring-whiteness.164 This speaks to the critique of identity politics that Damien Riggs, an Australian critical race and whiteness studies scholar, makes and his proposal of a model of responsibility in his ‘post-identity-politics-identity-politics’165.

Riggs acknowledges the validity of common critiques of identity politics which contest its usefulness in that there is a tendency of such a politics to be introspective and concerned with individualism, which is not useful in considering the ethics of relating and organising within diverse, broad social bodies166. However he advocates the marrying of an acknowledgement of ones subjectivity with a sense of responsibility. If we accept logic of intersubjectivity, that is that, “we are fundamentally reliant upon another for our sense of self”167, then in the process of forming our subjectivity we gain a debt to others. This indebtedness is one that is continually reaffirmed by the same process through which we reaffirm our identities. To recognise oneself as white (or as a subject-desiring-whiteness) means that we need to recognise how such identities are built in relation to others, which in an Australian context is built upon ongoing legacies of violence and dispossession. The responsibility of whiteness is then to look beyond the self with a sense of “responsibility and accountability to another through whom our sense of self is made possible”168. This means then that in order to achieve an ethical coexistence we need to not only acknowledge our individual subjectivities but also to acknowledge the relationships of intersubjectivity our identities are based upon and the situating of these identities within the structural legacies of the Australian nation-state.

164 Ravenscroft, “The post-colonial eye” op.cit. 25.
166 Ibid. 353.
167 Ibid. 351.
168 Ibid. 352.
acknowledgements should move us to an ethics of responsibility towards others rather than a negating of the need for acknowledgements of identity as it is these acknowledgements which should propel us to ongoing action, ongoing responsibilities. This is the responsibility to negotiate coexistence which curator and art critic Djon Mundine talks about when he contests discourses of ‘mutual obligation’ inherent in Howard’s idea of reconciliation by arguing that reconciliation “isn’t an Aboriginal problem, it is a white problem”169.

To assume that we are post-Aboriginal, or that we are all Aboriginal when we look at Indigenous art, is dangerous because it relies upon a denial of the political, social and economic legacies of colonialism which shape our current contexts and in turn shape our subjectivities. Without this knowledge underpinning our interactions we (non-Indigenous subjects) deny the responsibilities we have and in so doing absorb Indigenous art and artists into our own perspective, reinforcing and re-enacting the colonial logic of silencing. A critical engagement with Indigenous art based upon an understanding of responsibility inherent in the acknowledgement of identity offers spaces to speak to and with Indigenous artists and the art objects that are offered as moments of dialogue. It means that there is a sense of “accountability to another”170 that is the starting point for this critical dialogue, rather than the art critic being an omnipotent ‘voice of god’ figure.

Marcia Langton critiques the tendency of academia to do just this when she states that the majority of scholars researching and writing about Aboriginal people do not in fact have relationships with Aboriginal people171. This, she argues, is indicative of a ‘white nostalgia’ for the “White Master and the subservient Native”172 relationship, where whiteness uses

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170 Riggs, op.cit. 352.
172 Ibid. 83.
signifiers of imagined, silent, ‘authentic’ Aboriginality to police its borders\textsuperscript{173}. Langton applies this to her discussion of the label ‘Indigenous artist’ when she recognises that there are a growing group of artists who resists this label\textsuperscript{174}. Rather than this being a signal of being post-Aboriginal, it should be a signal to the (white) art market to step back in its consumption of Aboriginality as a marker of otherness, to step back in unilaterally asserting its perspective, a signal of the right of all aspects of Indigenous lives to be lived autonomously\textsuperscript{175}. Indeed, rather than assuming then that we need to do away with categories of identity for Aboriginality to be legitimate in its own right we need to see Indigenous assertions of autonomy as prompts for non-Indigenous audiences to take responsibility for the social, political, historical and economic contexts we consume art made by Indigenous peoples in. Part of the action we need to take is in the reading practices we employ when engaging with art texts. Alison Ravenscroft points to the reading of texts as key in the constitution of subjects-desiring-whiteness and therefore it is the act of reading which works to silence the voices of other perspectives and positions. Reading (meaning making) is a visual and performative practice\textsuperscript{176}. It is visual in the sense that when we read any text we encode it within an epistemological ‘scene’, arranging and selecting parts of the text which are meaningful to our epistemological position, while not seeing others positions\textsuperscript{177}. It is performative in that in our practice of reading, from our own perspective, we reproduce the epistemological scene/position in which we are implicated by identifying or not identifying with elements of the text and thus stabilising our own subjectivities: “we produce the scene that appears as it were ‘before’ us, and we are made in this act of looking, as ‘white’, or as a’woman’”\textsuperscript{178}. Thus it is important to understand the desires we come to a text with and

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid, 86.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid. 91.
\textsuperscript{175} Loc. cit.
\textsuperscript{176} Ravenscroft, “the post-colonial eye” op.cit. 1.
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid, 25-26.
\end{flushleft}
attempt to fulfil through performative reading practices.

The performative aspect of reading is important in that it points to the fact that there is no stable subject, it is constantly performed and reiterated in desire motivated reading acts. The subject who reads is always unstable because her identity is in need of constant reaffirmation through reading acts and this offers the potential for interruption of hegemonic articulations of norms. Therefore, a subject is never white but is always a subject-desiring-whiteness. And because we read from situational and limited positions there is no way that we can know all aspects of a text, our reading is always partial. The partiality of reading opens up potential opportunities for the interruption of norms. This potential comes in acknowledging the moments when reading a text that our interpretation and imaginations fail to comprehend the complete meaning being articulated by the author. By acknowledging these moments we hold onto a willingness to “bring ourselves into uncertainty.” It is usually in such gaps of reading that we would ‘stitch in’ meanings/imagine meanings so that we might complete the reading task, lest our subjectivity be threatened by incompleteness: “[…] that faced with a strange and incomprehensible text, I will be undone.” What we stitch over these in these gaps is in fact ourselves as open to relationships, our desires as opaque and therefore our responsibilities stemming from such desires. In so doing we cover over the voices of others which attempt to speak to us through silence. Ravenscroft prompts a different reading practice based upon the ethics of willingness to be unknowing readers, to acknowledge gaps in our ability to read texts, and enact a shift in our understanding of knowledge:

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178 Ibid. 25. original emphasis.
179 Ibid. 27.
180 Ibid. 20, original emphasis.
181 Ibid. 19, original emphasis.
That is, against a notion of knowledge as accumulative, reading instead is a shift in relations between objects in a field, and between the field and what lies outside it, a shift that implicates the viewer, or reader.  

We can draw links with this shift in reading practices that Ravenscroft proposes with Riggs’ concept of responsibility to others, understanding both as responses from non-Indigenous authors to Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s challenge for white academics to theorise the relinquishment of power. These are not responses which merely recognise the Orientalising power dynamic of western engagements with art made by Indigenous peoples, nor do they deny dialogue (Willis and Fry) or sidestep the challenges (Tillers and Butler) that artists assert in their work. Rather, these responses take an approach of praxis, theorising the possibilities and limits of giving up power and engaging with ways to do so while making strong arguments for the necessity of such an approach. While the ideas of responsibility to others (Riggs) and reading unknowingly (Ravenscroft) take seriously the critiques levelled at identity politics they deny sidestepping the difficulties of engaging with identity and difference that a ‘post-Aboriginality’ approach advocates. They do so by recognising, firstly, that these identity categories continue to reflect for many people something ‘real’ about their experiences and therefore have real effects and secondly, that to sidestep identity with discourses of ‘post-Aboriginality’ is another reading practice which attempts to interpret or imagine beyond the limits of our position to do so. Put simply, it is not the place of white, male academics to propose that we are post-Aboriginal, that when we look at/read art objects made by Indigenous artists with cross-cultural intent that “we are Aboriginal”.

These approaches inform my reading of the practices and works made by Vernon Ah Kee and Fiona Foley in the pages to follow. While Terry Smith’s idea of an ethical art-writing practice

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182 Ibid.20.
183 Riggs, op. cit. 345.
185 Butler, op.cit. 111.
which proposes engaging critically with Indigenous art through questions of “who speaks, with what authority and with whom”\textsuperscript{186} is useful, it does not move beyond a postcolonial critique of power to consider how this writing itself is implicated in the reiterating of who has the power to speak, with what authority and with whom. Taking Ravenscroft’s concept of reading, however, allows us to develop Smith’s idea of ethical art writing by understanding that the act of writing is in itself a reading practice. That is, we constitute ourselves in the process of reading Indigenous art through art writing. Thus there is no position from which art writing can engage critically without the art writer being implicated in the scene of reading and writing about the art object. If we marry this to Riggs’ ideas of responsibility to others then we can say that in the act of reading Indigenous art we become indebted to Indigenous artists as we constitute ourselves through the reading practice. Thus we have a responsibility to engage in dialogue with these art objects from a place of accountability, recognising the situated, intersectional positions we come from and how these are bound up in the situations of others. It means that, following Ravenscroft’s ideas, we need to take seriously the gaps in our knowledge that are presented to us and pointed out by Indigenous artists through their art objects, willingly engaging with these moments of incompleteness in our reading rather than brushing over them by sidestepping the way that our situated identities and desires are bound up in structurally reinforced norms which play out in our reading practices. In so doing we miss the point and we rearticulate the violence of the norms we embody. We need to instead be willing to engage with the risk involved in reading Aboriginal art, the risk being that there will be gaps in our knowledge, that there will be aspects of these objects that we cannot understand. We need to explore what this absence of knowledge might mean and its potential for challenging and shifting white desires. We need to be willing to really acknowledge and respond to these gaps in our knowledge which are presented to us through the art objects

\textsuperscript{186} Smith, \textit{op. cit.} 11.
made by Fiona Foley and Vernon Ah Kee because the “fragmentation, gaps and silences are the story”\textsuperscript{187}. There is a creative potential in the absence of knowledge that we might be able to see differently by relinquishing our predetermined, whiteness-desiring, conclusions to the story.

\textsuperscript{187} Ravenscroft, “The post-colonial eye” \textit{op.cit}. 13.
Chapter Four- (White desires of) Blackness, Bodies and Belonging in the works of Fiona Foley and Vernon Ah Kee

The male figure, pictured from the waist up, gazes intently across the horizon as waves crash on the shore in the background. His hand to forehead, shading his eyes, he looks at a horizon point we cannot see, signifying a sense of duty and stalwart nationalism. His gleaming skin draws our eyes to him and takes up half the shot. This figure is reminiscent of the oft repeated figure in Australian visual culture, that of the beach lifeguard. Yet there is one significant difference to this image. This figure, although, embodying the stance and physique of the idealised male lifeguard figure, is brown skinned a signifier of his Aboriginality and the historical disenfranchisement of Aboriginal people from the narratives of nation in Australian history enacted on the beach. The immediate subversive effect of picturing this skin in our colonial context has much to tell us about Australian history and culture. The surprising nature of an Aboriginal male body being portrayed in the typical stance of the beach lifeguard also reveals the nature of white desires and the limits these desires place on the aspirations and roles Indigenous bodies can take on.

Fig. 1: Fiona Foley. Nulla 4 eva VII, 2004, ultrachrome print on Hahnemühle paper, 120 x 80 cm, Niagara Galleries, Melbourne.
The image described above comes from Fiona Foley’s *Nulla 4 eva* (2009) photographic series. This is one of the bodies of work I will examine in this chapter. The above image brings up themes of embodiment, the beach, skin, colour and photography that are pertinent to my analysis of the positioning of bodies in both Fiona Foley and Vernon Ah Kee’s works. This chapter will begin by examining a specific aspect of contemporary Australian racial relations, namely, the interaction between the white gaze and the black bodies it creates. Vernon Ah Kee and Fiona Foley explicitly challenge white discourses of blackness in the way they depict Aboriginal bodies and their inversion of the (white) knowing gaze. Fiona Foley’s photographic series *Nulla 4 eva* is a set of rich cultural texts. In these images Foley moves between Australia’s political, demographic and social histories to present a tale told specifically through the figures she depicts in place. I will focus on her representation of bodies and discuss the visual subversion of blackness in this series. I will also consider the embodied nature of blackness and whiteness through Vernon Ah Kee’s portraiture. This analysis will consider the significance of photography and how whiteness operates through the photographic gaze, examining Ah Kee’s alternate readings of photographs through time and gazes in which he creates an intersubjective space, with limits defined by the artist.

**Blackness**

*I move slowly in the world, accustomed now to seek no longer for upheaval. I progress by crawling. And already I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am fixed.*

* [...]The evidence was there, unalterable. My blackness was there, dark and unarguable.*

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Franz Fanon draws attention to several key issues that this chapter will deal with. The concept and philosophy of blackness is key to understanding the history of Australian policies and practices of racialisation or ‘fixing race’ to bodies. I wish to explore this idea generally with reference to the significance of the visual. As Fanon states above, it is through the white gaze that race is fixed and blackness sticks to/within his skin. Thus the role of visual representation and perception is key to understanding the nature of blackness. Secondly, I wish to elaborate on the real effects of this concept of blackness by discussing Fanon’s racial epidermal schema in order to understand the embodied, phenomenological nature of how blackness, as a technology of whiteness, works. These points will be discussed in order to understand how blackness is seemingly fixed and located in the body but also shifts and is applied to different bodies in different historical/political contexts. Here the multicultural policies discussed in Chapter Two which establish, shift and fix racialisation of ‘ethnic’ groups work as a function of the marking of certain bodies as black. The space that blackness inhabits is a strange place of cultural discourses and context-warped visual perceptions. Simply speaking, the concept of blackness denotes a process of othering a subject whose skin colour is defined as different to an invisible norm and this physical difference aligns with a supposed set of cultural differences. This process thus implies that there is one who looks at and defines all skins differences – skin is interpreted as ‘black’ from a white (European) perspective or gaze. Yet the process of how blackness is experienced and how its definitions change is far more complex than this initial understanding.

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189 Please note that the term ‘multicultural policies’ in this thesis refers to policies in the history of Australian governments that have aimed to police, control, discipline racialised and ethnicised communities (specifically in these communities relation to white colonial settler society), for example the 1897 Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act (Qld). When referring to specific policies they will be named and described. This term is in relation to the argument I have made in chapter 2 regarding the continuity of the official period of multiculturalism in Australia’s policy history with earlier policies regarding the management of racial others.


Skin is a site of social interactions. Shirley Anne Tate describes the web of interactions enacted on black-skinned bodies as blackness:

*Blackness means that skin is ‘a site and a primary means of communicating with others, of establishing signifying relations; it is moreover an “inscribing surface” for the marks of those others’.*

Skin is therefore the site in which power within contexts collide, the site where visual forms of communication occur and the site where others perceive us. This makes skin a site of violence in the inscribing of supposed truths by the gaze of outside others, silencing the subjectivity of those whose bodies are gazed at. Skin is also a site of potential resistance to this violence, a site of slippage where supposed ‘truths’ of subjectivity can be interrupted, resisted and lived between- skin can ‘lie’ and hide the subject from the gaze of others. Sara Ahmed argues that this understanding of skin as a site of collisions is important. Skin should never to be reduced to a site on which we read abstracted theories of difference. Rather skin is the site of a phenomenological ‘war’, a site of intersecting signifiers of difference that fix and simultaneously offer us possibilities to ‘seep’ out of the limits of our contextually defined ‘skins’. This is an important point to impress in order for this chapter to continue. There is a danger when talking about difference and bodies that the lived experiences of those bodies being spoken about will be muted as a device for the writer to read her own desires through. As Ahmed argues, this technique does not necessarily involve a recognition of the “violent collision between regimes of difference” that occur on bodies in context. Speaking/gazing-at different bodies without locating them in specific contexts and recognising the intersecting and embodied nature of these collisions of difference risks

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194 *Loc. cit.*

195 *Loc. cit.*
universalising the experiences of the subject spoken of, thus silencing the othered subject and reinscribing the power of whiteness (she who looks) onto the writer.

Thinking through the skin means recognising that blackness as an experience is embodied. This informs Fanon’s critique of European philosophy. Fanon’s chapter “The Fact of Blackness” in Black Skins, White Masks translates more literally to “The Lived Experience of the Black”.196 This translation places emphasis on the phenomenological experiences of blackness and how it works, drawing attention to the idea that blackness is experienced in relations and interactions with others in society.

