

# Understanding History as a Rhetorical Strategy: Constructions of Truth and Objectivity in Debates over Windschuttle's 'Fabrication'

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## Abstract

Contestations over truth claims continue to remain the focus of white historical research in Australia. One recent example of this has been debates over Keith Windschuttle's *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*. This paper will argue that such debates demonstrate the ideological nature of white historical research, and more specifically, the ways in which these debates represent an attempt to manage the 'anxiety of whiteness' – the lack of, and longing for, a foundational claim to white belonging. Through an examination of the rhetorical strategies of 'objectivity' and 'ontological imperialism' evident within the debates, this paper will suggest that the continued use of science as a framework for determining historical truth works to recentre white values and ways of knowing, the result being that Indigenous sovereignty is denied. As a counter to this, it is suggested that white historians need to engage with their privileged location, and to develop more ethical ways of responding to the fact of Indigenous sovereignty.

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## Introduction

The history of Australia's colonisation continues to be a contested site, wherein narratives of a 'civilising mission' challenge narratives of dispossession and genocide. Such struggles over representation demonstrate one of the key questions that Keith Jenkins<sup>1</sup> raises in his work on the discipline of history, namely, whose history counts? From this perspective, history may be understood not as an 'objective truth' arrived at by those who correctly study 'the facts', but rather as a meaning making practice that privileges certain groups of people over others, and which thus legitimises the world view of particular groups to the exclusion and oppression of others. Understood in this way, contestations over 'Australia's history' represent much more than an academic exercise in truth-making. Instead, they underpin the claims to belonging that non-indigenous people have made to this country since colonisation, and the corollary denial of Indigenous sovereignty that this desire for belonging has engendered.

One recent example of this struggle over belonging is provided by Keith Windschuttle's<sup>2</sup> book *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, and the ensuing debates over it. These debates continue to demonstrate some of the central anxieties that shape non-indigenous belonging in this country, and more specifically, some of the practical ways in which white ways of knowing continue to be privileged in relation to histories of colonisation. Of particular interest to this paper are the debates between Windschuttle and those academics that he critiques in his book as supporting what he terms the 'genocide thesis'. These contestations over representation provide a useful means for understanding how history operates as a rhetorical device, and how it is deployed to warrant particular claims to truth.

From this starting point, then, this paper seeks to demonstrate two of the rhetorical strategies that would appear to be evident in debates surrounding (and located within) Windschuttle's text. Following on from a brief elaboration of the ideological nature of historical research, this paper suggests that both 'claims to objectivity' and acts of 'ontological imperialism'<sup>3</sup> represent rhetorical strategies that are deployed to a) manage opponents' truth claims, b) legitimise white ways of knowing, and thus c) represent particular individual truth claims as more valid than others. In looking at the effects of these rhetorical strategies, this paper takes as central the sovereignty of Indigenous people, and more specifically, the challenge that Indigenous sovereignty presents to white truth claims.

Thus, rather than attempting to perpetuate any claim to an 'objective perspective', this paper firmly locates the subjectivity of the researcher as a central aspect of research in the area of history.<sup>4</sup> As a result, it is suggested that all non-indigenous academics (the present author included) need to examine how our claims to objectivity render us complicit with oppressive practices, and what this means for any attempt to disprove our 'opponents' theories *in accepting the terms set by science* (as an appropriate 'arbiter of truth'). Indeed, it is suggested here that conceptualisations such as those represented by the term

'opponent' are inherently flawed – they presume that white people, through adherence to scientific values, can overcome the institutionalised racism within which we are located. Instead, this paper proposes that we need to develop more ethical ways of responding to the sovereignty of Indigenous people, and to recognise our own complicity within the hegemony of whiteness.

