

Critical psychology in a context of ongoing acts of colonisation

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Abstract

Although encompassing a broad range of topic areas, approaches to analysis, and theoretical frameworks, it is arguably the case that critical psychology in Australia is best represented by research undertaken on the topic of racism. The primary reason why critical research on racism has been so prevalent in Australia, is because of the ongoing history of colonisation in the country. Critical psychological approaches thus allow for a political (and discursive) examination of the psychology of racism. This paper first outlines the context of Australia as a colonial nation, before going on to analyse a press release made by one Australian politician in 2011. The analysis, focused primarily on specific rhetorical devices, examines how Indigenous sovereignty - centred in the paper as an empirical fact against which all knowledge or truth claims must be assessed - is denied, and moreover how the press release signifies an investment in this denial. The paper concludes by suggesting that critical psychology in Australia has an important ongoing role both in deconstructing existing truth claims about race, as well as reconstructing new possibilities for thinking about and relating to the fact of Indigenous sovereignty and colonisation.

Keywords: Australia, critical psychology, racism, colonisation, Indigenous sovereignty, politics

As the time drew nearer for writing this piece, a rather interesting (though highly problematic) press release was issued by Mr Ted Baillieu, the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs in the Australian State of Victoria. The press release was problematic for the logic that it employed in regards to the recognition of Indigenous people accorded by Mr Baillieu and the Liberal party of which he is a Minister. It was, nonetheless, interesting as a prime example of the rhetoric of inclusivity employed by many Australian politicians in regards to Indigenous people. As such, and by way of introducing one, arguably central, aspect of critical psychology in Australia to an international readership, this paper analyses in close detail the contents of this press release.

Before going on to analyse the press release, however, it is important to signal why its contents allow for reflection upon the state of critical psychology in Australia. The reasons for this are twofold. First, the fact of Australia's ongoing colonial history - one in which racialised hierarchies and practices of domination produce racial difference as a key site of contestation - is something that requires continued attention from critical researchers. In writing this paper, then, and bearing in mind the remit of this special issue to describe the features of critical psychology in one given region - in this case Australia - my argument is that whilst critical psychology in Australia is constituted by a broad and diverse range of research interests and areas of focus, it is racism, and its particularly insidious neo-colonial forms, that must be given sustained attention. Focusing on Mr Baillieu's press release thus provides an opportunity to demonstrate one of the ways in which critical psychology in

Australia can make a contribution to challenging racialised and colonising networks of discursive power.

The second and related reason why focusing on the press release from Mr Baillieu provides a useful way of considering the role of critical psychology in Australia is due to the fact that critical psychological research in Australia to date has resulted in the production of a sustained body of critical psychological research on racism, largely spearheaded by Professor Martha Augoustinos at the University of Adelaide (e.g., Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Augoustinos, LeCouteur & Soyland, 2002; Augoustinos, Tuffin & Rapley, 1999; Hanson-Easey & Augoustinos, 2010; LeCouteur & Augoustinos, 2001; LeCouteur, Rapley & Augoustinos, 2001; O'Doherty & Augoustinos, 2008), though over the past decade such research has been increasingly added to by academics from across Australia. Discursive research on racism in Australia continues to make a vital contribution to identifying and naming the rhetorical tools through which politicians specifically, as well as the general public more broadly, make claims about groups such as Indigenous people and refugees, claims that legitimate the marginalisation of these groups.

In order to provide further context for the analysis that is presented here, it is important to first examine in some detail the history of Australia as a colonial nation, in order to highlight the broader social factors at play in relation to the press release. Whilst the analysis of the press release that I provide below is focused to a large degree on the micro level of discourse, introducing the colonial context first, and referring back to it throughout the analysis of the press release, also demonstrates the need for macro level analyses of the discursive operations of racialised power in colonial nations such as Australia.