Fanon details two schemas that account for the lived experience of blackness- the historic-racial schema and the racial-epidermal schema. Fanon contends that his experience of the self is not universal. Rather, there is a marked difference in the experiences and ability to actively participate in the ‘schematization of the world’ of the self felt by white and black bodies in colonial contexts.197 Fanon’s schemata’s map the functions of systemic and institutionalised racism and racialisation in the structures of a colonial society. Indeed it is these schemata, the ways that black bodies are defined, gazed at and disciplined, which constitute key facets of the process of colonialism.198 This is historical and racial, that is, the racialised other is subject to experience and discipline herself within the context of a history of being objectified; and her experience of subjectivity is on a continuum with imposed outside narratives. Whiteness gives its others particular scripts to play in accordance with its interpretations of ones racial essence and history.199 Thus a colonised self is given less freedom to negotiate their experiences of self in this rigid script. This schema hinders not only the personal and intellectual development of a black person but also the bodily

196 Nielsen, op.cit. 365.
197 Ibid.367.
198 Ibid.368.
199 Ibid.367.
comportment and movement of the black self in space leading to a paranoid, constrained existence.\textsuperscript{200}

The racial-epidermal schema accounts for how these scripts of racialisation become naturalised and internalised by the black self-in-body through the embedding of discourses of blackness by a colonial society. Understanding the power of the white gaze in the functioning of the racial-epidermal schema is crucial. It is through the gaze of power (whiteness) that blackness is fixed to skin, and this racialisation is maintained and reinforced by various socio-politico apparatuses.\textsuperscript{201} That is, the white gaze sticks blackness to the skin of the other and this power to ‘stick’ or ‘fix’ colour/race is dispersed throughout the social body, institutionally and socially. This racial-epidermal schema “is a reality that confronts the black other on a daily basis and forces him to experience his phenotypic differences via the distorted perspective of the white other”.\textsuperscript{202} This distorted perspective is invisible through the functioning of the dis-individualising of power (the invisibility of whiteness as those who see but are not tied to the body). However, the black(ened) bodies in the colonial context become fetishised objects of sight, so much so that “one could almost say that the individual body schema is replaced, in the course of socialisation, by a ‘racial-epidermal schema’”.\textsuperscript{203}\textsuperscript{204}

In order to make Fanon’s schemas appropriate to the context of Australian we can draw on Ghassan Hage’s concept of Australian whiteness, a social system which relies particularly on Indigenous blackness to define its form. Within the field of national power ones access to normative belonging (whiteness) is constantly in flux, dependant on historical political

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{200} Loc. cit.
\item \textsuperscript{201} Ibid.368.
\item \textsuperscript{202} Ibid.369.
\item \textsuperscript{203} Ibid.370.
\item \textsuperscript{204} It is important to clarify here that blackness fixed on the skin is not necessarily referring to the colour of one’s skin. Drawing from Hage’s (op.cit.59-61) concept of whiteness as accumulated social capital (e.g. language, accent, name, residential address, citizenship status, education, physical appearance, gender, sexuality etc) we can understand blackness too as assigned to a subject in degrees not always dependant on skin colour. Blackness then is the lack of a subject in meeting the norms of a society. That being said skin colour is a very powerful signifier of blackness and different skin tones can be defined by society as referring to social/cultural traits of a subject and limit one’s ability to negotiate social-historical and corporeal bodily schemas.
\end{itemize}
context. Thus migrant blackness (or perhaps we could describe it as degrees of brownness) is a shifting signifier that moves between variously racialised influxes of migration and migrant or refugee communities and determines the access to national power and belonging of such racialised communities. Yet Indigenous blackness is constructed in this dynamic as a form of capital signifying belonging (ultimate belonging as Indigenous peoples, this belonging a threat to colonial nation-states) but also not-belonging (an ultimate form of non-belonging as the most marginalised peoples within colonial nation-states). Indigenous blackness, a fixed marker, is used to delineate the boundaries of norms and is utilised by non-white peoples to access whiteness. That is, Aboriginal blackness is used as a marker by non-white peoples to “emphasise their non-blackness and their capacity to enter the field of whiteness”.

Therefore white and non-white peoples have a stake in maintaining the ‘naturalness’ of a black-white binary and in so doing reassert the logic of colonialism. This structural conception of blackness as a marker of passive national belonging is presented as fixed and natural in the a-historical discourses and debates which fix Aboriginality to certain bodies, allowing or disallowing access to this form of national belonging.

It is important to consider the complex, albeit arbitrary, way that Aboriginality and blackness has been fixed to bodies, as well as the complex relationships between the archetypal fixed body of Indigenous blackness and the shifting body of migrant blackness in the national imagination in order to destabilise this binary. The concept of blakness, as coined by Destiny Deacon, is another significant interruption to the black-white binary that I argue is utilised by Fiona Foley in her photographic practice.

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205 Hage, op.cit.57.
206 Loc.cit.
207 One only needs to consider the public debate over the legitimacy of Aboriginal corporeality raised by Andrew Bolt’s “It’s so hip to be black” (Herald Sun, April 15, 2009) as a contemporary example of the visibility of Aboriginal Blackness (or determined lack of) and discourses which reinforce ideas of Aboriginal bodies as objects to be analysed, assessed and essentialised in terms of the literal embodiment of Blackness.
‘Blakness’

As I am an Aborigine, I inhabit an Aboriginal body, and not a combination of features which may or may not cancel each other. Whatever language I speak, I speak an Aboriginal language, because a lot of Aboriginal people I know speak like me...we need to develop strategies which undermine those forms of representation which deny our ability to develop identities which are both coherent and sustaining.208

Destiny Deacon’s term ‘blak’ was devised as a strategy to twist colonialist language, a political tool to at once interrupt its power and reclaim the right to define herself.209 As Daniel Browning writes, this term is devised “in defiance of the inexorable power of the English language, [it] expresses our right to state who and what we are”210. The term blak, then, refutes the white-black binary and denies the tying of Aboriginality to externally defined corporeal signifiers. It asserts that “Aboriginality is not simply a question of Aboriginal blood, or quantum of it. It runs much deeper”211 or as the above quote from Ian Anderson asserts, that Aboriginality is a complex, daily lived experience and more than a relational concept. With this term Deacon draws together the corporeal and linguistic nature of colonialism and subverts it in an act of reclamation which negates the power relationship inherent in naming and disciplining black bodies.

With the term ‘blak’ Deacon points to the limits of the black-white binary, not only for capturing Aboriginality but also for our own relationships with Aboriginality. She points to the fact that this binary is unnatural and in fact Aboriginality as well as non-Aboriginality are intersubjective concepts created and re-created through inter-cultural encounters. This means there are possibilities to interrupt these categories, possibilities to interrupt the historic-racial and racial-epidermal schemas through which we experience ourselves. Such a perspective

208 Ian Anderson as quoted in Clare Williamson and Hetti Perkins, Blakness: Blak City Culture! (South Yarra, Victoria: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 1994), 26.
209 Williamson and Perkins, op.cit.20.
interrupts the idea of culture as static, instead echoing up Fred Myer’s idea of culture as a system of meanings in flux, that is, signs are given meaning in negotiation, in action, and this negotiation happens in a field of power.\(^{212}\) This occurs internally, within Indigenous communities, and externally, in relation to the broader national field of power, embedded as it is with the black-white binary and the assumptions of authenticity or in-authenticity. Blakness then is a disruption to the black-white binary, signalling the possibilities of intersubjective and intercultural relations.

In this conception of Aboriginality there is a denial of the colonial relationship in which blackness is fixed as an a-historical, essential relation to whiteness. Blakness calls in to question our corporeal realities and offers spaces to negotiate the ways we embody the Australian national field of power. In order to consider how blakness is utilised by Fiona Foley and Vernon Ah Kee we must first understand the genealogy of blackness and whiteness in Australia.

**An historiography of Aboriginal skin in the Australian colonial regime**

*Since their first intrusive gaze, colonising cultures have had a preoccupation with observing, analysing, studying, classifying and labelling Aborigines and Aboriginality. Under that gaze, Aboriginality changed from being a daily practice to being ‘a problem to be solved’.* \(^{213}\)

The bodies of Aboriginal people have been a constant source of study in the colonial project and the cultural, scientific and political discourses this study has engendered have had an overwhelming fascination with the study of Indigenous peoples’ skins. Shino Konishi tracks the fascination early European explorers had with the colour and nakedness of Aboriginal men and women’s skin, noting that these physical features were remarked upon by all of the


\(^{213}\) Dodson, *op.cit.* p.27.
early navigators. Konishi discusses skin in these accounts (the accounts of the visible skin of Aboriginal peoples and the unwritten accounts of the invisible skin of the colonists in their diaries) as sites of cross-cultural communication, or rather the struggles European explorers had in translating adornments and colours of Indigenous skins into a “European cognitive framework”. It is a significant point in her account that Konishi stresses the visibility of Aboriginal peoples’ skins as objects for study and translation particularly with discovering the ‘absolute’ colour of Aboriginality as in, for example, Cook’s interactions with people at Endeavour River in Northern Queensland. This incident saw Cook attempt to rub the dirt off an Aboriginal man’s body in order to determine its ‘true’ colour which he wrote “resembled that of Chocolate” whereas Sydney Parkinson described the colour as “like that of wood-soot”. This pre-occupation with discovering, documenting and defining “what their absolute colour is” reveals the influence of Enlightenment taxonomies on these early accounts, particularly the theories of Johann Blumenbach who, studying skin colour as the marker of difference, developed the idea of different races as varying degrees degradations from the ideal racial type which he defined as Caucasians. It is interesting that in these early accounts the interest in Aboriginal peoples’ bodies is in the most part benevolent and marked by mutual curiosity as much as the interpretations of skin that the early explorers make are Eurocentric. In some cases it did lead to a reflexive turn, as in the realisation by the French Baudin expedition in 1802 on Van Diemen’s Land when they learnt that the colour of the Palawa peoples skins were both normal and attractive in their own society. Yet as Konishi notes, this benevolence did not mean that explorers tried to understand the

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215 Loc.cit.
216 Ibid.18.
217 Loc.cit.
218 Ibid.18,23.
219 Ibid.23.
significance of skin to the Indigenous peoples they encountered as an everyday cultural artefact or as the site for inscribing identity and belonging.\textsuperscript{220}

As the colonial project in Australia expanded in the nineteenth century, corresponding to global expansions in race theories of Social Darwinism and a preoccupation within the scientific world with race sciences such as craniometry, this benevolence quickly disappeared. Konishi describes this period as one in which representations of a new archetypical (male) Aboriginality arise including the Aboriginal body as the ‘performing body’ and as the ‘degraded body’, bodies for the consumption of entertaining dances stripped of cultural significance and bodies perceived as grotesque, disease ridden, emaciated and without dignity.\textsuperscript{221} The nineteenth century colonial project focused particularly on knowing and creating ideal Aboriginal bodies through corporeal regimes of discipline and violence. Aboriginal skin in this period is a “uniquely important locus for social and political activity”.\textsuperscript{222}

These discourses constitute a “visual ideology”\textsuperscript{223} intended to tie Aboriginality to the corporeal, informed by and legitimating the race theories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This ideology was used to legitimise and support the policies and practices of the colonial state, particularly in the control and management of Aboriginal bodies.\textsuperscript{224} As such, Aboriginal bodies and skins were marked as not only different and other but also the site for the exercise of the State’s systems of authority.\textsuperscript{225} Aboriginal bodies were marked by ideas of ‘civilising’ and policies of protection and assimilation through overt violent physical marks (such as lashings), silencing marks (such as the use of clothing or separating children from

\textsuperscript{220} Ibid. 35.
\textsuperscript{222} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{223} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{224} Dodson, \textit{op.cit}. 36.
\textsuperscript{225} Haebich, \textit{op.cit}.
their physical genealogies) and disciplining marks (such as the dietary regimes of mission life). The ‘new’ Aboriginal bodies produced by these regimes were visible symbols of colonial ‘progress’ and authority and photographs of Aboriginal bodies were used not only to reinforce this authority but to serve as visual reminders of bodies and cultural practices which did not represent colonial standards of bodily care and comportment. 226

It is not as though this preoccupation with scrutinising and defining Aboriginal bodies is a thing relegated to our national past. Despite the politically correct mantra of ‘colour-blindness’ which the era of multiculturalism has ushered in, Aboriginal bodies are still important sites of political and social activity. As discussed earlier the political significance of the blackness of Aboriginal bodies plays a role in marking the normative boundaries of national belonging and power. As the 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Response (the Intervention) has demonstrated, Aboriginal bodies are sites for the exercise of political power in the most extreme measure with the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act (C’th) 1975 in order to enact a military led intervention into 73 prescribed communities with legislation targeted at ‘normalising’ Indigenous communities. The Intervention assumes that Aboriginal people’s deviance from the morals of whiteness in Northern Territory communities would be written on their bodies and thus Aboriginal bodies, through punitive measures, need disciplining to become morally ‘normal’. 227 Measures of surveillance such as the introduction of mandatory health checks for all Aboriginal children in order to find the corporeal signs of abuse and disciplinary measures; and blanket alcohol bans for all Aboriginal peoples in these areas segregate the Aboriginal body as pathologically and extraordinarily deviant. The spectacle of this discourse of blackness has played out through images of blurred, male Aboriginal figures (figured as perpetrators of abuse) and voiceless

226 Ibid.
young Aboriginal children (victims needing state intervention and normalisation). Notably absent are the images of the caregivers of these children, particularly Aboriginal women.228 These images fit into simplified representations of the noble savage which further work to fix a black-white binary. It is in the middle of this binary which Fiona Foley’s dialogues in the Nulla 4 eva series come to play, taking the corporeality of Aboriginality as her weapon for challenging the desires of whiteness evident in policies such as the Intervention.

Fiona Foley’s work, particularly her representation of bodies will be analysed with the context and politics of Australian regimes of blackness in mind. I will be analysing the figures of Foley’s Nulla 4 eva series with the intention of recognising the violent collisions of difference being spoken to in the skins of these bodies. This is an endeavour, in the words of Ahmed, to “think through the skin as a surface upon which differences collide”.229 Furthermore this is done with a view to displacing (if only momentarily) the white gaze by turning it upon ourselves by asking these questions: how might Foley be looking at us through these photographs? What are these embodied figures asking us? That is, what are the webs of interaction that are occurring on/in the bodies represented, both on/in the body of the artist who represents and on/in the bodies who look? And how, perhaps, is Foley transforming blackness into blakness?

**Fiona Foley- Nulla 4 eva and Blackness vs. Blakness.**

*I’m desperate for dialogue.*230

Fiona Foley’s Nulla 4eva series highlights several key ideas in contesting and furthering the historical dialogue about blackness and nationalism in Australia. I argue that not only is Foley resisting or reversing the history of blackness in Australia as a fetishised body without

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228 See the ABC Lateline program “Sexual slavery reported in Indigenous community” which aired 21 June 2006 as exemplary in propagating these images.

229 *Loc.cit.* Emphasis added.

agency (those constantly seen but never seeing) but that she is also interrupting contemporary multicultural discourses of ‘colour-blindness’ to speak to the invisible privileging of historic-racial and racial-epidermal schemas as a continuation of the process of colonisation. In this picturing of herself in Nulla 4 eva IV Foley takes on signifiers to the effect of a double othering and asks, in the words of Djon Mundine “If you are an ‘other’, can you then be any and all ‘others’?” This question is more complex than it seems. Foley is asking us to consider our practices of reading bodies, our role in the maintaining of colonial historic-racial and racial-epidermal schema’s through the desires for whiteness that make up our subjectivities. If the power of colonialism is dis-individualised through its ability to be enacted by any fixing gaze, (the look that ‘knows’ skin), how do we read these images when Foley refuses to let us see her skin by wearing a niqab (as she does in Nulla 4 eva IV), as she refuses to let us fix her in the simplistic signifying binary of oppressed-resistant? How does multiculturalism in the Australian context fix difference on the skin of others so as to disallow dialogue? What are the dialogues in this series that Foley is so desperate to have?

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232 A binary much like the categories of debate which discourse over the politics of wearing the niqab and burqa fall into.
The tactic of layering levels of otherness on the body recurs throughout the catalogue of Foley’s photographic work. Her practice through the use of this tactic speaks to other contemporary conceptual photographers, such as Cindy Sherman and Yasumsa Morimura, which reinterpret historical images through political frameworks and post-modern references to popular culture. In her series Badtjala Woman (1994), based on photographs found in the John Oxley Gallery circa 1899, Foley reclaims the images of her forebears by performing the colonial photograph. Foley mimics the technique of the (male) colonial gaze as photographer, however simultaneously challenges this gaze by inserting herself into the fetishised space of the photograph. This is a photograph of herself, by herself. Foley’s imitations of ethnographic photographs are saturated in the nostalgia invoking sepia-tone, punctuated by her naked torso adorned only by shell and reed necklaces or a dilly bag in Badtjala Woman (with collecting bag) (1994). She restructures the power relationship inherent in the 1899 photographs by re-performing the original photographs, inserting herself as the subject of the shot. Not only does she reverse the power relationship of the white photographic gaze (who photographs and composes the shot) by actively choosing to take on what in the original image were signifiers of otherness, but through her agency and assertion of the right to choose she reclaims the image of her forebear. Through the embeddedness of the memory of the original photograph employed in the tactic of mimicry Foley makes visible the power relationships inherent in colonial photographs and forces us to consider herself and the original woman photographed as women with agency. Simultaneously Foley is disrupting the original photograph by taking on the role of ethnographer. Her ethnographic subject is not, however, the fetishised other- it is us; it is we who are being read as subjects marked by racial desires. She is “looking at you, looking at me”.\textsuperscript{333} Foley is not only performing the role of photographed subject, she is simultaneously performing the role of the photographer and in

\textsuperscript{333} Michele Helnrich, “Looking at You Looking at Me: Performance and Ethnography in Fiona Foley’s Photographs” in Fiona Foley et.al. Fiona Foley: Forbidden, (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, 2009), 35.
so doing interrupting our knowing, fixing gaze watching the way that we read signifiers of otherness, interrupting our need to fix knowing discourses to her body.

Reclaiming photography through the performance of shots with the insertion of herself in the scene is not just limited to Australian colonial history in Foley’s practice. The technique of layering signifiers of otherness is taken up by Foley when she takes on signifiers of American First Nation Peoples dress in *Wild Times Call* (2001). This series was shot on a Seminole reservation and Bayou Country in Southern Florida and Foley uses country, people and dress to play on signifiers of Indigeneity in the context of the USA. These are a series of shots which reference a fashion shoot featured in Oprah Winfrey’s ‘*O*’ magazine from September 2000. In Foley’s recreation of the shoot she evokes a sense of nostalgia, again with sepia toned shots, herself modelling Bayou dress in ‘natural’ landscapes reclining against a canoe (*Wild Times Call 3*), leaning against a tree on the riverbed (*Wild Times Call 1*) and walking, eyes closed, through an abandoned, tree framed field (*Wild Times Call 7*). These shots in particular emphasise a fetishisation of female Indigeneity so present in contemporary
society, a desire for embodiments of ‘divine femininity’ in touch with ‘mother nature’ complete with exotically patterned dresses. As Michele Helmrich describes it, Foley plays on a desire for “a Walt Disney version of Pocahontas”. Yet Foley disrupts this fetishising gaze particularly in *Wild Times 2* and *Wild Times 4* (2003). Arms crossed and defiantly staring into the camera surrounded by jean clad Bayou men or standing in front of a car amongst her male friends Foley challenges us to dare to define her, forcing us to acknowledge her contemporaneity and her basic right to identify herself as she chooses. She is not a silent image to be read by our white desires. She is political, savvy, strong and watching us as we watch her.