### **Whose History – Whose Silence?**

Constructions of history within the debates surrounding Windschuttle's book demonstrate some of the ideological underpinnings of white historical research. Thus as Keith Jenkins<sup>5</sup> suggests, 'in the end history is theory and theory is ideological and ideology is just material interests'. These material interests may be understood as connected to maintaining white privilege by justifying white control of resources and white hegemony over which accounts of history hold sway. This is evident in the framing of the debates, and in particular, the discussions that examine the phrase 'the Great Australian Silence', which was evoked by W.E.H. Stanner in his Boyer lecture in 1968. Windschuttle critiques Henry Reynolds<sup>6</sup> for using the phrase by suggesting that 'as an accurate summary of Australian cultural history in the first half of the twentieth century, it is not convincing' (p. 409). In so doing, he seeks to render visible the ideological assumptions of Reynolds work, by demonstrating his investment (as well as that of Stanner) in promoting a particular political viewpoint of Australian history. Windschuttle thus contrasts this with his own position, which he implicitly suggests is 'ideology free'.<sup>7</sup>

As a response to this, Robert Manne,<sup>8</sup> in his introduction to the edited collection *Whitewash* (a response to Windschuttle's book), suggests that Windschuttle misses the point of the phrase, and instead reasserts the claim that 'both scholars and citizens had, thus far [at the time of Stanner's speech], failed to integrate the story of the Aboriginal dispossession and its aftermath into their understanding of the course of Australian history'. In doing this, whilst he reveals Windschuttle's own ideological and political assumptions, Manne fails to recognise that by reasserting the validity of the phrase, he in effect privileges a white account of history, one within which the notion of 'silence' makes sense. In other words, rather than paying attention to the vocalicity of Indigenous people in regards to history, he prioritises silence as the dominant discourse at the time of Stanner's lecture. Whilst it is important to acknowledge that silence was indeed the dominant *white* discourse at the time, it is also important to recognise the ways in which the phrase effectively excludes Indigenous people from the category 'Australian citizen', and thus perpetuates the notion that Indigenous people have not 'looked back' or voiced dissent in the face of colonisation.

This example of debate over the use of Stanner's phrase exemplifies some of the ways in which the ideological nature of historical accounts is often masked through recourse to notions of (white) truth and fact: debating the meaning of the term does little to decentre white values, and instead may be seen as reasserting the validity of white accounts of history. Thus as Martha Augoustinos<sup>9</sup> suggests, 'the historical narrative explains away and rationalizes existing social relations and inequities'. Taking up a point made in the

introduction of this paper, then, it may therefore be possible to understand how white debates over Australian history demonstrate the foundational anxiety of white belonging. To elaborate: a focus on what counts as truth, and 'whose (white) history matters' works to construct history as a site divorced from the present. As a result, and regardless of claims to the contrary, such constructions evidence attempts to locate white people outside of history, and more specifically, outside of white violence. From this perspective, critiquing someone else's historical research does not necessarily require a critique of one's own privilege – it allows for the masking of the privilege that inheres to white academic writing. As will be elaborated in the next section, the rhetorical tool of 'objectivity' is one of the ways in which white historians locate themselves outside of history.