Colonisation in Australia

As many readers of this article might already be aware, the colonisation of Australia involved the dispossession and genocide of the more than 200 First Nations whose sovereignty over the continent has existed for over 40, 000 years. In contrast to colonial nations such as the United States and New Zealand – where some form of treaty was negotiated with Indigenous people (even if in many instances this was not adhered to) – Australia was ‘taken possession’ in the name of King George III, despite an awareness on the part of both Captain Cook and the British monarchy that Australia was already inhabited. The fact of Indigenous sovereignty was circumvented by declaring the continent as ‘Terra Nullius’ – as ‘land of no one’. This legal assumption presumed not that the land was literally empty, but that it was legally empty of property owning subjects who could hold a rightful or recognised claim to sovereignty. Such an assumption, which required the brutal enforcement of the presumed to be sovereign rights of the British monarchy, has thus informed relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous (specifically white) people since first contact.

Yet the denial of Indigenous sovereignties by white colonisers does not mean that such sovereignties do not continue to exist, nor that Indigenous people have not consistently resisted the theft of their lands (Moreton-Robinson, 2003). Whilst white people may have gained control of much of the land that constitutes Australia through the (illegal) claiming of the land as a possession of the Australian nation State (proclaimed as such in 1901), the existence of Indigenous sovereignty has not been extinguished. As Moreton-Robinson notes, Indigenous people carry their sovereign rights to land with them through their ontological relationship to country. Displacement from their country, dispossession of their land, and the

denial of the right to speak their language or practice their culture does not mean that sovereignty over land and knowledge of culture does not continue.

Recognition of ongoing sovereignty – within Australian law – was demonstrated in the landmark Mabo2 land rights case in 1992, where the High Court of Australia recognised the inherent rights of Indigenous people to hold title to land as First Nations people. Yet this has not been without consequence. Following the Mabo2 outcome the then Labor government passed the Native Title Act (1993), which outlined the mechanisms through which land could be claimed by Indigenous nations. Subsequently, however, when the coalition government (constituted primarily by the Liberal party) came into power in 1996, it introduced the Native Title Amendment Act, 1998, which significantly tightened the requirements for the claiming of land rights. This amendment to the Act was passed in many ways as a response to the findings of the Wik land rights claim, which recognised that Native Title is not inherently extinguished by the granting of a pastoral lease. Findings such as these were seen as constituting a threat to the sovereignty of the Australian nation, hence the passing of the Native Title Amendment Act to protect the interests of mining companies and pastoralists.

Since the passing of the Act some land claims have been successful (such as the Miriuwung Gajjorong case), many have not been recognised by the High Court (such as those by the Yarmirr, Fejo and Yorta Yorta people). In the case of the Yorta Yorta, the testimony of white pastoralists and anthropologists were used to ‘prove’ that the Yorta Yorta people had not had ‘continuous contact with their lands’ and, in Justice Olney’s words, that the ‘tide of history’ had ‘washed away’ native title (Moreton-Robinson, 2004). This represents one particular example of the legal fiction of Terra Nullius being used to perpetuate the claiming of sovereignty by the Australian nation, where native title is defined according to the rules of the nation, and where the testimony of white people is taken as ‘reliable evidence’.

To reiterate, however, such legal determinations fail to recognise that Indigenous peoples never ceded sovereignty to their land, and that Australia is thus a nation located upon land that is illegally possessed. Further to this, Moreton-Robinson notes that cases such as that of the Yorta Yorta not only centre non-indigenous laws and interpretations of proof and evidence, but they also fail to treat Indigenous people as subjects of colonial law itself. As Moreton-Robinson cogently argues, the judges of the High Court failed to apply common law precedent in making their determination about the Yorta Yorta claim. As she notes:

In the Mabo 2 decision the Justices held that when the Crown asserted sovereignty, the indigenous people of Australia became subjects of the Crown and as such entitled to the protection of the imported Common law which extended to protection of existing property rights.

That the judges in the Yorta Yorta case did not apply this common law finding represents a failure that can only have resulted from their inability to conceive of Indigenous peoples as subjects of Australian law (which they have been since being ‘granted’ citizenship in 1967).