In the *Nulla 4 eva* series Fiona Foley again disturbs and interrupts the boundaries of Australian multiculturalism through her semiotic plays with skin and clothing. The series, first shown at Niagara Galleries in 2009 and notably in her retrospective MCA show “Forbidden” (2009-2010), weaves a narrative that transverses space and time. Most obviously Foley is referencing the 2005 Cronulla Riots through the name of the series, the location of various shots on Cronulla beach and the recurring themes of conflict and the beach that these images narrate. However she critically engages with broader discourses of multiculturalism and nationalism by referencing the racialisation of Australia’s history through the 1788 landing and the 1897 *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* (Q’ld).

In this she offers her body as a site to be read while also simultaneously denying us the ability to read her skin, her body becoming a site for complex, intersubjective negotiations with limits.

Fiona Foley’s *Nulla 4 eva* series comprises of 7 colour photographs, each with their own narrative but linked by themes of racial diversity and historical trends of xenophobia in

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234 Consider, for example, fashion shoots in any women’s magazine which place waif thin, white models donned in ‘ethnic’ clothing amongst exotic landscapes and people e.g. ‘In Living Colour’ shoot in Australian *Marie Claire* magazine, March 2013

235 Ibid.37.
Australia. These large images (80 x 120 cm) are obviously highly staged and have the look of theatrical cast shots or stage shots of moments in a performance called “Australian Race Relations”. Foley uses recognisable symbols which indicate recurring points of inquiry to anyone familiar with her body of work. *Nulla 4 eva I* depicts a racially diverse scene with people we read as of Chinese and European descent posing along the levels and stairs of a Queensland house. At the bottom of these stairs there is what we assume are an Aboriginal man and Chinese young woman leaning in towards one another, presumably courting. On the surface level this image obviously references the 1897 Act and its intention to not only control all aspects of Aboriginal peoples’ lives but also linked this to the control of Chinese populations in Queensland. The 1897 Act conflates Aboriginal and Chinese populations as problem populations at once needing surveillance and management, Aboriginal populations as at once posing a danger and at danger (needing protection) and Chinese populations as a potential danger from outside, as posing a polluting threat to the broader populace. The 1897 Act then was a multicultural act which set up boundaries for the management of interactions between Chinese, Aboriginal and European peoples. Yet Foley’s image in *Nulla 4 eva I* points to the hidden, intercultural histories of Australia’s multicultural history – personal moments which resisted the disciplining gaze of the state.

The other obvious inspiration for this photographic series is the 2005 Cronulla Riots. *Nulla 4eva IV, V, VI and VII* are all shot at Cronulla beach. These images, which either address conflict on the beach through images of white and Indigenous Australians or group shots of Muslim women and Aboriginal men posing on the sand, speaks again to the intercultural relationships and hidden histories so often left out in the anxious (white) media accounts of the Cronulla Riots. The reportage on the days following the Riots focused on whether or not the conflict on this day, which was centred around who had rights to belonging and access to
the beach\textsuperscript{236}, could be classified as a race riot\textsuperscript{237} highlighting a common anxiety with the idea that Australia might be a ‘racist’ country (that is, that racism may be structurally embedded in Australian culture). Then Prime Minister, John Howard, famously disavowed the role that racism had to play in the attacks at Cronulla beach\textsuperscript{238}. In the public discourse about the Riots it is clear that race and racism (and its visibility) are the anxious centre.

It can be argued, as Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Fiona Nicoll do, that the Cronulla Riots were a (re)performance of patriarchal white sovereignty, an act of (re)claiming possession.\textsuperscript{239} By violently claiming the beach as native (‘We grew here’) white Australians attempted to erase all original assertions of sovereignty that Dharawal people have. The function of this is to relegate ‘authentic’ Aboriginality to the ‘outback’ (read: relegate Aboriginality to the black body who speaks language, performs ceremony and is not involved in broader political discourse).\textsuperscript{240} This at once resets the black-white body binary in that markers of ‘authentic’ blackness are reinscribed while those that can negotiate belonging in the field of national power are those with varying degrees of access to whiteness. This functioning of whiteness ascribing blackness embodied in the Cronulla Riots also silences histories of resistance, warfare and challenges to (white) State sovereignty. It silences the realm of the intercultural and the intersubjective. Addressing this dynamic is the impetus for Fiona Foley’s challenge in her \textit{Nulla 4 eva} series.

\textsuperscript{238} With placards and slogans being thrown around such as ‘We grew here: you flew here’, ‘We’re full fuck off’ ‘Respect locals or piss off and ‘100% Aussie Pride’ (as quoted in Moreton-Robinson and Nicoll: 2006, 153).


\textsuperscript{239} See Howard’s comments in the Sydney Morning Herald’s piece, Dec 12 2005, where he states “I do not accept that there is underlying racism in this country...I think yesterday was fuelled by the always explosive combination of a large number of people at the weekend and a large amount of alcohol” (http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/pm-refuses-to-use-racist-tag/2005/12/12/1134235985480.html?page=2).


\textsuperscript{240} \textit{Ibid.} 157.
These photographs are significant in the way they interrupt this binary logic of colonialism through the theatrical performance of an ulterior colonial narrative. Each of these images is highly staged and this not only makes the images uncomfortable to look at but also perplexing. They seem at once familiar and easily readable (echoing the readability of stereotypes) while also disturbing as though there is something not quite ‘right’ with the narrative they perform. Fiona Foley does not simply represent historic events key in the negotiation of racism and nationalism but she also mimics the possessive logic of such events. She forces us to consider the performative logic of our looking and deciphering, asking us to consider what desires we are reading onto these images.

*Nulla 4 eva IV* is exemplary in terms of this dynamic. It references not only the Cronulla Riots through the symbolism of racialised conflict on Cronulla beach but also the contested nature of settlement (keeping in mind that Cronulla is adjacent to Kurnell, the site of Cook’s landing on 29th April, 1770 and also the site where his landing was opposed by Dharawal peoples). This image clearly references ideas of contested territory and the nature of possession with towels printed with Aboriginal and Australian flags laying claim to opposing sides of the beach and the clearly antagonistic interaction going on between the Aboriginal and Australian performers. Not only does Foley introduce ideas of resistance to this encounter on the beach but she mimics the (troubled) performativity of laying claim to territory. As Henry Reynolds demonstrates, the principle of possession in international law required that the party who laid claim to possession were required to be both physically present on land and demonstrate a ‘will to land’, that is a determination to exploit the land to their interests.241 This requires that those who lay claim to possession must perform the principles of possession.242 These performances are reiterated over and over again in

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242 The Native Title claims process, which requires claimants to provide evidence of ongoing presence and unbroken cultural practice on the piece of land being claimed, is a contemporary example of these principles of possession being translated into common law.
everyday interactions and in the structures of the state which reinstate the logic of colonialism.\textsuperscript{243} The events at Cronulla on Dec 11 2005 perform this logic through embodied significations of possession and iterations of patriarchal white sovereignty on and through the bodies of the rioters.\textsuperscript{244}

The large format figurative tableaux and intentionally staged feel of \textit{Nulla eva IV} references the legacy of Enlightenment era history painting and etching, an artistic moment which coincides with the colonisation of Australia. The Enlightenment, dubbed the ‘age of reason’ and characterised by a focus on Aristotelian logic, led to what can be broadly generalised as a rejection of the church, religious superstition and the inherited privilege of aristocracy following the Protestant Reformation\textsuperscript{245,246}. Exemplary of the aesthetics of this period are the history paintings and etchings of Jacques-Louis David (developing his then controversial artistic style and popular following in the 1780’s) who effectively becomes Napoleon’s court propaganda painter in the 1790’s following the French Revolution.\textsuperscript{247} David created grand scale narratives, drawing upon heroic figures and champions of Greco-Roman mythologies to imagine the deeds of Napoleon as “heroic self-sacrifice and service to the nation, that is, as a quality distinct from the existing structure of privilege”.\textsuperscript{248} This neo-classical imagery is typical of Enlightenment imagery and employs the rational, ‘universal’ laws of mathematics and proportion to represent the events and new worlds which imperialist, Enlightenment


\textsuperscript{244} Moreton-Robinson and Nicoll, \textit{op.cit.} 153.

\textsuperscript{245} Charles Loring Brace, “\textit{Race} is a four letter word: the genesis of the concept”, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). 22.


societies are exploring. The imagery of the Enlightenment was not without tensions and it negotiates the emotive style of Romanticism. The references to Ancient Greece and Rome in Enlightenment history painting are evoked in a nostalgic tone, remembering these societies as ‘other’ to be retold in ambiguous and multiple aesthetic narratives. Thus there is an inherent tension between the emotional and the rational at the heart of the aesthetics of the Enlightenment.

This aesthetic tension comes through when we consider the representations of Aboriginal bodies by early colonial explorers. As Shino Konishi explains, the recordings and evaluations of Aboriginal men were often overtly made through comparisons with the bodies, capabilities and personalities of the European explorers themselves. These comparisons were, however, not necessarily negative. She traces in her research the often involved, embodied negotiations between the ways that European explorers understood themselves in relation to these other bodies. Taking into consideration these tensions we can then read a typical Enlightenment representation of Aboriginal bodies, such as Thomas Medland’s etching *Natives of Botany Bay* (1755-1822) which pictures Aboriginal male figures in the style of Greco-Roman statues, as at once an objectification of Aboriginal men within the ‘noble savage’ discourse, as well as an objectification troubled by nostalgic tensions. These tensions come through in the framing of Aboriginal men’s bodies within the aesthetics of Greek and Roman rationalism which imperial Britain modelled itself upon. In this there is a nostalgic identification with the Aboriginal male figures that is an underlying tension in this image. In *Nulla 4 eva IV* Fiona Foley references such large format figurative tableaux’s of Enlightenment imagery in order to exploit the tensions in objectification/identification that underlie this aesthetic format. Foley uses the highly staged nature of her shots to point to the

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251 Konishi, *op.cit.* 5
way in which we read these images and reinstate racialised scripts of nationhood in them in order to stabilise our own invisibly raced subjectivities. *Nulla 4 eva IV* in its composition reminds us of Enlightenment tableaux images, and in particular its reference to conflict on the beach is reminiscent of John Cleveley’s *The Death of Captain Cook* (1784).

Fig. 4: Fiona Foley, *Nulla 4 eva IV*, 2009, ultrachrome print on Hahnemühle paper, 80 x 120cm, Niagara Galleries Victoria.

Foley, however, chooses to subvert this traditional composition of the ‘coloniser meeting the natives’ scene by staging an anticolonial narrative. She chooses her set (Cronulla beach with the pavilion and the beach framing the scene on either side), props (a towel, a beach ball), and arranges her characters (9 men in total with fingers pointed at one another- 7 men on ‘stage left’ surrounding the Aboriginal flag beach towel; ‘two men’ on stage right next to the Australian flag ball and towel; and a figure in a niqab in between these two conflicting groups) in a reversal of the dynamics of Cleveley’s 1784 image. This is obviously a narrative about contested land and contested relationships, about claiming your patch of sand. It draws on the symbolism of flags, beach, Islamic dress, and Cronulla to weave a story about the
contestation of claims to land through racialised conflict, a recurring theme from the moment of first British contact in 1770 to contemporary Australia. This is a narrative contrary to the mainstream tale of settlement as peaceful and without resistance, and it ties the original myth of peaceful ‘conquest’ into a story which is on a continuum with the possessive logic of contemporary performances of whiteness-as-desiring-sovereignty seen through contemporary displays of racialised conflict such as the Cronulla Riots.

It is the way in which we are forced to act and read the ‘stage’ which makes this photograph more effective in interrupting whiteness than the anti-colonial narrative it represents. This image is effective because it implicates us, the viewers, in the scene rather than positioning us outside of it. In effect we become actors rather than viewers. This is initiated by Fiona Foley creating this scene as a narrative that draws and relies upon symbols, texts and narratives of colonialism in Australia to be legible. In forcing us to read these through the lens of a decolonising spectacle we not only are made aware of the reliance that the binary logic of white colonialism has with its other (Indigenous blackness) but that this is a performative relationship, it is made and remade through the circulation of discursive norms that are read, and through this reading, normalised. Foley in *Nulla 4 eva IV* mimics the performative logic of racialisation so that we are made consciously aware of the way we are reading this text because it is not the narrative we know. This act of reading-as-meaning-making undermines the logic of colonialism as a definite act but rather shows the way it works, as reliant on performative episodes in order to create “a nexus of power and discourse that repeats or mimes the discursive regimes of power”. Thus the image makes us aware of the performativity of our reading of texts in the project of colonialism (racialising others through the binary of black-white). This awareness implicates us in this image and the broader power dynamics it mimics. It is the *reading* of a text which reinstates logics of power, not the text.

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itself. In the reading we are implicated in the circulation and normalisation of the white-black binary and the political, historical and social consequences of this binary. Hence, by making us aware of our reading through the momentary disruption of the (sub)conscious narrative of colonialism, the narrative of *Nulla 4 eva* disrupts the invisibility of the process of our performative readings of whiteness and the imbrication of this performance in the colonial project. We are actors in this scene of *Nulla 4 eva IV* implicated in how it plays out, the story it tells. This turn makes the power of whiteness visible, if only momentarily. It offers a place for us to read whiteness imperfectly. Foley further exploits the role of performativity in the gaze of the (white) viewer by the insertion of her (covered) body into these scenes of race and power on the beach.

**Bodies at the Beach**

*This [Australian] beach is both the original scene of invasion and the ultimate border, a site of ongoing racial demarcation and exclusion, as of endless vigilance and fear.*

Fiona Foley’s references in her *Nulla 4 eva* series to the Cronulla Riots and the beach more generally tap into the social semiotics of the beach in the Australian national imagination. While these references are easily accessible in this series of images I argue it is how she ties together narratives of beaches and bodies with her own (invisible) body which works to interrupt the way whiteness reinforces the Australian national field of power. In particular, Foley draws out the intersections between race, gender and skin to comment on socio-historical narratives of otherness and reposition her audience in relation to herself.

The beach is a significant cultural site in the Australian national imagination. As the above quote from Suvendrini Perera suggests, the beach is a site invested in the political and

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historical nature of the state, a physical and imagined site where the colonial logic of possession is staged and replayed.\textsuperscript{254} The Australian beach as a semiotic text is almost overloaded with potential meanings, arising in part from the beach as an anomalous and ambivalent space.\textsuperscript{255} The beach, as neither land or sea, city or ‘nature’ is not only an ambivalent space but is located in a contested history as the physical site of settlement/invasion and the imagined site of our national borders, the place where the threat of invasion is repeated over and over again in the possessive logic of colonisation.\textsuperscript{256} This beach logic is played out through the bodies that inhabit and, more importantly, those that do not inhabit the beach.

The idealised national beach body is gendered, racialised and classed. As Richard White traces, the figure of the beach lifesaver as national hero arose in the 1930’s, with “a phalanx of lifesavers”\textsuperscript{257} finishing the ‘March to Nationhood’ parade in the 1938 sesquicentenary celebrations in Sydney. This new formation of Australian nationhood was an idealised type of image with its roots in traditional Australian mythologies of nationhood: “[…] the sun bronzed physique, the masculinity, the cult of mateship, the military associations, the hedonism and the wholesomeness of the beach.”\textsuperscript{258}

The national type was exclusively masculine with women generally excluded from surf clubs until the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century. In the image of Australia on the beach women’s roles were to “beautify Australia’s beaches rather than make them safe”.\textsuperscript{259} Although there are now exceptions to masculinist beach cultures, such as female surfers and lifesavers, the position occupied by women on the Australian beach in our national imagination is very much as tanned (white), bikini clad objects of beauty playing in the sand (think Lara Bingle in

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Loc.cit.}
\footnote{John Fiske, Bob Hodge, and Graeme Turner. \textit{Myths of Oz: reading Australian popular culture}. (Sydney: Allen and Unwin), 54,59.}
\footnote{Perera, \textit{op.cit.} 138.}
\footnote{Loc.cit.}
\footnote{Loc.cit.}
\end{footnotes}
Australian tourism ads). Female bodies that are non-white (or too white), too-large, too
covered or too old do not fit this idealised female counterpart to the ‘Aussie male lifesaver’.
The sexualised status if women’s bodies as the complementary counterparts of the lifesaver
aligns with Australian beach being a liminal zone for female nudity where it is acceptable for
women to sunbake topless, to expose sexualised parts of their body in the pursuit of an even
tan the beach, notably, being the only public space in which this is normalised. It is
acceptable also for women’s bodies to be looked at by the male gaze on the beach, although
there are racialised limits to who can look and how. 260
Skin and colour play an important role on the Australian beach in demarcating racialised and
classed borders of belonging. Skin colour on the beach can be a site of racial anxiety as the
possibility of ‘passing’ arises. A tan is a commodifiable health object, the sign of leisure time
and holiday: “healthy skin is wealthy skin”. 261 Tanned skin, as a choice of adornment is
considered proper and perfectible, a mask that can be taken on or off as opposed to black
skin, genetically darker skin tones, which are not a choice. 262 263 The colour of tanned skin
signifies that the subject is essentially white and that the brownness of tanned skin is a
“detachable signifier” rather than fixed blackness which threatens to infect white skin. 264
Tanned skin intersects with racial dynamics and the above discussed gendered and sexualised
positioning of subjects on the beach. Ahmed argues that the function of the tan is to

260 See Judy Lattas “ ‘Bikini vs. Burqa’ in contemporary Australia: a feminist response to the Cronulla riots” in
(Sydney: Institute of Criminology Press) 2009. This article is an interesting discussion of the racialised
dynamics between white women and racially othered men (predominantly Lebanese men) in sexualised
encounters on the beach. While I have issues with this paper which are not relevant to this discussion, it is
interesting to note the discussion on pages 209-210 which addresses the differences in social acceptability
between the ‘come-ons’ of ‘Aussie’ and Lebanese men.
261 Ahmed, op.cit. 58.
262 Loc.cit.
263 Sara Ahmed, “ ‘She’ll Wake Up One of These Days and Find She’es Turned into a Nigger’: Passing through
264 See the discussion of medical terminology in Ahmed, “Animated Borders”, op.cit. In this article Ahmed
discusses the value laden descriptions in medical research as to how skin acquires colour as infection of
pigmentation. In these descriptions skin “is seen to hold the ‘truth’ of the subjects identity” (56) yet this truth
when reading white bodies is unstable, constantly at risk from infection and thus the borders of white skin are
constantly in need of protection.
demarcate the white female body from the black, in that a white female’s tan, as a choice and an eroticised surface, means that her tanned skin is “a surface which is detached from Being”.\(^{265}\) In contrast the skin of women deemed as black (fixed, seemingly without choice over the colour of their skin) is used to fix the truth of her Being: “being and looking [or being looked at] cannot be separated”.\(^{266}\) This skin is at once fetishised and sexualised in its exoticism (its deviation from the invisible norm of whiteness) while also being potentially dangerous, hyper-sexual and infecting.\(^{267}\) The white tan serves to further fix this other blackness by making the signifier of dark skin ‘safe’ in that it is a conscience and transient choice to take on the exoticised signifier of the other, “the white woman can flirt with ‘blackness’ as a signifier of sex without becoming Black”.\(^{268}\) Yet this dynamic, which serves to reinstate the black-white binary, is inherently flawed. The blackness of skin relies upon the power of an outside gaze, the reading and assigning of one’s skin as black (or the dismissal of the threat of black skin as merely a tan).\(^{269}\) There is a gap then between seeing and being which Ahmed deems a crisis, and this crisis has the potential to be exploited by non-white others passing as tanned which involves “both fixation and the impossibility of fixation determined through encounters between others”.\(^{270}\) This skin crisis, in which the logic of colonialism relies upon its ability to look, to gaze, to possess through knowing (in which looking at and ‘knowing’ black skins also become a metaphor for possessing land) is exploited by Fiona Foley in her insertion of herself onto the Cronulla beachscape and her donning of a niqab in the \textit{Nulla 4 eva} series.