Further to the previous point about the past/present binary, it is useful to elaborate the ideological functions of this distinction. Constructions of history as an 'artefact of the past' work to maintain a gap between current day actions, and the 'previous actions' of those who are located firmly 'in the past'. Thus as Jenkins<sup>10</sup> suggests, 'those who control the present control the past and those who control the past control the future... Thus people(s) in the present need antecedents to locate themselves now and legitimate their ongoing and future ways of living'. This demonstrates the paradox that underpins the past/present binary, namely, that as white people we need to find ways to justify our belonging, but at the same time this is problematic in that our only justification is through recourse to the violence of colonisation and the myth of terra nullius.<sup>11</sup> Margaret Wetherell<sup>12</sup> suggests that this results in a logic whereby 'accounts which most effectively justify the status quo flexibly stress the continuity of good and the discontinuity of evil'. This is evident within the debate over Windschuttle's book, where those involved either focus on the ongoing 'generosity of white people' (whose aim is to 'civilise'), and the location of 'bad choices' in the past (in Windschuttle's case), or (again) on the 'generosity of white people' (whose aim it to 'do good' by 'telling the truth' about colonisation), and the location of 'the bad' as being the position of certain 'misguided' historians (in the case of Windschuttle's opponents). In both instances white violence is managed through the deployment of the past/present distinction – either through the denial of white violence, or through the suggestion that 'good white intentions' can help to generate white absolution.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to this understanding of the past, we may understand the very concrete ways in which the past continues to exist in the present. Hadyn White<sup>14</sup> suggests that 'the past can be conceived to have continued to exist in the present... as elements of social praxis inherited from the past in the form of conventions, ideas, institutions, beliefs, and so on'. In this way, the foundational assumption of terra nullius (for example) continues to inform legal, political and social responses to Indigenous sovereignty, and thus continues to reassert the normative status of whiteness. As a result, 'the past' is constructed as something both foreign to us as white people, and also intimately a part of who we are, and the unearned privileges that we benefit from.<sup>15</sup> The past is foreign, in that as white people we now lay claim to a form of national belonging that discounts the relatively short duration of our location in this country, thus positioning

'narratives of arrival' as somewhat foreign to our sense of belonging now. Yet, at the same time, the past structures how we understand ourselves – the triumphs that we claim – and therefore the sense of self-through-belonging that we evoke.

Aileen Moreton-Robinson<sup>16</sup> provides a theoretical framework through which to understand these apparent paradoxes of white belonging – the refutation of white violence on the one hand, and the promotion of white sovereignty through the denial of Indigenous sovereignty on the other. Moreton-Robinson suggests that this demonstrates the 'conjuncture of good intentions of individuals and the theft, denial and silence that [has] supported white sovereignty'.<sup>17</sup> This simultaneity of benevolence and violence renders visible a 'national psychosis' – the unsettling that is produced through a recognition of the illegal dispossession of Indigenous people.<sup>18</sup> As a result, these contrasting evocations of the past demonstrate the uncanniness of white belonging – belonging that harbours a foundational impossibility.<sup>19</sup> Read alongside the fact of Indigenous sovereignty, then, this point thus demonstrates the ideological advantages that stem from claiming a separation between the past and the present. Such a distinction maintains white violence as being 'in the past', thus allowing white historians to elaborate 'the present' as somehow being more free from racialised assumptions or race privilege. As the following analysis of scientific rhetoric will show, this 'up the mountain research saga'<sup>20</sup> allows for an account of historical research that legitimates white ways of knowing through the tropes of objectivity and proof.

### **Rhetorical Device I – Objectivity and Truth**

Following on from the previous discussion of the ideological underpinnings of white historical research, it may be possible to examine Windshuttle's text more closely (and the responses to it) in order to better understand how notions of truth are used to warrant particular versions of history. Intimately related to this is an understanding of what particular constructions of history achieve<sup>21</sup> – what are their material outcomes, and how do they reify science as having access to the truth? Hadyn White<sup>22</sup> identifies the trope of metonymy as one particular rhetorical tool that is used to warrant claims to objectivity. White suggests that metonymy is deployed to mask the metaphorical nature of science – that in order to claim a 'truthful' representational value for their research, those who employ the discourse of science rely upon the presumption of a direct correspondence between observation and fact. This perspective achieves its hegemonic position by ignoring the contextual nature of meaning making practices, and instead promotes scientific objectivity as both a laudable and achievable goal.<sup>23</sup>

In the introduction to his book, Windschuttle proposes that:

This series is... an excursion into the methodology of history. It examines how we can know about the past, the kinds of evidence we can regard as reliable, and how to detect false claims when they are made... There was no choice but to address the fabric of [other white historians'] scholarship in

order to unpick their work and to establish what *really* happened.<sup>24</sup>

With this in mind, he suggests that:

[One] reason to start with Tasmania is because its records are so good. On the mainland, the supporters of the genocide thesis often hide the weakness of their case behind what they claim is a paucity of historical documents... This is definitely untrue for Van Diemen's Land. Hence, rather than evidence 'never existing' or being lost or destroyed, the documentary record here is comprehensive and accessible.<sup>25</sup>

Together, these two extracts demonstrate the assumptions of objectivity that Windschuttle brings to his analysis. Thus, in drawing upon the discourse of scientific objectivity, Windschuttle takes white written records *a priori* as truth – that which is written down is not only all there is to know, but is also an accurate recording of historical events. In his justification for looking at the settlement of Tasmania, Windschuttle suggests that it is a fair place to start 'because all of its records are so good'. Here 'good' is taken to mean true, where truth is defined by the standards of white historical research. In this regard, truth is taken to be an artefact that can be objectively measured, according to the rules of verification. Thus throughout the book Windschuttle attempts to prove his claims by providing corroborating evidence for his thesis. What this entails, is a reliance upon white written accounts of frontier Tasmania, and the promotion of these as representing 'what really happened'. In light of the previous discussion of the reasons for constructing white historical research as fact, Windschuttle's reference to the 'good' of 'Tasmania's records' may also be taken to mean non-anxiety provoking, where the white records of a 'civilising mission' can work to absolve the white nation of blame for the genocide of Indigenous people. In this regard, then, claims to the objectivity of white records (and by implication, his own research) allow Windschuttle to justify rhetorically his position 'outside' of 'the past', and thus to reassert his truth claims.

Windschuttle elaborates this claim in his suggestion that:

The argument that all history was politicised, that it was impossible for the historian to shed his political interests and prejudices, and that those who believed they could do so were only deluding themselves, became the most corrupting influence of all. It turned the traditional role of the historian, to stand outside contemporary society in order to seek the truth of the past, on its head. It allowed historians to write from an overtly partisan position and to justify this both to themselves and to anyone who dared to challenge them.<sup>26</sup>

In this extract Windschuttle clearly derides those who acknowledge the partisan nature of historical research, and instead aligns himself with a view of historical research as one that represents 'objective truth'. By constructing these

contrasting positions, Windschuttle is able to draw upon the power of scientific rhetoric in order to undermine the truth claims of those he labels supporters of the 'genocide thesis'. In particular, he pays attention to the work of Lyndall Ryan, and devotes a chapter to demonstrating the 'unscientific status' of her work. He concludes this chapter by suggesting that:

Unfortunately... standards of proof, accuracy and rigour are largely absent from the work of the current practitioners of Aboriginal history. In particular, the fact that Lyndall Ryan's work is devoid of credibility at so many places is a reflection not only of her own standards but also of those of the school of historiography of which she has long been an esteemed member. Not only have none of her colleagues publicly exposed her fabrications, they have continued to endorse her work.<sup>27</sup>

Together, these continual assertions of 'objective truth' are used to bolster Windschuttle's claim to be representing what 'really happened'. Thus rather than recognising the metaphorical nature of his claims (i.e., that they are driven by a desire to represent 'the past' in ways that reassert the goodness of white people), Windschuttle attempts to pass off his account as being factual – as the closest possible approximation of the events from the perspective of the present. Yet, as Denning<sup>28</sup> suggests, such 'definitions are rarely descriptions of what is, only declarations of territoriality claimed'. In this regard, Windschuttle's use of the rhetoric of objectivity may more transparently be understood as an attempt to reassert white belonging, and the sovereignty of white ownership.

The use of the rhetoric of objectivity is also evident in some of the responses to Windschuttle's book. Whilst on the whole these responses are prefaced by a recognition of the situatedness of historical knowledges and the subjectivity of the researcher, they do little to challenge scientific objectivity as the framework for determining truth. Thus as Aileen Moreton-Robinson<sup>29</sup> suggests, all white historians 'provide their interpretations through white man's filtered lens – a lens which is blind to the way in which white race privilege manifests itself in and through such work. The "truth" can only reside in the minds and the written word of white knowers'. Moreton-Robinson here points towards the limitations of using science as an arbiter of truth – the continual prioritisation of white constructions of truth only serves to reify the status quo, by ignoring white privilege, and thus in essence denying the situatedness of white truth claims.