As this brief history of colonisation in Australia would suggest, then, contestations over who has the right to define ownership continue, yet such contestations fundamentally fail to recognise the ongoing fact of Indigenous sovereignty, and the location of all Australians upon land that is stolen. Moreover, I would hope that this brief discussion of Australia’s ongoing colonial history highlights the ways in which critical psychology’s ongoing (and for the most part justified) scepticism of fact claims is incommensurate with an understanding of

sovereignty issues in Australia. Whilst we might, as critical researchers, wish to be sceptical of claims made by politicians when they speak of ‘the nation’, such scepticism, I would argue, is not applicable when we consider Indigenous sovereignty. In other words, and as Fiona Nicoll (2000, p. 370) states, “Indigenous sovereignty exists *because* I cannot know of what it consists; my epistemological artillery cannot penetrate it”. Treating Indigenous sovereignty as a fact is thus not contrary to the critical psychological focus upon the construction of ‘truth claims’. Rather, it highlights the cultural specificity of such a focus.

Racism and Recognition in the Press Release

To return to critical psychological research on racism in Australia, then; in addition to identifying the complex ways in which marginalisation is often couched in terms of inclusivity, Australian critical psychological research has also emphasised the subjective investments that non-indigenous (and specifically white) Australians have in depicting Indigenous people in very specific, stereotyped, ways (e.g., Due & Riggs, 2011; Riggs & Augoustinos, 2004; 2005). Given the above outlined history of colonisation in Australia, this research has emphasised such subjective investments not as intrapsychic processes *per se*, but rather as collective discursive resources that produce a particular form of tightly regulated intelligibility for white Australians, one in which the denial of colonisation and Indigenous sovereignty operates as an overriding principle. Such investments function to render invisible the operations of racial privilege, precisely by making invisible the denials that underpin them (what, following Freud, we might term the repression of racism. See Riggs, 2003; 2007).

An investment in denying Indigenous sovereignty is evident in the press release made by Mr Baillieu. The very topic of the press release itself signifies an unwarranted investment in denialism: the press release was concerned with stating both that making an acknowledgment of traditional owners is not a mandatory part of public functions, but that the Victorian government is committed to policies that recognise and support Indigenous people. For international readers, it has increasingly become commonplace for public events (such as conferences, gallery exhibition openings, and public speeches) to include either a welcome to country made by an elder of the Indigenous nation upon whose lands the event is held, or in absence of this for the opening speaker to begin their address by acknowledging the sovereignty of the Indigenous nation upon whose land the event is held.

Opening with the disclaimer “The Victorian Coalition Government recognises the first peoples of this nation through a variety of mechanisms including, where appropriate, acknowledging traditional owners past and present”, the press release then moves swiftly on to state that “Acknowledgement of Country is not mandated, never has been, and nor should it be. The Coalition Government believes that such acknowledgements may be diminished if they become tokenistic” and later closes with the comment “and the Premier and other representatives of the Victorian Coalition Government will continue to acknowledge the first peoples of this nation - not because it is mandated, but because we choose to do so out of respect. We all have a deep and enduring respect for Aboriginal peoples”.

In the refutation that follows the opening disclaimer, Mr Baillieu constructs as taken for granted the claim that an acknowledgment of country should not be mandated. This is achieved through the rhetorical device of maximization in the form of a three-part list, where Mr Baillieu states that an acknowledgement is “not mandated, never has been, and nor should it be”. Yet despite the consensus warrant that is implicit in this claim, it is far from the case that this is a universally agreed upon issue. For some people and institutions (i.e., those who

recognize Indigenous sovereignty as a fact and thus treat an acknowledgement of country as a protocol that must be observed), an acknowledgement is indeed mandated as but one way of recognising the ongoing sovereignty of Indigenous nations. To state that it never has been mandatory, then, is incorrect.

The moral claim made in the third part of the maximising list – ‘nor should it be’ – is bolstered by the sentence that follows it, in which the mandating of an acknowledgement is constructed as ‘tokenistic’. Here Mr Baillieu deploys a rhetorically self-sufficient argument to deny the need to mandate acknowledgements of country. This is only possible, I would suggest, precisely because Mr Baillieu fails to recognise that in treating acknowledgments as a matter of choice for any given speaker, this in effect constructs acknowledgements as always already tokenistic. Tokenism, by definition, references something done in a perfunctory or merely symbolic manner. Of course when an acknowledgement of country is done simply on the whim of the speaker, and when it is not connected to the aim of continually challenging and rendering visible ongoing acts of colonisation (by explicitly recognising the fact of Indigenous sovereignty), then such an acknowledgement is indeed tokenistic. By contrast, an acknowledgment given because it is protocol to do so (because the sovereignty of Indigenous nations must always be recognised) is far from tokenistic – it is a very real act of challenge to denialist narratives of colonisation.