Foley creates a crisis point in her representation of self. She chooses to depict Cronulla as a multicultural landscape, a space where the performances of colonial logic are played out (as

\(^{265}\) Ahmed, “‘She’ll Wake Up”, \textit{op.cit.} 62. Emphasis removed.
\(^{266}\) \textit{Ibid.} 62.
\(^{267}\) \textit{Ibid.} 61.
\(^{268}\) \textit{Ibid.} 61. Emphasis added.
\(^{269}\) \textit{Ibid.} 63.
\(^{270}\) Ahmed, “Animated Borders” \textit{op.cit.} 96.
in *Nulla 4eva IV* as a form of disturbed theatre. In this performance the boundaries of whiteness are troubled and throwbacks to policies of the past (such as the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* (Qld) 1897) are present, rupturing the historical narrative of Australia as a nation of progress. She questions these real and imagined narratives of national power by making herself an ambivalent visible/invisible figure in the images. In *Nulla 4eva IV* and *V* Fiona Foley is present in the scene as a figure wearing a black niqab. In this curious tactic Foley literally covers her skin, her body, shielding it from our gaze. We may read this figure through the garment covering it, imagining that the figure underneath is a Muslim woman. This semiotic reading is in itself telling in terms of the way in which we read cues of dress as Muslim, fixing ‘Muslim-ness’ to a very particular, reductive and static image. With further research into the composition of the image and finding out that Foley has ‘invisibly’ inserted herself (not placed herself in the image according to the signifiers we expect to read her as) our reading of these images is interrupted. This interruption again works to turn the act of reading back on ourselves – she exploits the crisis point between looking (reading) and being. Foley places limits on her body, manipulates what we can and cannot read onto her body and in some cases may remain ‘hidden’ in these images. She challenges our ability to know and further turns this knowing gaze back on us by manipulating how we read her body by taking on signifiers of other feminine ‘skin’. In this tactic of turning our desires to read and know her body Foley begs the question of us: why is it that we need to read others bodies through racial signifiers and what purpose does this reading serve? In the asking of these questions Foley invites us to read our white-desiring-selves imperfectly.

**Vernon Ah-Kee: reading skin through time**

*There’s this gaze that is constant through all of the subjects because they’re basically in confinement and made to sit. And on some of the communities they’re very much*
under the thumb, or under the heel actually. And so there’s this gaze and you know as
an artist, and as a black fella, and as a critical thinker, I read lots of ideas, and
emotions and connotations into the gaze and I wanted to pursue that. And so I’m
using portraiture and my own family to do that.²⁷¹

Vernon Ah Kee plays with context in his figurative works in order to prompt, interrupt and
complicate the othering gaze. His works explore the gaze of the photographed rather than the
photographer. This reversal of investigation marks not only a challenge to post-colonialism
but is a technique of layering gazes which I argue contains important implications for the
audience (reading the gaze of a subject rendered through the gaze of the artist). Here I wish to
examine the intersection of gazes evident in Ah Kee’s portraiture and its implications.

Ah Kee identifies the gaze as both a significant personal and intellectual pursuit in his works
and a tool which he uses to affect his audience in order to alter public perceptions of the
contemporary view of Aboriginal people. Ah Kee describes the particular gaze he
interrogates as the gaze that comes about from the mindset of “no pride, no courage”, a
mindset he sees as enabled by the colonial relationship.²⁷² Although much has been written
about the dynamics of the gaze and intersections of gazes, what is significant with Ah Kee’s
portraiture is firstly the appropriation of the gaze of his subjects from early twentieth century
scientific photography and the effect/affect of the gazes in these portraits. I will be
discussing this in relation to three of Ah Kee’s portraiture shows, the 2004 series Fantasies
of the Good acquired by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney in 2006; the triptych

mythread 2007 as part of the *Culture Warriors* inaugural Australian Indigenous Art Triennial in 2007 and the *Transforming Tindale* show at the State Library of Queensland which includes the series *neither pride nor courage* (2006) and the *Annie Ah Sam* (2008) portraits. All of these shows derive inspiration from the ethnographic photography of Norman Tindale and collections of his work held in Brisbane’s John Oxley library. Tindale, working in the 1920’s, made a first expedition to the central Cape York region to collect artifacts and take pictures of Aboriginal peoples as part of a long-term project (completed in 1974) to map the boundaries and peoples of this region and present a cartographic representation of Indigenous nations and language groups. In a later expedition (1930s) to reserves in this area, such as Yarrabah and Palm Island, Tindale in collaboration with Joseph Birdsell, was concerned with documenting the effects of miscegenation. This anthropological study was conducted through the collection of staged ‘mug shot’ centre and profile portraits of Aboriginal subjects, accompanied by identification numbers and record cards.

This body of scientific photography was intended to condense Aboriginal subjects to the information on their record cards and to allow what was considered a ‘dying race’ to be studied for generations. As Benjamin Smith notes, this period of the advent of field photography and modern anthropology marks the moment when anthropology is not only documenting the remnants of ‘dying races’ that were examples of “earlier stages of European [racial] development” but was developing towards a photography and anthropology concerned with documenting, articulating and defining the difference of the other in order to set European (white) societies apart. The images of Aboriginal otherness, such as Tindale’s photographs, were particularly significant to the visual culture of Australian whiteness in this

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period. The colonies in Australia from the mid-1800s were reacting to debates from Britain that the rise of population in Australia from convict and Irish roots could have led to a separate, inferior, race of people. These debates corresponded to scientific studies to prove that British convicts were descendants from a degenerate race. In order to prove their whiteness we see a preoccupation with the early colonies studying the ‘degeneration’ of Aboriginal people on the evolutionary ladder (the blackness of Aboriginal people) in order to contrast and prove the modernity of Australia.

Ethnographic photography was key in this pursuit. Popularity rose for photographers such as J.W Lindt who shot ambient, staged photographs of ‘authentic’ Aboriginal people in recreations of their ‘natural’ habitat. Such images depict Aboriginal peoples in states of half-naked docility as though they were static figures in a museum diorama. This period of ‘scientific’ ethnographic photography, then, is particularly interesting to us as it marks an historical moment in the scientific definition of blackness in Australia’s visual history. It marks a period where there is not just fascination with Aboriginal people as scientific curiosities but a period of intense anxiety and scrutiny of Aboriginal bodies.

Ah Kee references this history when he appropriates the Tindale images of his great-grandmother, great-grandfather and grandfather in his drawn portraits. The effectiveness of these portraits in disrupting this history is in the way they enable a ‘third category’ of representation. This ‘third category’ is described by Marcia Langton as the space where constructions of Aboriginality (and conversely constructions of whiteness) are generated through dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjects, where “the individuals involved will test imagined models of the other, repeatedly adjusting the models as the

277 Ibid.135.
responses are processed, to find some satisfactory way of comprehending the other”. While I recognise the problematic nature of considering Tindale’s photographs as an equitable space where the Indigenous subjects have power to affect or negotiate the intention or reception of the image, I also think it would be amiss to discount the agency of the subjects in these photographs and the subsequently the potential for these photographs to represent and initiate dialogue. This potential comes from these photographs as intersubjective spaces. Smith figures the intersubjective potential of these photographs as such:

But photography can also be produced and circulate from intersubjective positions based in more equitable relationships. In many cases, anthropologists' photographs cannot be understood merely as isolated images, abstracted from their subjects and the scene of their production, and thus an aspect of an objectifying and exoticizing body of practice. Even those photographs whose original intentions have become increasingly questionable have remained embedded in complex relationships with the families of those pictured and with the discipline of anthropology. The uses to which such photographs have been put highlight the need for more sophisticated inquiries into the production, dissemination, and meaning of photographic images as social things, and as things that themselves produce agency-like effects.

It is significant here that Smith identifies the need to inquire into the uses of photographs as ‘social things’ with ‘agency-like effects’. There is a large body of work that discusses the contemporary appropriation and repatriation of colonial photography in Australia by Indigenous peoples and communities and the new meanings and social currency these images have in such contexts. Jane Lydon argues that Indigenous photographic practices create “a tangible, performative link between the past and present [...] challenge colonial histories,

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279 Langton, ‘Well I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television’, op. cit. 35.
280 Smith, “Images, selves, and the visual record”, op. cit. 23.
reified definitions of Aboriginality, and assert survival in the present.”  

Ah Kee’s appropriation of Tindale’s scientific photographic record and claim to these as his genealogy through his work is a significant example of this.

Ah Kee’s first portraiture show, *Fantasies of the Good* shown at Milani Galleries, is the beginning of his inquiry into the possibilities and limitations of this gaze. Robert Leonard writes that these works came out of Ah Kee thinking about photographs he remembers as being in his grandmother’s purse. These were reproductions of Tindale photographs of her husband (Mick Miller) and mother (Annie Ah Sam). These photographs, as well as another Tindale image of Ah Kee’s great-grandfather George Sibley, are key inspirations for many of the works in Ah Kee’s catalogue which incorporate portraiture (e.g. the surfboards in *Cant Chant* 2007; the *What is an Aborigine?* installation in the 2008 Biennale of Sydney). The *Fantasies of the Good* show focuses on an investigation into the male gaze with 13 charcoal portraits each 102 x 67.5 cm of members of Ah Kee’s family. While each of these portraits is drawn from a photograph only two of them use Tindale images (those of Ah Kee’s great-grandfather and grandfather). However, in preparing his subjects for the photograph Ah Kee tells them to adopt a mindset of ‘no pride, no courage’ in recreating the manner and position subjects who were photographed by

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Tindale might have been in from the psychological effects of mission control. He asks his subjects to sit like this in order to study the physical manifestation of this condition entrenched through the experience of his forebears of a total system of control, punitive discipline, numeric classification and definition as an inmate on missions such as Palm Island. While this is the intention that Ah Kee brings to the photographs he works from, what is interesting is the effect of the portraits he draws. One notable aspect of the effects of his portraits is their size. By increasing the size of the images (in comparison to the original photographs) in his reproductions Ah Kee shifts the subject-object relations between the work and the viewer. These are no longer images that can be taken in with one look, but must be negotiated in their size. Ah Kee’s sketching practice also works to shift the power relations of colonial photography. These meticulously rendered sketches resist the scientific gaze of Tindale’s ethnographic photography through their composition. All of these portraits are intentionally off-centre and rather than the criminal mug-shot style of Tindale’s photographs, where the focus of the shot is the physiognomy of the subject, Ah Kee’s realist portraits draw attention to the eyes of the subject through a cropping of the image to the head and torso. The majority of the detail in these sketches is concentrated on the eyes. In the short documentary Vernon (2008, dir. A. Barnes) Ah Kee describes his process in creating one of these portraits whereby, working from a photograph, he begins the drawing with the eyes of the subject and focuses the detail of his sketches on this feature. He describes the intent of this practice as such:

*Primarily drawn in charcoal, the portraits are a realisation of my efforts to establish a re-visioning of the Aborigine as a beautiful and worthy subject full of depth and complexity. The Aborigine is a worthy subject to be sure, but my intention is to strip*  

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away from the image any of the romantic and exoticised notions of primitivism, virtue and most importantly, the decorative stone-age.  

However, Robert Leonard, in discussing this series of works, contests the achievement of Ah Kee’s intention to strip the images of his ancestors and relatives of primitivism by arguing that his portraits are “tainted by association with the Tindale images, as if Aborigines today - even his young son - might still be heirs to old attitudes; imprisoned by them.” While I agree that the association of these portraits to the Tindale images is inescapable I disagree that this relationship is as simple as Leonard suggests or that it detracts from Ah Kee’s intention to represent complex, human characters. There is a much more complex relationship between the Tindale photographs and the portraits in Fantasies of the Good. This complexity comes from the ambivalent relationship of Ah Kee to the photographs he is working from and the ambiguity of colonial photography, derived from its potential as a space of intersubjectivity, in the contemporary Australian (post)colonial context more generally. He exploits this ambiguity and ambivalence in order to disrupt the reading of these images through normative white colonial narratives of desire.

For many Indigenous people photographs provide evidence and certainty of pasts which have been left out of colonial histories and in this way they are not only incredibly significant personally but also challenge monolithic histories of Australia by recording “a history of engagement, of involvement and of ancestry in place”. Jane Lydon describes photographs as “technologies of Indigenous memory” which not only construct the past in the present but do so in a performative manner, thus the photographs are social actors. That is,

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285 Leonard, op. cit. 8.
287 Lydon, op. cit. 174.
288 Ibid. 180.
photographs are more than aesthetic or archival objects but rather photographs create histories, memories and connect people to kin and ancestors even when official histories do not record these memories. This is illustrated in this quote from Ah Kee discussing the first time he viewed the Tindale images of his great-grandmother, Annie Sibley:

*I could see how my mum looks like her, but she is still a mystery to me. I don’t know what she looks like when she moves, don’t know what gestures she has. I can make guesses from looking at my mother, but they are only guesses. What her hair is really like or how big she actually is or anything like that. Looking at the scan from Adelaide the thing that really comes to the front of my mind is that there are flowers on her dress, that is what I wanted to tell my cousins straight away. In this image there are flowers on her dress. Then I started thinking because we are looking at black and white, I started thinking well what colour are the flowers?*

This quote demonstrates the photograph as a social actor as Ah Kee engages with it not only as an archival object but also as an image proving his genealogy and a history of embodied family likeness (considering the likeness of the Annie to his mother) as well as being moved to imagine the memory of his great-grandmother differently, prompted by the discovery of a floral print on her dress. This discovery personalises the coldness of the scientific shot of Annie, giving hints of a memory of her that is not spoken of by Tindale’s record card but asserted through her agency as a subject in this image. And it prompts Ah Kee to ask questions about the woman beyond the black and white image. What is particularly interesting about this is that there is a coupling for Ah Kee between the affirmation of genealogical history that the Tindale image provides and the sense of ambivalence these images bring up. Ah Kee can only *imagine* the wholeness of his great-grandmothers body, her movements, gestures and features. Although the affirmation of genealogical likeness and

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links can inform this imagining of memory there is still a sense of loss. These photographs at once produce memories and reinforce the unofficial family histories that they depict while they also are accompanied by a sense of lack or loss in that they are not the whole story, there are gaps in the histories they attest to and that some details of the stories they tell will remain unknown. There are layers to the gaps within the histories that these images tell- for while there are gaps in Ah Kee’s recollection of his family history, so too are there gaps for the white audience in reading his reclaiming of this history. We cannot imagine how it feels like for Ah Kee to look at this image, knowing the historical context it was produced in and how Ah Kee experiences the intergenerational effects of this context. We cannot know the stories that come to his mind when he looks at these images or the embodied emotions that they evoke for him. While his statements about the images and his interpretation of them through his sketched portraits invite us to engage in dialogue with him and his relationship to the Tindale images, there are limits placed on what we can know. These layers of ambivalence in the Tindale photographs mean that they become social actors, they negotiate between the gaps in our, Ah Kee’s and their own vision. What is particularly interesting is the way in which Ah Kee engages with the ambivalent gaps in these images and extends the function such gaps can play as a site of social relation in his sketches.