In her refutation of Windschuttle's critique of her own work, Ryan<sup>30</sup> suggests that:

I will show that he has little understanding of the process of footnoting and even less knowledge of the sources I have used... I suggest that this tells us more about his lack of familiarity with research into primary sources than about the way I have used my footnotes... Windschuttle... mis-read and relied on sources that any scholar with a knowledge of the

Tasmanian archives would have readily found to be incomplete.

In this way, Ryan deploys the criteria of science in order to demonstrate Windschuttle's 'lack of familiarity'. As a result, Ryan implicitly suggests that Windschuttle's findings are a poor approximation of the truth, and that by employing a more 'objective' reading strategy (i.e., one that *does* have an understanding of 'primary sources') she is able to more accurately discern the 'truth of history'. Having said that, the point here is not that Ryan should not have the right to defend her work, nor that we should allow Windschuttle's work to go unchallenged. Rather, the point (and one which will be elaborated further) is that in accepting the terms of science when engaging in such debates, we continue to reify truth as a white concept, and one that is determined by the 'proper practices' of white historical research.

A similar critique of Windschuttle is provided by Peter Boyce,<sup>31</sup> in his suggestion that:

The number of elementary errors in *Fabrication* will soon exclude it from serious historical debate... The narrow selection of sources result[ed] in a profound ignorance of the basics of Van Diemonian [sic] economy, society, politics, which in turn leads to a series of elementary errors.

In pointing out the 'elementary errors' of Windschuttle's work, Boyce clearly constructs what counts as 'serious historical debate'. Those who do not play by the rules of white historical research are effectively excluded from involvement. Whilst this might be a useful way to exclude Windschuttle from the research area, it also in effect excludes other voices that dissent from the dominant paradigm of historical research. Boyce's claims also work to reassert the privilege that is given to white interpretations. In suggesting that Windschuttle displayed a 'profound ignorance of the basics of Van Diemonian [sic] economy, society, politics', he implicitly suggests that he (and other white historians) have a better understanding of these factors as a result of their research *not* containing errors. As a result, the terms that he employs, and the authority that he assumes work to recentre white accounts of history. Objectivity in this sense thus resembles a claim to neutrality, whereby individual white historians have the ability to ascertain what the facts are (i.e., about 'economy, society, politics'), and from there make a judgement about what constitutes the truth.<sup>32</sup> This particular account of historical objectivity thus assumes a position that effectively rules out alternate explanations and modes of understanding – for example, a focus on 'avoiding errors' or 'understanding the basics' works to mask the ethics of these particular foci.<sup>33</sup> In other words, the 'choice' to focus on these aspects of colonisation comes as a direct result of race privilege, and more precisely, from the assumption that historical events can be researched 'at a distance',<sup>34</sup> rather than as revealing the constitutive violence of white belonging. As the following section will elaborate, these assumptions demonstrate what Robert Young<sup>35</sup> has termed 'ontological imperialism' – the ways in which those



people who are positioned as the racialised other are allowed very specific locations within white historical research.

### **Rhetorical Device II - Ontological Imperialism**

The rhetorical device of ontological imperialism achieves two very important outcomes that work to manage the violence of colonisation and the corollary privilege of white people. First, it excludes but does not dismiss those people positioned as the racialised other, and second, it allows for the possibility of the subjectivity of the racialised other in very specific ways, set on the terms of whiteness.<sup>36</sup> This demonstrates the networks of power that inhere to historical research – the means by which it allows for very particular understandings of the racialised other, in ways that represent an attempt at co-opting difference. Thus as Robert Young<sup>37</sup> suggests, ‘when [white] knowledge or theory comprehends the other, then the alterity of the latter vanishes as it becomes part of the same’. This point may be taken a step further by suggesting that this act of incorporation is the fantasy of a ‘national psychosis’ – it is far from the case that the other is effectively incorporated into the same. Rather, the ‘anxiety of whiteness’ results from the fact of Indigenous sovereignty, something that always already exceeds incorporation – its very incommensurability provides a resistance to incorporation.<sup>38</sup>