Looking at the closing sentences from the press release, we see further how Mr Baillieu constructs as common sense his denial of the need to mandate acknowledgements of country, in his statement that Liberal politicians will make an acknowledgment “not because it is mandated, but because we choose to do so out of respect”. Here making an acknowledgement is constructed as a personal choice, not a political act, and certainly not an act demanded by the context of standing on ground illegally possessed that must be recognised as the sovereign property of a First Nation. Mr Baillieu’s use of the word ‘choose’ highlights the considerable privilege accorded to non-indigenous (and specifically white) people to decide where and when they will recognise the other (Hage, 1998; Nicoll, 2004). Of course this notion of choice is undermined by Mr Baillieu’s subsequent use of the word ‘respect’: if a choice is made on the basis of respect, then surely there is always the possibility that due to a *lack* of respect any individual may refuse to ‘choose’ to acknowledge country. Where the onus for respect lies is unclear in Mr Baillieu’s press release, however it is quite common for the suggestion to be that respect must be earned. This would suggest, then, that whether or not any individual ‘chooses’ to make an acknowledgement out of respect is contingent upon whether they perceive the Indigenous other as deserving respect. Again, this type of logic does not make for truly inclusive practices that are grounded in the fact of Indigenous sovereignty and ongoing colonisation, but rather hinges inclusivity upon the actions of the other.

Mr Baillieu’s closing sentence is also notable for its reference to Indigenous peoples. Again, this statement fails to adequately centre the issue as one related to sovereignty and land ownership, and instead reduces acknowledgements to respect for *peoples* (rather than *nations*). Whilst it could be argued that, to at least some degree, the term ‘peoples’ recognized a grouping or collective, it falls short of recognizing the sovereignty of those peoples and the status of their group as a sovereign nation. Of course, to mandate that representatives of the Australian nation (i.e., politicians) must acknowledge the owners of the nation upon which they stand may well be seen as a difficult position to adopt (and certainly some on the political right would refer to this as ‘divisive’). This point aside, such an acknowledgement would nonetheless render it perfectly clear that whilst Australia might exist as an ‘imagined community’ (Anderson, 1983), it is located upon land whose sovereignty still resides with the

more than 200 First Nations situated across the land colonised as ‘Australia’ (even if legal recognition of this sovereignty is still yet to occur for most nations).

This problematic emphasis upon peoples rather than nations is epitomised in the sample acknowledgement that Mr Baillieu provides in his press release (taken from a previous speech by the Victorian Premier): “I would like to start today by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land past and present. In so doing I want to make it clear that our Government acknowledges the special place indigenous [sic] Victorians occupy as the original inhabitants and custodians of this state”. Mr Baillieu goes on in his press release to state that this type of acknowledgment is a “real and genuine acknowledgement that means something to both the speaker and the audience, rather than a mandated set of words”. This emphasis upon ‘real and genuine’ constructs these terms as taken for granted, without considering for whom they might be experienced as such. Whilst Mr Baillieu employs a consensus warrant to claim that the words “mean something to both the speaker and the audience”, we in fact have no way of knowing what they mean for the audience. Rather, this is a rhetorically self-sufficient argument that makes the claim that the speaker of the sample acknowledgement is ‘real’ and ‘genuine’.