The *Transforming Tindale* exhibition (6 September- 9 December 2012) at the State Library of Queensland is an important example of Ah Kee’s engagement with the colonial photograph as a social actor. Its significance is not only the images that are displayed but the setting of this exhibition. The State Library of Queensland, as a state institution for collections of books, archival material and artefacts is in itself a history making institution. Significantly it also houses art objects which attest to hidden Indigenous histories of the state of Queensland, namely Fiona Foley’s installation work *Black Opium* commissioned by the Library in 2006 and installed in 2009. This work speaks to the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the...*
Sale of Opium Act (1897) and the system of ‘protective’ control, discipline and discrimination this Act engendered. Thus, the State Library as a setting for an exhibition of art objects already brings with it particular contexts in which these objects will be read and will speak to themes of history, contestation and colonisation. Therefore the appreciation of Ah Kee’s portraits is already received firstly through critical thematic readings of their meanings and secondly as aesthetic objects. It also is significant to consider the different and perhaps wider reception these portraits might have in this display versus a display in a smaller gallery space. The reading of this show as a critical engagement with colonial history is further reinforced by the display of the original Tindale images with Ah Kee’s sketched portraits. Whereas other shows of his portraiture drew on Tindale photographs (such as the Fantasies of the Good show discussed below) the link between the images needed to be sought beyond the art object. However, in displaying Ah Kee’s Annie Ah Sam (2008) and neither pride nor courage (2006) portraits with the corresponding original Tindale images there are very clear narratives of the speaking of hidden histories, repatriation and the transformation of colonial histories being made.

This conceptualisation of the significance of photographs to contemporary Indigenous people corresponds well with the title of Ah Kee’s Fantasies of the Good show. In this title Ah Kee questions Australian mythologies of nationhood (a recurring theme in his catalogue). Speaking of this series he says:

Australia, as a country, as an idea, as an ideal, as a social-political system, thinks of and believes itself, despite its history of racism and exclusion, to be essentially good; I of course disagree. These drawings and what they represent are my evidence.

On an obvious level Ah Kee is contesting the so-called “three cheers” approach to Australian history and identity and prompting audiences to consider the racial violence of its

colonial history. However, the acts of contestation that these works take up are significant as they assert that these highly emotive concepts (Aboriginality, Australia, Australian history and identity) are not unproblematic. They are highly charged and dynamic and their meanings are socially negotiated and reassessed according to intersubjective and intertextual encounters. Ah Kee draws on the embodied nature of the gaze of his subjects and himself as an artist to draw attention in turn to our own experience of embodied gazing at these images of people with personality, agency and their own stories. Thus the intersection of embodied gazes is significant in understanding the potential of this series and the way that Ah Kee exploits it.

While much has been written about the politics of gazes and there is a growing body of literature that discusses the differing experiences (psychological, phenomenological, social) for what it means for colonised people to re-look at colonial imagery little has been written about the embodied nature of gazing through a lens of whiteness. The question we should ask is, how can we complicate a politics of looking by thinking about how it feels to look at photographs (and perhaps be looked at in return) of Indigenous people as a non-Indigenous person who inhabits the desires of whiteness? Gazing and (being gazed at) is an experience felt in the body and with physical affects and possibilities for the experience of “intimacy, pleasure, scrutiny, confrontation, and power”.

From these ideas I will now talk about the affective experience of looking at Ah Kee’s portraiture as an investigation of the bodily manifestation of the fixing white gaze and, in turn, consider how this prompts us to negotiate our own white bodily schemas. In doing so I will consider specifically how Ah Kee’s portraiture uses historical links with fraught ‘scientific’ photography to create spaces of

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293 See for example the earlier references from Macdonald and Lydon.

embodied intimacy and discomfort with his viewers and think through how this might interrupt schemas of whiteness. This is done primarily through his focus on the gaze of his subjects and the way that his practice focuses on the eyes of his subjects.

It is clear that there is more than one gaze present in any photographic image. In fact Lutz and Collins\(^\text{295}\) identify 7 different gazes in their analysis of images of peoples in the *National Geographic* magazine. This is complicated further in the case of Ah Kee’s portraiture by the appropriation of a photograph by gaze of the artist (an 8\(^{\text{th}}\) gaze). Christopher Pinney, in examining contemporary Indian and African portraiture, makes a case for these practices of appropriating the gazes of photographs as “visual decolonisation” through a “vernacular modernism”.\(^\text{296}\) As Pinney argues, postcolonial photographic practices refute the schemata of colonial photography which sought to fix the identities of its subjects through photographic surfaces of “rationality, encoded with signifiers of time and place, creating knowledges of these people and thus representing them as objects of “chronotopic certainties”.\(^\text{297}\) Tindale’s photography is exemplary of this in its explicit use of information cards to place the subjects within a place and time as well as his presentation of subjects through measured and centred front and side portraiture against clean, white backdrops in order to emphasis their physical features. Pinney argues that in postcolonial appropriations of colonial visual practices such as photography, subaltern artists layer up the surface of images, creating opaque surfaces and photographs that are concerned with the image not as a picture of the world, such as is the case with colonial Orientalising photography. Instead these postcolonial images are preoccupied with the materiality of the surface, a move that refuses the rationality of colonially encoded images, and engages the viewer in embodied, almost tactile

\(^{295}\) *Loc.cit.*
relationships. This surfacism is present in Ah Kee’s appropriation of the Tindale images, as he builds detail by translating these images through the materiality of patterns of charcoal strokes. This build-up of the textuality of Ah Kee’s portraits mirrors the way that he layers contexts and gazes, through the themes of his portrait works. In this technique his practice bridges temporal, spatial and genealogical gaps as can be seen in the Fantasies of the Good series. These portraits not only liberate their subjects from the 2-dimensionality of the ‘mug-shot’ photograph by presenting textured, variable, individual portraits in which we know each line has been etched out by the artist’s hand, but they are also faces that look out at us through time and space as they are re-presentations of historical photographs.

It is interesting to note that in Ah Kee’s portraits the build-up of the textured surfaces is underwritten with points of clarity focused on the eyes of the photographed/sketched subject. Pinney identifies this technique as a central feature of postcolonial images, eyes being “crucial markers of the images ability to reciprocate the look of the viewer: eyes become the fulcrum of the relationship between the picture and the world outside it”. The focus on the eyes of such photographs becomes a point with which to focus the materiality of the image— it is about drawing attention to the relation between the images physical and historical surface and the viewer. As noted earlier, it is the eyes that are the beginning and focus points in Ah Kee’s portraiture practice as he interrogates the nature of the embodied affect of colonialism on the Aboriginal male subject. In drawing our attention to the eyes Ah Kee is putting us in a relational space with himself and his subjects and asking us to consider the relationships that Australian ‘fantasies of the good’ engender. How do we feel when we look at these subject’s faces? What does this feeling prompt us to think? Do we look or do we turn away? And how might this focus on the eyes make us uncomfortable in our position as viewer desiring to fix the identities of the subjects which we gaze at? How might the materiality of the image and

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298 Ibid. 203.
299 Ibid. 218.
the focus on the eyes be drawing us into a relational space in which we are invested, body and mind? How does this focus on the eyes of the subjects of these images interrupt the way in which we read our own desires for whiteness?

The photograph as a “relational object” comes from the interactions between imagery and materiality that allows the viewer a multi-sensory, embodied access to the image which goes beyond encounters limited to the visual. In this sense photographs are like sculptures (a point I will explore further in my discussion of Ah Kee’s Cant Chant show in the next chapter). Ah Kee’s portraiture, which relies upon and draws on photographs to simulate and create images of his own family means that there is a doubling of the relationships that occur when we look at these images. Firstly, there is the relationship, performed by the materiality of the photograph through time and space between Ah Kee and the chemical traces of his family, his history and his roots. This relationship has its own set of implications simultaneously political, historical, personal and emotional which are inaccessible to us. When we view images such as Annie Ah Sam (2008) we are viewing the performance of this relationship translated through the body of Ah Kee as he has rendered these images through and as part of his relationship with the Tindale photographs.

What we see when we look at Annie Ah Sam (2008) or the neither pride nor courage (2006) series is the imprint of the embodied interaction Ah Kee has with the Tindale photographs of Annie Sibley and George Sibley through time and space. This imprint has layers which are hidden to us. What is remarkable about the Transforming Tindale (2012) exhibit is that the original photographs and Ah Kee’s responses to them are shown together and we thus have an intersection of relationships between the artist and the chemical trace of his family; between ourselves and the chemical trace of Annie and George Sibley; between Tindale’s vision, our own vision and Ah Kee’s vision of who these people are; as well as the eyes of the

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Sibley’s who look back at us with their own senses of identity (fully aware of the intentions of this photograph and defying us perhaps to even try to define them).

Fig. 6. Vernon Ah Kee, *Annie Ah Sam (A)*, 2008, acrylic, charcoal and crayon on canvas. 180 x 240 cm, James C. Sorriss Collection, Brisbane.

Fig. 7. Vernon Ah Kee, *mythread*, 2007, synthetic polymer paint, charcoal and conte crayon on canvas, 177 x 720 cm (overall), National Gallery of Australia.
Ah Kee’s technique of building up layers of textuality interrupts our (white) readings of his portraits. Ah Kee points to this as his intention in the triptych *mythread* shown in the *Culture Warriors* show 2007. *mythread* is a series of three meticulously sketched charcoal and polymer paint portraits of Ah Kee and his grandfather, Mick Miller, in the style of Tindale photographs. Unlike other portraiture series however this work does not use museum photographs. Instead Ah Kee appropriates their style and pictures himself as if posing for a Tindale shoot in the first two and focuses on his grandfather’s face for the third. Each of these portraits has the signature Tindale record card included but with important differences. In the first two panels of Ah Kee the cards read ‘ill-like’ and ‘myth-read’ and on the third panel the card declares that Miller is a “WAANJI MAN, Lawn Hill” with a panel reading “Palm Island”. The title and details of these images point to Ah Kee’s purpose to disrupt the myth-making that occurs when we read our white selves in images of Aboriginal people. It is important that Ah Kee links this myth making with the act of reading as not only does it allude to ideas of the fictional nature of such mythologies, but it also focuses us on the act of reading itself. Reading is an embodied process, we do it through our ways of seeing and relating to objects. In pointing out that we create mythologies of Aboriginal peoples as objects through the act of reading Ah Kee locates the audience as embodied readers rather than subjects whose power to read and make meaning is detached and invisible. He forces us to consider ourselves as situated readers and also to question our own taken-for-granted truths. He interrupts our white gaze by forcing us to meet the eyes of those that we read and subsequently objectify into our (white) national mythologies and our white-desiring-subjectivities. This is a myth making which is intergenerational, and just as Ah Kee’s body is linked to the legacy of his grandfather’s so too are our bodies linked to colonial gazes and violent readings of Aboriginal peoples mythologised by our forebears.
Both Fiona Foley and Vernon Ah Kee use their bodies to interrupt the white desires of their audiences through their artistic practice. By highlighting the mechanics of desires-for-blackness in the ‘mythreading’ function of our white gaze these artists pull us back into our embodied selves, disallowing us access to read ourselves onto their bodies. This is also an assertion of the fact that identity has been and is still a battleground where white desires violently assert their interests. Thus the claim that we are ‘post-Aboriginal’ plays right into these interests. The claim to ‘post-Aboriginality’ re-performs the colonial logic of fixing blackness, by assuming the sovereign (white) right to place limits on how Indigenous peoples can identify. Ah Kee and Foley challenge this neo-colonial move in the images discussed above by building layers of textuality and context to assert that there are things we cannot know, cannot define about their experiences, bodies and histories. They bring us into relation with their self-controlled assertions of the sovereign right to claim ‘unreadable’ identities, making visible the violent desires of whiteness.
Chapter Five- Challenging White Desires for Place: Mapping Indigenous Sovereignty Through Language and Memory.

The map is open and connectable in all its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification...It can be drawn on the wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation.\textsuperscript{301}

As much as guns and warships, maps have been the weapons of imperialism\textsuperscript{302}

This chapter is concerned with mapping, colonisation and the interconnections between these in competing claims to sovereignty. Following ideas from the earlier chapter regarding the enactment of claims to sovereignty made through cultural discourse, I will be examining the practices of Fiona Foley and Vernon Ah Kee as challenges to the linguistic and embodied mappings of patriarchal white sovereignty in Australia. The two competing ideas of the function of maps, introduced in the quotes above, will be explored. I will trace the significance of the map to the imperial projects and specifically to colonialism in Australia. My reading conceives of maps as not only geographic documents drawn up by cartographers, but as ways in which we perceive, categorise, demarcate and, importantly, know and relate to space. This reading of the map opens up an understanding of mapping as practiced in a wide array of social, cultural and political ways. This is an idea of a map as a schema of relations between peoples, places and ideas. As such, my definition of a map in this chapter is something which can be “drawn on the wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation”.\textsuperscript{303} Specifically I will be looking at the way that Vernon Ah Kee and Fiona Foley use language, historical memory, physical space and the audience’s


\textsuperscript{303} Deleuze and Guattari, \textit{op.cit.} 12.
(white-desiring) body to map alternate conceptions of the space we call Australia which challenge white reiterations and desires for sovereignty. In order to introduce these themes in contemporary art I will start with a description and discussion of the work of Megan Cope. Cope is a mixed media artist and a Quandamooka woman whose practice explores themes of country, mapping, identity and the power of language in claiming landscape. A recurring theme in Cope’s works is that of exploring the power of maps. In many of her works (see *After the Flood* series, 2009; *Fluid Terrain* 2012; *The Tide is High* 2013) she appropriates military topographical maps from the early 20th century (when Aboriginal peoples were living under Protection Acts, moved from country and Indigenous connection to country was invisible in imaginings of a white Australia) and layers these maps with toponyms of Indigenous place and language group names. She also imagines future topographies by overlaying new watermark boundaries to demonstrate the effect of rises in sea levels. What is significant about Cope’s work is the effect of her use of Indigenous toponyms to contrast the intended purpose of military maps. Military topographical maps, created for the purpose of representing natural and cultural landscapes in order to strategically plan for the use of landscape in the interests of the sovereign, are potent symbols of colonising interests.

The role of mapping and naming of places in the claiming of space is a well-researched area. Tony Birch traces the significance of mapping to the colonial project in Australia, arguing that mapping of areas by early cartographers was key in recommending the colonisation of land. Birch also characterises the practice of mapping as a form of taking possession of land, reducing landscape to something which can be ‘known’ and held in ones hands (literally and metaphorically). The act of naming landscape, of attaching toponyms, is highly significant in legitimising this ownership. What Birch points out as significant in these two dynamics, mapping and naming, is that they legitimise the histories of colonisers, the history of terra

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305 Ibid. 234.
nullius that is so central to the settler psyche. Despite terra nullius becoming legally defunct in Australia post-Mabo (1992) Larissa Behrendt argues that a psychological terra nullius persists in the Australian psyche in that Aboriginal peoples, while being recognised as physically present, are still invisible in the historical, cultural and political spaces of the national consciousness. For example, even in our post-Mabo era, the Native Title claims process serves to contain Indigenous conceptions of country by relying on Eurocentric concepts of property. This containing of Indigenous concepts occurs through the use of maps to measure native title as entitlement to spatial boundaries, rather than expanding the concept of mapping to recognise overlapping and dynamic cultural, economic, social and political connections and relationships to place that are part of the concept of country. The function of such mapping is to maintain the legitimacy of colonial histories in which the sovereignty of the British Crown remains unquestionable. These are histories predicated on making invisible, subsuming and taking possession of the histories of Indigenous peoples and making the landscape an ‘historical fact’. Birch makes a crucial point when he recognises that it is not necessarily in the inclusion of Indigenous toponyms that patriarchal settler whiteness is challenged (as there are many spaces which have Indigenous names). Rather, it is when these names are restored in order to recognise Indigenous histories, that is, when history and language are combined to destabilise the settler conception of Australian space as a historical fact and to open up landscape as a messy, contestable place that the power of reclaiming Indigenous toponyms occurs.

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306 Ibid. 236.
309 See discussion of the dynamics of mapping in the Native Title claims process, and a succinct critique of the Horton Aboriginal Languages Map (1994) and the AUSLIG Land Tenure Map (1994) in terms of how these maps curtail concepts of country and privilege notions of space rather than place in Alexander Reilly, op.cit.
310 Birch, op.cit. 234.
311 Loc.cit.
In her technique layering of toponyms and geomorphologic features (real and imagined) Cope points to multiple perspectives, multiple histories and multiple conceptions of the landscape. She also asserts that these histories, perceptions and conceptions are shared in place, in tangible country, although the ‘truths’ of this country may not be tangible for all of us. Cope’s complications of the ‘truths’ of country open up the debate over who owns the right to name place (i.e. sovereignty), while she also makes available multiple relationships with landscape. She uses maps of familiar landscapes which we might have our own relationships with or be able to imagine ourselves in. She does not erase non-Indigenous toponyms (the signposts for the kinds of imaginings we might have in these landscapes), but rather overlays these with Indigenous place names (symbols of relationships between people, language and communities within place) and her imagining of future geomorphologic change. These are fragile, fluid terrains and there are no historical facts. There is no key to her maps. In so doing she engages in the creation of a new cartography, a cartographic practice which is powerful in its expression of an “assertion of place outside of spatial particularity...resistance to categorisation and direct comparison”.312

Tactics which draw upon the power that comes from naming spaces and reclaiming the sovereign right to do so parallel Indigenous concepts of place as country. Fiona Foley asserts that country exists on physical, political and conceptual planes and that the interactions of these planes in Indigenous art signify the difference between western vertical/vanishing point perspective landscape art and Aboriginal horizontal perspective country art.313 The difference between these two art forms is the difference between a conceptualising of land as space or of land as place. Space is an idea which depends upon the assumption of emptiness, thus in geographical frameworks we would define the boundaries of the space as points where there

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312 Reilly, op.cit. 270.
are no people and objects (‘wide, open spaces’), empty until filled and demarcated. In contrast, place is a concept which privileges the interactions of people, events and practices within and around place to define its form. As such places are dynamic spaces of interrelation. This relates to an Indigenous perspective of landscape as country. Country is multidimensional, a living entity which is at once “lived in and lived with”. This conceptualisation of place contests colonial mapping practices which rely on a narrative of static features, objectively observed. The aim of colonial mapping practices is to attempt to fill space with white narratives in order to claim possession of it and create places of white sovereignty. This aim is visible in (white) Australian landscape painting.

What is important to consider in interpreting landscape art in the Australian context is to read historically specific settler-Indigenous relations within it. We need to consider the forms of representation (or lack of representation) of Indigenous peoples in these images. Gary Lee reads the landscape tradition of art in Australia as a narrative justifying the colonisation of Australia and dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their land. The nineteenth century landscape practice 'Europeanises' the landscape with representations of a tamed and conquered empty land, made serene and pristine, nostalgic and imitating British landscape tradition. In the twentieth century the narrative embedded in landscape art was a picturing of land as part of settler Australia’s heritage, a new land that was now the home of the Australian subject. This subject of this narrative was white, male and intimately linked to the landscape. In examining the historic discourses informing landscape painting Lee asserts that these narratives are an overt strategy of “describing and consolidating cultural hegemony

314 Reilly, op.cit. 256.
316 Ibid.256-257.
319 Lee, op.cit. 105.
320 Loc.cit.
over Australia”. These practices demonstrate the white desires of colonists, desires which are performatively read onto the landscape through visual arts practices.

Nicholas Thomas consolidates this view in his examination of the Heidelberg school of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century’s. This school of landscape painting (the main figures being Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts, Frederick McCubbin and Charles Conder) was influential in shaping narratives of Australian national identity based in the land and the rural subject. Their representations moved from the European gaze of the Australian landscape to a local portrayal of distinctly (colonial) 'Australian' scenes punctuated by motifs of sunlight, the beach, and pioneers. Accumulating an iconic status, their art offered the new, urban Australian subject a tangible heritage and history (for an example of this heritage and the ideal national narrative being represented, see Frederick McCubbin's famous “The Pioneer”, 1904). Yet, as Thomas explains, this visual culture almost totally excluded Aboriginal peoples or represented them in terms of racist ideologies (such as the dying race), coinciding with the historical marginalisation and physical removal of Aboriginal people from places of white population.

Lee sums up the place of Indigenous Australians in the Australian landscape tradition and the subsequent national narrative: “there to provide a touch of exoticism, mysticism, primitivism and comic relief”. The cultural narrative of a unique, white culture based and borne of the soil of Australia, unchallenged by the threatening presence of the Aboriginal subject, is thus consolidated and actualised in the Heidelberg school and other such Australian settler landscape representations.

Lee takes Thomas' argument further and emphasises that the category of landscape art has been a denial of the “ancient traditions and contemporary politics” that inform Aboriginal
picturing of country.\textsuperscript{326} This denial is practiced through the history of settler landscape art which in its representations of land ignores any recognition of Aboriginal connection to country. In this tradition, the category of landscape art becomes valued and judged through a framework of settler knowledges which further dispossess Indigenous peoples of their lands.\textsuperscript{327} This echoes the critique of ‘Aboriginal Art’ levelled by Richard Bell when he argues that the dispossession of Aboriginal artists from their practice is through the ethnocentrism of Western definitions of what counts as art, and the appropriation of Aboriginal imagery and land in white Australian art and tourism (both part of a visual culture creating and presenting the national narrative).\textsuperscript{328} This dispossession denies Aboriginal artists a voice that is separate and equal to the system of Western art.\textsuperscript{329} The existence of Aboriginal art is, however, an active re-definition of Aboriginality, history, connection to country and challenges the validity and integrity of settler landscape art and the narratives it perpetuates.\textsuperscript{330} Mapping, landscape and language are all interrelated and play key roles in the process of colonisation as well as act as tools to further challenge the colonial tradition of settling landscapes. Megan Cope’s work, discussed earlier, demonstrates the links between mapping, landscape and language and their power. The landscape that is perceived (or the country that is not) is dependent on the language used to map space. The proposals of theories of critical discourse analysis and ideas of linguistic determinism, which state that language shapes our sense of reality, are useful in drawing out these links. Linguist Lera Boroditsky, in an investigation of linguistic determinism\textsuperscript{331}, engaged with the question of whether our

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
  \item \textit{Ibid.} 101.
  \item \textit{Ibid.} 101, 110.
  \item Bell, \textit{op.cit.}
  \item \textit{Loc.cit.}
  \item Lee, \textit{op.cit.} 101.
  \item Linguistic determinism is a theory of linguistics, attributed largely to the work of Benjamin Lee Whorf, which proposes that the categories and distinctions of each individual language embody a way of seeing, understanding and being (acting within the world). Therefore speakers of different languages would fundamentally differ in the way they perceive and act in similar circumstances (see Boroditsky, 2001). This
\end{enumerate}
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understanding of space was linked to the culturally specific conceptions of time (enshrined in the different linguistic modes through which we express a sense of temporality). She found that people not only talk about time in spatial terms, but they also use these terms to think about time. \textsuperscript{332} Boroditsky found that English speakers use horizontal metaphors to speak about time whereas speakers of other languages (such as Kuuk Thaayorre) used linguistically different markers of space (such as east, west, north, south) to talk about time. These metaphors translated into the way that people literally imagined time existing and moving in space around them. \textsuperscript{333} \textsuperscript{334} By linking the work of Boroditsky to Tony Birch we can draw out a narrative about the temporal, geospatial politics of the English language in Australia. It is not an extraordinary leap to imagine that the words through which we conceptualise space, for example the toponyms we assign to features of landscapes, map not only what we see in space but also the way that we interact with linguistically diverse others in time and space. This dynamic, in the colonial context of Australia, sets up English as the (white) norm by which landscape is understood as place. This linguistic norm maps the privileges, responsibilities and relationships one can have within space, thereby shaping the form of places. In doing so it devalues other linguistic ways of being within space as abnormal. The nation-state of Australia (a particular conceptualisation of space/place) relies upon the

\textsuperscript{334} One example of an experiment used to test this theory gave participants cards that given a shuffled pack of cards depicting a temporal progression of events (such as the stages of a banana being eaten from unpeeled to empty). Participants would then be asked to place the cards on the ground to indicate what the correct temporal order was. Participants were asked to do this twice, each time being moved to face a different cardinal direction. She found that English speaker arranged the cards from left to right (which corresponds to the arrangement of text in English language) whereas speakers of Kuuk Thaayorre (from the Pormpuraaw community in Cape York) arranged the cards from east to west irrespective of the direction they were facing (and without being told which direction they were facing) (see Boroditsky, 2011). This is significant because Kuuk Thaayorre speakers do not use relative terms such as left or right, but speak in terms of absolute directions when referring to space of all scales (the examples Boroditsky gives are things such as saying things like "the cup is southeast of the plate" or "the boy standing to the south of Mary is my brother"). She concludes that in Pormpuraaw, due to the linguistic and cultural significance of direction a person must always stay oriented in order to be able to communicate properly (Boroditsky, 2011).
promotion of ideologies of ‘social cohesion’ and ‘national homogeneity’ in order to maintain its political order and the construction of a common linguistic culture is key to this.\textsuperscript{335} Part of the attempted extinguishment of Indigenous sovereignty has been through the promotion of monolingualism through the exclusion of Indigenous peoples from the nation (dispossession, ‘protection’ eras) and the subsequent forcible inclusion into the hegemony of white Australia (assimilation, self-management eras). Despite the recognition of the endangered nature of Indigenous languages there is still a contemporary push for monolingualism at the structural level of the nation-state, evidenced through recent undermining of bilingual education in the Northern Territory and the fact that there is no Constitutional recognition of Indigenous languages, nor is there any national legislative protection for Indigenous languages.\textsuperscript{336} The Australian landscape continues to be mapped through the white, English narrative of cohesion through homogeneity.

\textbf{Vernon Ah Kee- Contesting geo-linguistic maps of the (white) landscape in \textit{Cant Chant}}

Vernon Ah Kee takes this to task in his text works. His 2007 installation show \textit{Cant Chant} examines Australian beach culture and sets up a landscape of text and images that his audience needs to navigate. It is through Ah Kee’s text works that he re-imagines the Australian landscape by reconfiguring its spatial and linguistic dimensions, thereby asserting Indigenous sovereignty by reimagining who has the right to configure places. This multimedia show was first shown at the Institute of Modern Art in Queensland in 2007 and notably was included in Australia’s entry to the 2009 Venice Biennale and in the 2013 survey show \textit{Australia} at the Royal Academy of the Arts, London. This final show is of significance to this chapter as Ah Kee’s work is directly put into conversation with other Australian


\textsuperscript{336} ibid.394-395.
landscape artists (such as McCubbin) and is held in an institutional space whose patron is (ironically) the sovereign-in-waiting Prince Charles.

Vernon Ah Kee’s *Cant Chant* is a mixed medium show which combines installation, text and 3 channel video to comment on Australian cultural landscapes and histories. This show is part of an ongoing engagement in Ah Kee’s work with social, historical and political landscapes of Australia. These landscapes are etched into the re-presented faces of his family in his portraiture and embodied in the text slogans he brands gallery walls with.

Ah Kee’s text works are typically lower case lettering in black, bold, Helvetica typeface on white boards/walls. The texts chosen are mostly snippets from popular culture (e.g. *hang ten* 2006), literature (e.g. Shakespeare), activists (e.g. Malcolm X) or the artists own voice, although these text snippets are not represented as quotes or with indicators of their original context. They are separated in vignettes across the wall yet remain in conversation with one another, creating a landscape of multi-dimensional (social, political, historical) words.

Speaking of his practice Ah Kee makes reference to the dissociation he is made to feel in relation to Australian history. His works are a remedy to this:

> When I read about white Australian history, including Aboriginal components within that history, it makes no sense to me. It’s so wildly out of context that it renders me as a person invisible, invalid, unrecognisable, not real at all; with no future, no past, not having existed, and not existing in the future...I use my art to establish some sort of equilibrium for myself. It’s how I make sense of the world.\(^{337}\)

This historical and physical landscape within which Aboriginal peoples are made to feel invisible is constructed through language. One such landscape is the beach, which is located within specific linguistic configurations in the Australian imagination. Fiske discusses the language of surfers as creating a particular world and within this world a particular normative

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beach body, a “world that is a mosaic of physical sensation, of bodily freedom”\(^{338}\). This language works to contain the multiple and overflowing meanings that the beach offers, controlling and colonising this space in order to encapsulate its meaning in culture.\(^{339}\) What Fiske’s analysis does not recognise, however, is that this language and the landscapes and bodies it creates are white, and the linguistic dynamics of whiteness on the beach are important to understand in order to engage with the challenges Ah Kee presents in *Cant Chant*.

The Cronulla riots of December 11, 2005 are an example of the performative function of language in claiming space and creating normative white bodies. Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Fiona Nicoll argue that rather than a disorganised riot this day was a protest, that is, an ordered possessive claim to articulate patriarchal white sovereignty.\(^{340}\) This possessive claim is ordered and asserted through the linguistic frameworks of the day, starting with an SMS stating: “Bring your mates down and let’s show them that this is our beach and their [sic] never welcome back”\(^{341}\) and literally shaped the landscape and bodies of protestors who brandished their bodies with language (such as ‘We Grew Here: You Flew Here’; ‘We’re full fuck off’, ‘Respect locals or piss off’ and ‘100% Aussie pride’\(^{342}\)). Such slogans utilise possessive pronouns (‘we’, ‘we’re’, ‘our’) to delineate who could legitimately lay claim to place and space in Cronulla (only those with ‘100% [white] Aussie Pride’) while also using surfer slang in order to signify and reiterate whose version of the beach was ‘true’. This language then rendered the beach as a white, male domain policed by the possessive logic of words that render all other claims to place and space if not invisible then unviable. Yet this claim to place is beset with anxiety. Notions of home in Australia are contested by

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\(^{338}\) Fiske, Hodge and Turner, *op.cit.* 69.


\(^{340}\) Moreton-Robinson and Nicoll, *op.cit.*

\(^{341}\) As quoted in Clemence Dué and Damien Riggs, “‘We grew here, you flew here’: claims to ‘home’ in the Cronulla Riots” in *Colloquy* 16 (2008):212.

\(^{342}\) As quoted in Moreton-Robinson and Nicoll, *op.cit.*153.
unacknowledged claims of sovereignty by Indigenous peoples and by immigration of non-white people which both work to challenge the norms of whiteness in Australia’s imagining of place and space. Indeed, Moreton-Robinson and Nicoll write that the logic of patriarchal white sovereignty has to continuously work to reproduce itself “ideologically, materially and discursively”. Ah Kee exploits the anxiety of patriarchal white sovereignty in *Cant Chant*. He does so by engaging with its language, English, the language which we have already established is central to the linguistic colonial project in Australia. His presentation of text is reminiscent of advertising with big black lettering brandishing the ‘white cube’ space of gallery walls. Ah Kee acknowledges the influence of Barbara Kruger’s practice on his work with her collage photographs appropriating text from advertising to engage with feminist critiques. Ah Kee also cites Russian constructivist posters as inspirational in the abstract shapes of text in these posters. The contrast of the black and white and the ‘larger than life’ sizing of this text transform the gallery wall into a confronting and inescapable message board. The deliberate use of Bold Helvetica font is significant here. Helvetica font, created in 1950s Switzerland, is described as the quintessential modernist, capitalist font. It is used extensively in marketing and advertising and its form communicates a sense of simplicity and balance (seen in the relationship and balancing of the shape of the letter with its negative space). Ah Kee’s use of this font can be read as contrasting the ‘comforting’ visual appeal of the aesthetics of Helvetica with confronting oversized lettering that seem to pop out and force you to look. Not only does Ah Kee contrast the aesthetic appeal of Helvetica with the confronting effect of their size, but he also references pop culture, mass media advertising and the tradition of capitalism and modernism that this font is aligned with. This play between text as

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343 Due and Riggs, *op.cit.* 211.
344 Moreton-Robinson and Nicoll, *op.cit.* 150.
communication and text as shape is what is so compelling about Ah Kee’s text works and is the medium for his investigation into competing claims to space, place and sovereignty. Returning to the idea of the map as a technology not limited to traditional geographical methodologies I argue that Ah Kee’s use of language and the visual in Cant Chant is a mapping practice. To elaborate this we need to consider the metaphor of language as a map. John Harwood Andrews explores this and argues that cartography and language have a structural similarity. Indeed cartography relies upon language in order to make sense, and we could understand the non-linguistic markers of maps as a language in themselves. Firstly, Andrews argues that both maps and language have a performative function- they realise that which they name in their psychological, social and political functions. In this sense, the questions of who is mapping, and who is speaking (or whose language is being spoken) are inquiries that need to be made in order to understand the power relationships embedded in such a function (who has mobility in the spaces created by the performativity of maps and language?).

Another significant parallel between maps and language are the semiotic purposes of both. Words and symbols are used in maps to stand in for real and imagined things and places, just as words in languages have no inherent qualities of the things they represent. In a grammatical sense we can think of words and symbols on a map as cartographies’ nouns. In this sense there is an interesting relationship to be considered when words are linked to maps in the field of visual art, a field which employs semiotics to visually represent, conceptualise and/or abstract ideas, emotions and things. In Ah Kee’s use of text we can think about the way in which his words stand in for and act as markers of patriarchal white sovereignty which often go unnoticed in day to day life. He maps the way in which linguistics functions

348 Ibid.2.
349 Ibid. 3-4.
to legitimate forms of belonging and claims to space. He makes visible the invisibility of white ness, thereby extinguishing some of its (anxious) power.

The grammar of maps is further drawn out if we think of the way in which these markers of places and things on maps (nouns) are given specific features. Andrews argues that the features of markers on maps (e.g. the colour, shading, width, pattern etc.) function as an adjective does, that is, they describe and qualify the noun. Another significant grammatical feature is the ideas of space on a map as a pronoun. The cartographic role of space is to denote distance and in doing so distinguish between different features (nouns). Andrews points out that small and uniform distances on a map could be thought of as conjunctions, joining and uniting features. These grammatical/cartographic features are particularly important to consider in Ah Kee’s text works for he plays with the colour and the negative space of letters and words in order to disrupt the grammatical map of the English language thereby interrupting its logic, a point I will return to later.

Perhaps one of the most interesting parallels between maps and language that Andrews draws out is the ability of both to “vehicles for the transmission of truth or falsehood”. In extending the metaphor of map as language to this length Andrews problematises the seeming objectivity of maps as transmitters of pure geographical information. This description of maps as information makes invisible the power of maps to transmit misinformation and translations, whereas the idea of a map as valued by its judged truth (or falsehood) makes a map accountable, specific to its context and purpose. It means that we read maps as a perspective and as a process of creating space and in that sense they are much like languages- each serve to transmit the worldview of the speaker/cartographer. As such a map will also be translated by the reader in much the same way as a language will be, that is, in a subjective manner which relies upon ones values and comprehension of the language of

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350 Ibid.5.
351 Ibid.5.
352 Ibid.8.
the map/speaker. Andrews goes so far as to examine the metalanguage of the map in terms of what it does (or does not) signify, as reinforcing particular ideologies and structures of a society (a function of mapping and language explored at the outset of this chapter).\textsuperscript{353} In this sense Ah Kee’s work takes on the metalanguage of patriarchal white sovereignty as the speech of ‘everyman’ in \textit{Cant Chant}. He draws out the invisible power relationships inherent in colloquial beach speech, explores how such language maps who and how persons can relate to space, and the histories, experiences and bodies of those that are negated (left in the negative spaces) of such speech.

In drawing out the way in which Ah Kee’s use of language relates to mapping practices we might think of these text works, and the overall effect of the \textit{Cant Chant} installation, as “topography of experience”.\textsuperscript{354} This phrase captures well the purpose of Ah Kee’s practice to make works that “establish an Aboriginal history for me and my family that helps make sense of my life and experiences”.\textsuperscript{355} Topography, a practice which charts the detail of spaces and their features, captures the affective function of Ah Kee’s text works and the \textit{Cant Chant} installation. While Ah Kee might chart the parameters of patriarchal white sovereignty in the choice of words he emblazons his walls with (such as \textit{hangten} 2006), his play on the colour, size and grammar of such phrases has the effect of disrupting their seeming banality, impressing the violent affects that such word-maps can have. This affective element ‘fills in’ the detail of the boundaries of white Australianness that Ah Kee maps, and the topographical detail he fills in is that of his interactions with whiteness.