If we are, here for a specific purpose, to take this claim by Mr Baillieu at face value (which normally we would refrain from doing when it comes to politicians), then it is worth considering what is being referenced as ‘real and genuine’. In the sample acknowledgement itself, reference is made to “the special place indigenous Victorians [sic] occupy as the original inhabitants and custodians of this state”. What is ‘real’ and ‘genuine’ about this acknowledgement, I would suggest, is the fact that it clearly evidences the investment of white Australians in curtailing Indigenous sovereignty. This most clearly occurs through the delimiting of Indigenous people in Victoria to a ‘special place’, rather than recognising that all of the land referred to as ‘Victoria’ is the place of Indigenous nations. Further, the term ‘Indigenous Victorians’ engages in an act of epistemic violence, wherein what is referenced as a collective is in fact a product of a colonial mode of naming: Victoria the state is located upon the lands of 19 Indigenous nations. The term ‘Indigenous Victorians’, then, reduces this complexity to a collective term that is subsumed by the higher-level term ‘Victorian’. This reduction of Indigenous people in Victoria to the term ‘Indigenous Victorians’ also fails to distinguish between Indigenous people living in Victoria upon their traditional lands (which would likely be the minority of people) and Indigenous people living in Victoria upon the lands of other Indigenous nations (which is the case for the majority of Indigenous people in Australia, either because of dispossession from their own lands and/or because of the demands of the economy and the need to move to areas where employment and services are available).

Finally, the sample acknowledgement is problematic for its reference to ‘Indigenous Victorians’ as the “original inhabitants and custodians of this state”. This is problematic first because it continues the frame of reference as the ‘state’, when this is a nonsense in reference to nations who lived on the land now colonized as Victoria for 40, 000 years before it was classified a ‘state’. Moreover, it is problematic for its implicit ‘now and then’ construction of ‘custodianship’, where it is ‘in the past’ that Indigenous people’s ‘custodianship’ is located (i.e., ‘original’). And of course the very term ‘custodianship’ is problematic for its reduction of the complex ontological relationship that Indigenous people have to land to a notion of ‘custodianship’.

In sum, what I have suggested in the analysis provided here is that Mr Baillieu displays what

Moreton-Robinson (2004) refers to as a 'possessive investment' in both Indigenous people and the land upon which Victoria is located. He makes claims about Indigenous people that may be read as an attempt at delimiting Indigenous peoples' authority and denying their sovereignty, and in so centres an image of Victoria as part of the sovereign nation state of Australia. Importantly, the claims I have made here about Mr Baillieu's press release is not intended to impute anything about his own beliefs or attitudes towards Indigenous people *per se*. Rather, it is intended to render visible the forms of intelligibility that non-indigenous (and specifically white) Australians engage in when making claims about the land upon which we live, and the violence this can perpetuate against Indigenous people. In the following concluding section I take this point and consider its implications for what critical psychology in Australia can contribute to our understanding of ongoing colonialisms and the potential for challenging them.

Conclusions

In this brief paper I have sought to highlight what is unique about Australia in terms of its ongoing colonial history, and to explore one way in which critical psychology can contribute to the unpacking of this. As the above rhetorical analysis of Mr Baillieu's press release would suggest, what often appears to lie at the heart of much of what is said in the public sphere about Indigenous people is a cultural drive towards denying colonization, but also denying the ongoing fact of Indigenous sovereignty (Due & Riggs, 2011). These two forms of denial are, of course, somewhat paradoxical, in that denying colonisation forces our attention to the history of the land, and this can only result in a demand to focus upon whose land it is. This type of paradox produces for white Australians what Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos (2004) refer to as an 'ontological disturbance', one in which any claim to belonging must be premised upon recognition of the history of where one is claiming to belong, yet for white Australians this requires recognition of both colonisation and the fact of Indigenous sovereignty, recognition of which accounts such as those provided by Mr Baillieu appear invested in denying.

What critical psychology can offer, in response, is a non-individualising, non-internalising account of white subjectivities in Australia, one that allows both for the rhetorical devices that are deployed to manage the above mentioned ontological disturbance to be rendered visible, but importantly also for new ways of thinking about belonging to be developed (Riggs & Augoustinos, 2008). In this sense, and following Teo's (1999) excellent points about the role of critical psychology in challenging racism in the very first issue of the *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*, what are required are approaches that both *deconstruct* existing binaries and stereotypes, but also *reconstruct* new possibilities. In the case of Australia, critical psychology thus has an important role to play in continuing to examine the operations of racialised power that operate to privilege certain groups at the expense of others, and to do so with the intent of considering the forms of intelligibility that might make possible a claim to belonging in Australia for non-indigenous people that truly engages with the fact of Indigenous sovereignty.

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