However, Ah Kee’s topography of experience is slippery, his word maps are unfixed and have the potential to turn on us. Using seemingly benign, everyday phrases to map spaces on the gallery wall, Ah Kee makes these snippets of language markers and entrance points into

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{353}] \textit{Ibid.} 15.
\item[\textsuperscript{354}] Danie Mellor. Personal communication with the author. Sydney College of the Arts, October 22\textsuperscript{nd} 2013.
\item[\textsuperscript{355}] Vernon Ah Kee. Interview with Glenn Barkley. \textit{Borninthisskin}, Vernon Ah Kee, (Brisbane, Queensland: Institute of Modern Art, 2009), 23.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
networks of history, power and conflict. He plays with the sounds of words as well as their associations in his disruption of Australian whiteness and the privilege of his audience. Text snippets such as wegrewhere and firstperson take a satirical jab at the claims to possession made by white protestors at Cronulla in 2005. Their satirical value comes from revealing the anxiety of claims to sovereignty made by whiteness in Australia as such claims are always haunted by the unresolved question of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sovereignty. This anxiety is band-aided by our psychological terra nullius and the reiteration of claims to ‘legitimate’ patriarchal white sovereignty; however Ah Kee challenges us to remember the source of our nations anxieties. He speaks specifically to Australian linguistic imaginings of the beach as the border of Australia and the home of the masculine epitome of ‘white patriarchal sovereignty’: the white, masculine hero of the beach – the lifeguard- adventurous, nature-battling and humanitarian. Ah Kee speaks to this national imagining of the embodied space/place of Australia and interrupts the naturalisation of this narrative by subverting and making strange the language of its perpetuation, the English language.

The work borninthisskin (2008), included in later versions of the Cant Chant show (such as the one shown at the Ludoteca in the Venice Biennale) is indicative of the way that Ah Kee plays with text, in shape and meaning, to map an affective topology of experience. This work, an acrylic on linen diptych with dimensions of 180 x 240 cm, plays with the positioning of words and the spaces between words to engage and disturb its audience. It is set out as a poem, 8 lines long, with a repetition of lines and rhythm giving the work a sense of circularity. The run-on formatting of Ah Kee’s phrases speaks to a cumulative, run-on and repetitive trend in colonial history. In its visual form this work cascades down the wall and our ability to read the text is disturbed as Ah Kee has run the words together. The only immediately discernible word our eye is drawn to is ‘everyday’, repeated at the outset and middle of the verse. The circularity of the rhythm of this text and the punctuated repetition of
everyday (which our eye is drawn back to as a grounder of language and frame for the letters around it) suggest that this is a comment on the rhythms of everyday life and suggests a tedious, monotonous pattern. When our eyes adjust to the text and navigate its marks we can discern that this verse is about the limits and possibilities of embodiment ‘becauseiwas/borninthisskin’. Furthermore, this verse is about the achievements and concessions of everyday life which are scripted/mapped on our bodies (or are they embedded in our skin, that part of us which serves as the medium between inside/outside, nature/culture and a marker of the possibilities/anxieties of bleeding between dichotomous binaries?). We are forced to ask, “What does the artists body achieve and concede?” Alternatively, we might ask what we ourselves achieve/concede in our everyday rhythms because of the skins we are born into.

Fig. 8. Vernon Ah Kee, born in this skin, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 240 cm, Milani Gallery, Brisbane.
The textuality of *Cant Chant* forces us to reposition ourselves in that we have to adjust our ways of knowing our own language in its grammatical forms/norms. We also have to navigate the size and positioning of the words on the wall, a technique that challenges our ways of reading, knowing and moving around the words. The sculptural qualities of the text works in *Cant Chant* are in the way in which we must interact physically and intellectually with visual representations of words in order to engage with Ah Kee’s work. The hanging surfboards in the installation space reinforce these sculptural qualities of *Cant Chant*. The surfboards tie the themes of the text to concepts of landscape and sovereignty, as well as explicitly framing our understanding of this installation as about the intergenerational experiences of Ah Kee’s family. They achieve this through their rainforest shield designs, at once arresting in their bright red, black and yellow design, and confronting the audience as they walk in and literally have to navigate their way around these declarations of sovereignty, specific to Ah Kee’s heritage. Rainforest shield designs are integral to Aboriginal nations of the Queensland rainforests. Shields are objects possessed by men and given to them during
rites of passage, with colours and designs identifying ones connection to country. Contemporary Aboriginal artists, such as Michael Boiyool Anning and Danie Mellor, have taken up the making of these shields, revitalising culture and repatriating Indigenous knowledges held in museums while declaring sovereign rights to this practice.

The position of the rainforest shields in the Cant Chant gallery space is loaded with references to the legacy of colonial exhibitions showing ‘native curiosities’ and collecting artefacts, a central part of acquiring empire. The gallery space itself comes out of the tradition of exhibiting othered peoples and objects in order to politically, economically and socially justify imperial projects to the broader populous by demonstrating the intellectual and moral inferiority of colonised peoples and in return the need for the civilised intervention of the West. The positioning of the shields in Ah Kee’s installation space, in that they take over the gallery space rather than are contained by it, thus performs a decolonising function, reviewing the material and intellectual history of the gallery space itself. In drawing the links between contemporary repatriation practices of rainforest shields and the function that their collection and exhibition by imperial powers played in demonstrating the legitimacy of colonialism, it is

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357 Ibid.156-157.
360 Owen, op.cit. 22.
interesting to consider the rainforest shield as a site of white nationalist anxieties, a site where
the claims to sovereignty made by the white nation are troubled by ongoing Indigenous
sovereignty. Here links can be drawn between Ah Kee’s shields in Cant Chant and with
Danie Mellor’s Topographical Shield (2002), a shield made of reclaimed metal and inscribed
with the curved lines of topographic maps. In this work Mellor draws together the shared
histories of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships to land and inscribes this history
through the materiality of the shield, a site-specific object. His shields materialise a
topography of experience, imbricating white conceptions and relations to land with evidence
of Indigenous sovereignty in country. The topography of experience he charts in these shields
is this tension, reframed through the position of the materiality of Indigenous sovereignty
embodied by the shield. Similarly, Ah Kee uses his shields to interrupt and physically
obstruct the frameworks of whiteness through which we conceptualise/map landscape (the
assumptions of sovereignty we make in our taken for granted ability to move, speak and
know in the Australian nation-space), asserting Indigenous sovereignty through his shield’s
designs of country, and forcing us to negotiate the materiality of this sovereignty as we move
around and between the shields in order to comprehend the installation space.
The underside of the surfboards in Cant Chant incorporate larger than life portraits of Ah
Kee’s male family members, tying together these declarations of sovereignty as embodied
and specific, they are the achievements of being ‘borninthisskin’. They are objects of action
when we see these boards being used in the water by Aboriginal professional surfer Dale
Richards in the three-screen video installation in the next room. These boards then become
challenges; they take up their war-like function again by contesting the claims to sovereignty
made through readings of the beach by generations of white men (and women). This claim to
sovereignty made by white Australia is further troubled by the scenes of a white surfboard
hung by wire and shot at with gunfire, referencing the text hangten in the adjacent room and
reminiscent, as Robert Leonard notes, of the racialised violence of colonialism, bringing to mind lynched bodies.\textsuperscript{361} Ah Kee’s point is that the linguistic spatial markers of white sovereignty are violent and destructive in their attempts to make invisible Aboriginality in the geo-linguistic landscape of Australia and his challenge to us is to acknowledge Indigenous sovereignty in the bodies, country and histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The topography of experience that Ah Kee presents in \textit{Cant Chant} is revelatory through its use of the familiar to reveal to us our own whiteness and obstruct the invisibility, or assumed sovereign right to roam, that our linguistic white desires assume.

Chris Gibson argues that the map needs to be reconfigured as an open construct if we are to avoid the colonising containment of Indigenous voices, histories and sovereignty, a dynamic which has characterised Australia and been enacted through white mapping practices.\textsuperscript{362} Art provides a vehicle through which the “hegemonic spatial narratives” of whiteness are interrupted as it engages with both the discursive and the material. These are key intersections which Gibson identifies as necessary in the exploration of power and space.\textsuperscript{363} Public sculpture and installation art use the materiality of public areas to explore the physical and discursive dimensions of space. The practice of Fiona Foley engages with geospatial narratives of Australia in her mapping of terrains of remembrance in \textit{Witnessing to Silence} (2004) and read alongside Ah Kee’s \textit{Cant Chant} this public installation provides a further element of responsibility in the challenge to white patriarchal sovereignty.

\textbf{Fiona Foley- mapping terrains of remembrance and humanity in public sculpture/challenging univocal white desires.}

\textsuperscript{361} Leonard, \textit{op.cit.} 11.
\textsuperscript{363} \textit{Ibid.} 50-51.
Foley’s celebrated public art practice engages with the history and context of the sites she installs her works in. She engages with hidden histories such as in the sculpture *Black Opium* (2006) in the State Library of Queensland which explores the oppressive regime of the 1897 *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act (Q’ld)* or *Sugar Cubes* (2009), a monument to the black-birding of South Sea Islander peoples in the 1800s to work in Queensland’s sugar cane fields as indentured labourers. Her sculptural practice also asserts Indigenous sovereignty, such as with the *Yuwi* (2009) sculpture in Mackay, Queensland, naming the local sovereign peoples of this area or the *biami* sculpture, as part of the *Bibles and Bullets* (2008) installation in Redfern Park, which boldly names the sky creation ancestor of Eora peoples in Sydney as a permanent feature of this landscape.

In this sense her practice can be described as ‘contemporary site-specific art’ in that her works rely upon and reference the lands of the sovereign Indigenous nations that they are literally installed on and the hidden cultural histories of these nations, which her public sculptural works evoke and inhabit. Miwon Kwon identifies that the practice of contemporary site-specific installation has shifted from its origins, originally concerned with the physicality of the space a public work was installed in, to a contemporary extension of understandings of the ‘site’ to cultural, social and discursive fields.\(^\text{364}\) This shift, from the work being primarily defined by the actuality of the location and the social conditions of the institutional frame, to the discursive site (the debate, field of knowledge, idea) means that the process of creating the contemporary site specific work is as important as its (discursive) site.\(^\text{365}\) How, then, does Fiona Foley’s site specific installation practice relate to Kwon’s ideas? I contend that her installation practice relies both upon the actuality of sites (as places where historical events happened, where Indigenous sovereignties are still validated and challenged) as well as discursive sites (debates about nationalism, colonialism, the nature of history). This

simultaneity makes her work both intellectually and kinetically dynamic; it gives it a sense of movement that goes beyond the obvious physical movement of the audience around the work. I will argue that it is this movement that allows her to successfully map out spaces of Indigenous sovereignty and contest white landscapes of knowledge.

The performativity of site-specific installation is what makes this practice and its implications compelling. Nick Kaye writes that performance in site specific art defines the place (conceptual, physical) that the practice reflects upon.\textsuperscript{366} Using the work of Michel deCerteau, he argues that the space of a work is an unpredictable “practiced place”.\textsuperscript{367} Site specific installations, then, are made up of spatialised activities (such as the activity of installing a work, the activity if the audience viewing a work, the activity of a viewer moving through a work, the activity of the encoding and decoding involved in the creation and reading of a work) that map out and momentarily perform the artists definition of the site, the place of the work. However, these activities are not permanent and cannot completely define a place in one act. Therefore the spatial activities that make up a site-specific installation are characterised by their absence of stability, and it is this absence that provides the motion necessary to be able to account for the complexities of place, of the site of the work. It is absence that maps out the sites of Foley’s public art works and this absence gives her works movement.

Foley begins her works from such points of absence and, specifically, she investigates the points that are important to the discursive site of Australian colonialism- absent histories, absent acknowledgements of Aboriginal sovereignty, absence of rights for Indigenous Australians. These points become the markers for her mappings of whiteness and she creates places for her audience to move through whiteness’ (anxious) memories. This exploitation of

\textsuperscript{367} \textit{Ibid.} 5.
forgotten or hidden memories is significant for it is the memories that absence carries with it which makes it dynamic. Consider these two statements:

*The difference between a moving arrow and a still arrow [...] if a picture of each were taken and compared, they would be virtually indistinguishable. What distinguishes the moving arrow from the still one is that it contains where it has been and where it is going, i.e., it has a memory and an immanence that are not present to the observer of the photograph; they are essential absences.*

* [...] in absence there’s always an assumed opposition to it of presence – but I think absence as itself, as a phenomenological entity, it still has a presence about it – like absence is there, you can feel absence like it has a tangibility – we were talking about that before, about Indigenous sovereignty in a sense, being effaced from narratives, from stories, our everyday stories, our everyday conversations...*

What both of these quotes beautifully express is the way in which presence and memory are imbricated within absence. As such, the spaces of absence, presence and memory are contingent upon one another. Absence always contains a memory of presence. Foley exploits this relationship, the poetics of absence, in her public works. This is particularly poignant in her site-specific installation *Witnessing to Silence* (2004).

Located in the forecourt of the new Brisbane Magistrates Court (officially opened in 2012) *Witnessing to Silence* (2004) is a large installation that takes on questions of justice for Aboriginal Queenslanders (and more generally Indigenous people in Australia) whose

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368 Peter Eisenman as quoted in Kaye, *op.cit.* 123.
histories are absent in accounts of settlement as peaceful, in the psychological terra nullius that pervades Australian histories. It also asks how this absence is tied to stories of Australian nationhood and the spatial practices of forgetting which are used to map out such spaces. In this work Foley literally maps out massacre sites through a narrative of absence that is evident both in the process of creating this work and in the dynamics of the work itself.

The installation is made up of cast bronze lotus stems and a water feature which periodically sprays these lotus stems, pavers etched with 94 names of Queensland towns, and stainless steel pillars with glass panels through which we can see ash. This permanent work was commissioned by Queensland’s Public Art Agency who also commissioned public works by 13 other artists in the development of the Brisbane Magistrates Court. Asked to respond to the environment of the court the work, Foley originally presented an explanation of her design as a representation of the destructiveness of nature, a narrative of the fires and floods that have plagued Queensland. Two years after the works construction Foley revealed to a

Fig.11. Fiona Foley, Witnessing to Silence, 2004, installation view, cast bronze, etched pavers, stainless steel, laminated glass, various dimensions, Brisbane Magistrates Court, Brisbane. Photograph by Melanie Cook.

newspaper the real narrative underpinning her work, that it was intended as a memorial to Aboriginal people affected by the brutal massacres that were perpetrated on Queensland’s colonial frontier. Her references to fire and water are in actuality references to the disposal, hiding and covering up of bodies and other such heinous acts in our national remembering.  

The intention behind much of Foley’s practice is educative, revealing hidden histories and speaking, as she says, “to cover the mouth of silence”.  

In this sense Foley’s public art practice, and particularly her site-specific sculpture *Witnessing to Silence*, begins from sites of absence in our remembrance of history. She uses this site to fight against the placelessness

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that historical and cultural amnesia imposes on Aboriginal peoples. Paul Havemann argues that this amnesia, the psychological terra nullius and denial of Indigenous sovereignties perpetrated through the genocidal acts of colonialism in Australia (and their ongoing effects), are integral to the functioning of the modern capitalist state. In such a context the nation-state conquers space by decreeing who/what is useful and who/what is waste in terms of its agendas. It has the power to exclude peoples physically and ideologically to placelessness (the most extreme form of placelessness being the genocide of a peoples) if it deems them to be ‘waste’. Placelessness is a dehumanising ‘state of exception’ in which people are defined and treated as non-citizens (as human surplus/waste) and their freedom to life and movement is then controlled physically, legally and ideologically. This characterises much of Australia’s treatment of Aboriginal peoples and continues today in the genocidal legacy of government policies. In fact, we could argue that this dynamic of placelessness continues in the denial of Indigenous sovereignty and in the historical amnesia that Foley highlights. This placelessness is evident in the human consequences we still witness, in the damning evidence highlighting the disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in terms of quality of life outcomes.

The mapping of space by colonial, modern, capitalist nation states such as Australia is designed around the rupturing of space-place relations and designating spaces from places (e.g. the difference between ideas of work (a utilitarian space) from home (a place of human interactions)). The denial and lack of acknowledgement of Indigenous relations to country and histories located in land is another colonial mapping function to delineate place from

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374 Loc. cit.
375 Ibid. 63.
377 Havemann, op.cit. 68.
space. These colonial mapping mechanisms serve to deny the interactions between humans and landscapes that make up our shared history and function, as Hannah Arendt would argue, as a denial of humanity.

Arendt defines humanity by speaking of genocide as a crime against it in that it is “an attack upon human diversity […] without which the very words ‘mankind’ or ‘humanity’ would be devoid of meaning”. Arendt sees the ‘world’ as existing in-between people, in the state of diversity, dialogue and discourse between different peoples. This readiness to create and share the world in the spaces between us is humanity (based on the Roman principle of *humanitas*, ‘love of man’). We could understand humanity, with reference to the distinction between space and place discussed earlier, as physically embedded in places (spaces imbued with human interactions). However, humanity is in ‘dark times’ when the world in this sense is obscured by moves to erase difference. The imposition of placelessness on a group of people, as the erasure of different relations to space, is one such dark time. Arendt argues that it is only through the ‘mastering of the past’ that humanity (friendship between citizens) might survive dark times. Mastering of the past involves the recurring narration of genocidal events so as to reify them to a status of significance and insert them into our historical and cultural landscapes over and over again in the poetics of retelling so that these spaces between us might be remembered and maintained. This recurring remembrance is the enacting of a process of ethical relationships between peoples involved in a ‘mastering the past’. Fiona Foley can thus be understood as a critical poet, mastering the past and inviting us into spaces of humanity (places) through her work *Witnessing to Silence*.

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378 The *Native Title Act* (1993) is a contemporary example of this as it sets out quantifiable criteria based on ongoing cultural connection to land that has to be met if Indigenous peoples claims to native title rights are to be recognised by the State.


381 Ibid. 24-25.

382 Ibid. 21.
In this sculpture Foley installs a poetics of remembering through the engraving of 94 massacre sites in Queensland. She evokes the content of these crimes through her references to fire and water. Her exploitation of the absence of any such memorialisation of Aboriginal people brutally ‘displaced’ through the logic of colonialism in the public memory pricks at the conscience of a public concerned with discourses of ‘reconciliation’. Foley forces us to navigate the absence of such memories and implicates our bodies in such a process as we literally move around, through and over the elements of this installation. She maps out the dark times of this chapter of colonialism in the 94 massacre sites she records and invites us to engage in dialogue with this history through the movement of our bodies in the site, the reading and remembering of the place names she records, and the provocation to imagination with the sensory cues she provides in the form of ash and water. We are invited into a space of illumination, of life and death, the lotus lily being a potent symbol of all of these.\textsuperscript{383} This illumination rises up, like the bronze lotus stems, from the very ground we are walking on and the imagined space we inhabit as citizens of this nation-state. Foley blurs the lines between space and place that the mapping projects of colonialism strive for and instead offers us a space/place of humanity, a place to engage in dialogue and remembrance with different, embodied readings of history.

What are the implications of \textit{Witnessing to Silence} for the white participant? Whiteness is an invisible spatial hegemony, a discursive map of norms delineating space from place and defining which bodies have rights to access place. Thus, we can understand the dynamics of whiteness as performing a denial of humanity in that its power relies upon the ability to absorb the difference of others by ‘knowing’ their otherness. Whiteness denies Indigenous others access to place by its ‘knowing’ and absorption of the subjectivity of all others through disembodied readings of history. In the process of her creation of this work Foley has

interrupted whiteness’ ability to ‘know’ by withholding her actual intention behind the work until a time she chose fit to reveal it in. Through this process Foley also reveals the limits of our ‘knowing’- 94 sites where heinous acts of violence were carried out which are absent from the common knowledge of the state of Queensland. The revelatory nature of the work resides in the way Foley asks us to consider what else we might not know, what might be hidden and absent from our cultural memory. She illuminates the source of the niggling anxieties which eat away at our national identities, which provoke whiteness to reassert itself over and over again to be legitimate. The work itself is a performance of an Arendtian idea of humanity; it is an invitation to dialogue, a questioning of our knowing and a space of remembering where the past is reiterated over and over again. Foley implicates our bodies in this process which is one of the most potent functions that her public installations perform. Foley invites us to read ourselves in this map of the colonial crimes against humanity prompting questions such as: how might the events of this history be inscribed in our bodies, in the places we can roam, in the subjectivities we experience, in the social justice we have access to? Foley challenges us to do this by revealing the basis of our desires for whiteness, the absences in our cultural memory. She creates a space that has the potential to be a place that counters the current placelessness of Indigenous peoples in the Australian nation-state. This is a place where we can engage in an affirmation of humanity, countering the violence of absences in our cultural memory, performing the painful process of re-membering: “a [painful] putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present”384. It is our reading and re-membering in this place which has the performative potential, albeit momentarily, to interrupt desires for whiteness, map the absences which make up the boundaries of whiteness and offers us opportunities to transgress these boundaries and engage in dialogues of humanity.

The art practices of both Fiona Foley and Vernon Ah Kee act as mapping technologies through their use of language, space, place and memory. They both play with the landscapes of white Australia through their mapping of geo-spatial and space-place politics in the cultural imagination of the nation-state. Both of the works discussed in this chapter, *Cant Chant* and *Witnessing to Silence*, offer alternative configurations of the space-place we know as Australia and implicate the bodies and subjectivities of us, their audience, in this alternative mapping. In doing so they challenge the way that patriarchal white sovereignty and desires for whiteness literally and physically move through physical, conceptual and historical spaces. They offer opportunities for the interruption of embodied whiteness, exploit the anxious absences of our cultural memory and offer alternative mappings, alternate topographies of our ‘worlds’.
Conclusion

Wednesday, 13\textsuperscript{th} of February, 2008. The Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd opens Parliament with an historic national apology to Indigenous peoples; in particular those affected by the protection and assimilation policies of child removal. He apologises for the discrimination inflicted by past incarnations of the Australian Government. He requests “that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the nation” in order to move forward in an Australian future “based on mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility”\textsuperscript{385}.

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Wednesday, 13\textsuperscript{th} of February, 2008. Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, Australia live under a military led government intervention that curtails basic civil and political rights, not least of all the right to be free from racial discrimination. This situation is subsequently deemed to “overtly discriminate against aboriginal peoples, infringe their right of self-determination and stigmatize already stigmatized communities”\textsuperscript{386} by the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Indigenous Peoples, James Anaya.

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Thursday, 26\textsuperscript{th} January, 2012. Celebrations are occurring at the Aboriginal Tent Embassy on the lawns of Old Parliament House to mark its 40\textsuperscript{th} anniversary. Protests are taking place all over the country on this day to mark the invasion of Australia by British settlers. Tony Abbott, the then leader of the opposition, was asked to comment on the relevancy of the Tent Embassy which he answered by saying he could “…understand why the tent embassy [sic] was established all those years ago […] I think a lot has changed since then and I think it

probably is time to move on from that”\textsuperscript{387}. Participants at the Tent Embassy celebrations respond to these comments, understanding that they threaten the legitimacy of the Embassy (and amongst some confusion over the exact statement made by Abbott), by protesting. This cumulates in the group chanting “shame!” and banging on the glass of the restaurant lobby which the Prime Minister and leader of the opposition are in. The event concludes with a dramatic ‘rescue’ of the Prime Minister and opposition leader by security amidst fears that the glass could break and the Prime Minister would be in danger.

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The dynamics of these events, when read together, illustrate the themes that the previous chapters have explored. Rudd’s 2008 Apology, while significant, demonstrates the dynamics of Australian nationalism discussed in Chapter Two\textsuperscript{388}. The framing of an apology for the violence of colonialism in discourses of mutual obligation works to maintain the claims to sovereignty made by the Australian nation-state by assuming the right to set the terms on which this apology is to be made and accepted. There is a sense of multicultural ‘unity-in-diversity’ that comes through this Apology with the imagery of a united nation healing and moving on from the racial wounds of its past together. Yet the Prime Minister, not in negotiation, but as a monologue, is defining the terms of the moving forward. Indeed there is a sense of the rearticulation of power relations inherent in the request made by the Prime Minister that the Apology “be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the nation”\textsuperscript{389}. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples being apologised to are positioned by the Australian nation-state as its subjects in this univocal articulation of the

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\textsuperscript{388} While my analysis of the 2008 Apology is critical I do not wish to undermine its significance and what it personally meant for the many people who were and still are experiencing the immediate and long term effects of forced removal and assimilation. I am however very critical of the structural effects of the Apology- the way in which it was crafted so as to maintain colonial power relations in interactions between the Australian nation-state interacts and its positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

\textsuperscript{389} Rudd, op.cit.
terms the Apology given and how it can be accepted by them. This dynamic positions Indigenous peoples as not only subject to the terms of the Australian nation-state, but at once part of and outside of it. While there is an articulation of moving forward together, paradoxically embedded in the Apology are ‘post-race’ racial anxieties in the othering of Indigenous peoples through the claiming of their responsibilities to the State (you are ‘ours’ and owe us respect, but not ‘us’ because you do not have the equal right to negotiate the terms of this Apology). The violence of the colonial rhetoric underlying the 2008 Apology is further punctuated by considering that concurrent to the Apology was the ongoing Northern Territory Emergency Response (2007), an explicitly racist policy which claimed to be ‘post-race’ (we need to do this to protect ‘our’ Indigenous communities).

The images of the protests on January 26th, 2012 are pertinent when considering the fragile nature of whiteness (and subjects-desiring-whiteness) as traced through Chapter Three. The glass in these protests can be seen as a metaphor for the fragile desires of whiteness- the assumption of the ability to see through and ‘know’/fix others which is always at risk of having its integrity undermined. Simultaneously the glass represents the anxieties of whiteness as it can see its others but can never fully know them. The Tent Embassy is itself a symbol of Indigenous challenges to Australian sovereignty and the anxieties inherent to the colonial settler state, and the protestors coming from the Tent Embassy, shouting ‘shame!’ and banging on the glass represent the possibility of whiteness’ nightmare- the glass, the barrier between ‘us’ and ‘them’ shattering. This is what the Prime Minister needed rescuing from, not the threat to her physical safety at the hands of protestors should the glass shatter but the threat of the unknowable, unreadable, of the glass which maintains the balance between whiteness’ desires and anxieties becoming shattered and having to engage with challenges to its integrity without a framework of containment. More importantly the possibility of the knowing containment of difference being shattered, of a recognition of
Indigenous peoples in their own terms as “genuinely independent, genuinely different”\textsuperscript{390}, is not even conceivable to the structures of whiteness. This event, which highlights the anxieties of whiteness discussed in Chapter Three, brings to mind a quote by Martinican poet Édouard Glissant:

\begin{quote}
Transparency no longer seems like the bottom of the mirror in which Western humanity reflected the world in its own image. There is opacity now at the bottom of the mirror, a whole alluvium deposited by populations, silt that is fertile but, in actual fact, indistinct and unexplored even today, denied or insulted more often than not, and with an insistent presence that we are incapable of not experiencing.\textsuperscript{391}
\end{quote}

The opacity that Glissant describes, the cumulated alluvium of challenges to the ‘transparency’ of whiteness’ invisibility posed by Indigenous peoples, are the challenges made in the art practice of Vernon Ah Kee and Fiona Foley that have been traced in Chapters Four and Five. The bedrock of this alluvium is the sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples which in its “insistent presence that we are incapable of not experiencing”\textsuperscript{392} tugs and pulls at the anxieties of whiteness, maintaining an underlying challenge to the integrity of “patriarchal white sovereignty”\textsuperscript{393} and its violent attempts to wash away these challenges in the white-washing of history.

Vernon Ah Kee and Fiona Foley both present challenges to the knowing desires of whiteness through their works. When read alongside one another their practices weave a narrative of resistance. This is a narrative that is woven through the bodies of their subjects and themselves as well as implicating our bodies in the challenges they make to our reading practices. Both Foley and Ah Kee play with the racialisation of bodies in spaces throughout Australian history in their works. They interrupt the taken for granted frameworks that have

\textsuperscript{390} Dodson, \textit{op.cit.} 36.
\textsuperscript{392} \textit{Loc. cit.}
\textsuperscript{393} Moreton-Robinson, “The white man’s burden”, \textit{op.cit.} 419.
been meticulously set in place by the desires of whiteness for its fixed others by interrupting the narratives of blackness we read onto skins. Both in the subversion of signifiers of normative bodies on the beach and in the reclamation of the artists embodied lineage in images through time Ah Kee and Foley interrupt our white reading practices. The bodies they represent do not sit comfortably with the normative narratives of Australian multiculturalism and refuse to play their part as ‘ethnic others’ in their blakness.

Indigenous sovereignty also informs the way that Vernon Ah Kee and Fiona Foley map social and linguistic histories of colonialism. Ah Kee’s interruption of the logic of the English language through his decolonising word-maps that challenge the linguistic modes in which we speak and know the Australian nation-space echoes the effect of Foley’s public installation works. In these works Foley utilises the hidden histories of the physical spaces we are in and brings them to the surface with sculpture. We have to physically navigate around and move through these works in order to engage with them. This act of navigating has the effect of transforming these spaces as knowable/mappable and asserting that these are places we do not know. In both of these practices the familiar is utilised to implicate us in Foley and Ah Kee’s readings of the logic of colonialism. Indigenous sovereignty underpins the logic of the objects we encounter in their practice. The violent linguistic and social effects of colonialism are mapped in order to point out the racialization of the knowledges and epistemologies of whiteness and the challenge that these works presents is for us to, as Fiona Nicoll describes, be in rather than have a perspective of Indigenous sovereignty. These works reply to the debates, dominated by white voices, regarding the politics of non-Indigenous engagement with Indigenous art as outlined in Chapter Three. They refute the conclusion made by Willis and Fry that there is no ethical way for white audiences to engage

\[394\] Nicoll, “Reconciliation in and out of perspective”, loc. cit.19.
with Aboriginal art\textsuperscript{395} by demanding dialogue, implicating our embodied ways of knowing into the meaningfulness of the objects. However this dialogue is not without limits and its terms are not to be imposed by our (white) ways of knowing. Thus the idea that we are ‘post-Aboriginality’ in the way in which we engage with Indigenous art, argued by Butler\textsuperscript{396} and Tillers\textsuperscript{397} as alternative conclusions to the debate over the politics of engagement, are refuted in these objects as well. Indeed the art objects and practices of Foley and Ah Kee as discussed in Chapters Three and Four draw out the central role that race has played in the history of colonial Australia and locates this on a continuum with the expressions of Australian nationalism today.

Far from being ‘post-race’ as multiculturalism would assert or being ‘post-Aboriginality’ as contemporary art discourses coming out of this context would suggest, the works of Foley and Ah Kee point out the racialised anxieties at the heart of the Australian nation-state’s troubled claims to sovereignty. These claims and anxieties are built into the bodies of subjects-desiring-whiteness who reassert the hegemony of normative invisible whiteness and patriarchal white sovereignty by reading and ‘knowing’ others. Ah Kee and Foley explicitly deny and trouble this reading function that whiteness relies upon in order to rearticulate itself. In doing so they point to the reality of race as central to the material and ideological fabric of our society. From the challenges posed by Ah Kee and Foley in Chapters Three and Four we can understand that the claim to know Aboriginality, a claim that is central to ideas of ‘post-Aboriginality’ (we know that Aboriginal identity no longer matters), is a function of contemporary colonialism. Kahnawake Mohawk scholar and activist Taiaiake Alfred describes the central role that identity, specifically white claims to know the identity of Indigenous others, plays in the contemporary colonial project when he argues that:

\begin{itemize}
\item[395] Willis and Fry, \textit{op.cit.} 10.
\item[396] Butler, \textit{op.cit.} 131.
\item[397] Tillers, “Locality Fails” \textit{op.cit.} 264.
\end{itemize}
State-imposed conceptions of supposedly Indigenous identity [are] read to Indigenous peoples, from perspectives rooted in their own [colonial] cultures and languages, not as moves towards justice and positive integration (as the strategy is framed in colonial discourses) but as indicators of an on-going colonial assault on their existence, and signs of the fact that they remain, as in earlier colonial eras, occupied peoples who have been dispossessed and disempowered in their own homelands.\(^{398}\)

Thus rather than being a signal that we are engaging in productive intersubjective dialogue, the claims that we are ‘post-Aboriginality’, being made by white theorists, are another articulation of the colonial desires of whiteness. Ah Kee and Foley challenge this claim through the imbrications of their art objects and their own self-defined Blak identities. The challenges and limits to our ability to ‘read’ Aboriginality, asserted by Ah Kee and Foley, have implications beyond the art objects these challenges are embedded within. As the narratives at the opening of this chapter demonstrate, the idea that we are ‘post-race’ is articulated in the 2008 Apology in the narrative that we have moved on from the dark chapters of our racially discriminatory history. Central to this Apology, however, is that the Australian nation-state has the sovereign right to claim Indigenous peoples as Australians (‘ours’) and that the terms of repairing past colonial violence will be dictated by the Australian nation-state. The ideological violence of colonial whiteness and its desires to read Aboriginality are further reinforced by the material reality of the ongoing, discriminatory Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory (2012) policy (the 10 year extension of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (2007).

Yet the challenges to white desires for ‘post-Aboriginality’ asserted by Ah Kee and Foley are also echoed in events such as the 26\(^{\text{th}}\) January, 2012 Tent Embassy protests. These challenges assert the limits of what the white-desiring subject can read and know, and in doing so

interrupt (however momentarily) the rearticulation of patriarchal white sovereignty. These are challenges in which we as white-desiring-subjects, working within the structures and institutions of the Australian state, have a responsibility to engage with and respond to. The future implications of this work then are to explore the facets and depths of the challenges being made by Indigenous artists, peoples and nations and more importantly explore how white audiences, subjects and State structures respond to them. We have to work on this project in order to map the ever-changing mutations of white desires so that we can interrupt and undermine the violence of these desires and their affects. The question of whether, in exploring the challenges made by Indigenous artists, peoples and nations, we are able to substantially change the power relations in the relationship between the white critic and an Indigenous artist is an important extension of this project of responsibility. The implications for answering this question, arising from this project, are that the pursuit of such substantial change relies upon ongoing work (or a work-in-progress). While we can respond to Indigenous challenges to whiteness, our white-desiring-subjectivities are never completely made or undone. This ambiguity means that we, subjects located within institutional frameworks of whiteness, continually try to read ourselves as white despite, and sometimes whilst simultaneously engaging in opportunities to challenge this reading practice. Reframing our white-desiring reading practices is a project that must continuously be returned to and worked at. We must respond to the anxieties of whiteness as indications of our responsibilities to others and continuously work at meeting these responsibilities. What this project has shown is that there are opportunities for us to engage with these responsibilities, if only we can work at reading ourselves differently by recognising the challenges of Indigenous artists.
Edouard Glissant, in the above quote, describes the build-up of Indigenous challenges, although ignored by whiteness, as a fertile reality which places opaque limits on the invisible transparency of whiteness’ desires to read and know humanity in its own image. As subjects who access and reinforce whiteness through our reading of the world around us we have a responsibility to acknowledge and contemplate the fertility of the challenges made by Indigenous artists, peoples and nations because of the shared colonial histories written in, on and around our bodies. Acknowledging the limits of knowing asserted by artists such as Vernon Ah Kee and Fiona Foley opens up fertile productive spaces, spaces where the possibility to be in Indigenous sovereignty can be worked at and possibilities for real dialogue can be imagined.
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