Read through this lens, the rhetorical device of ontological imperialism may thus be understood as an attempt at managing this anxiety – at reasserting the hegemony of white historical knowledge. Windschuttle employs this rhetorical device when he attempts to dismiss the claims of those white historians who attempt to demonstrate the *a priori* rights of Indigenous people to land and ownership. For example, he proposes that:

The concept of ‘land rights’, which now dominate[s] both academic discourse and the Aboriginal political agenda, is also incongruous to Tasmania. The notion of ‘rights’ derives exclusively from the European political tradition, and has no meaning in traditional Aboriginal culture. The term ‘land’ is just as alien, having no role in either the vocabulary or the conceptual apparatus of Tasmanian hunter-gatherers.<sup>39</sup>

In this way, Windschuttle is able to ascribe a very specific (i.e., ‘primitive’) ontological position to Indigenous people, by constructing notions of ‘land’ and ‘rights’ as being solely European conceptualisations. In so doing, Windschuttle allows for the presence of Indigenous people, but does so by dismissing their claims to ownership *as defined by the terms set by white people*. Such a positioning, however, misses one key point - that Indigenous people are entitled to such ‘white constructions’ *as citizens of the white nation*. In her work on the Yorta Yorta land rights decision, Aileen Moreton-Robinson<sup>40</sup> suggests that the ‘possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty’ performs this ontological manoeuvre in order to reassert white sovereignty. As a result, white belonging is legitimated, and Indigenous sovereignty denied.

Windschuttle takes this ontological imperialism one step further by, in effect, denying Indigenous people a location within the category of 'humanity':

To talk about the Tasmanian Aborigines acting with 'humanity and compassion' [as per Sharon Morgan's suggestion in her book *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania*<sup>41</sup>] is to invoke concepts they would have regarded with complete incomprehension. These terms come not from Aboriginal but from European culture. It was the European Enlightenment that founded the idea of the unity of humanity and the Christian religion that originated the notion of sharing the suffering of others. Neither was a concept held by hunter-gatherer society, in Tasmania or anywhere else, for whom the idea of loyalties owed and sentiments shared beyond the boundary of kinship was literally unthinkable.<sup>42</sup>

This extract works to both position Indigenous people as being outside of the category 'humanity' (and thus as being unentitled to rights), and to dismiss the truth claims of Indigenous historians through the implicit assertion that any notion of 'Indigenous humanity and compassion' represents an inauthentic representation of Indigenous people 'in the past'. The arbitrary nature of this account of history is premised upon the construction of white settlers as active subjects. In taking white settlers' accounts as representing the truth, Windschuttle accords them the position 'active settler subject'. The outcome of this positioning is that Indigenous people are automatically assigned the corollary status of 'passive native object'. As a result, Indigenous people are positioned as passive recipients of white settlement. Yet, such a construction may be seen as anxiety producing, in that it leaves the white nation open to accusations of colonisation and dispossession, rather than the result of 'natural progress'. In other words, the imposition of white people onto Indigenous lands may be read as an intentional act of genocide. This anxiety is managed through the construction of colonial intent as the desire to 'civilize and modernize',<sup>43</sup> acts which are positioned as 'merely' benevolent, rather than oppressive. In this way, the construction of Indigenous people as passive recipients of colonisation is achieved through recourse to the binary of 'civilised vs primitive'.<sup>44</sup>

Yet, it may be suggested that such constructions again demonstrate the 'anxiety of whiteness'. For whiteness to be maintained as normative, it must be contrasted with that which is considered to be 'not-white'. Such a contrast would seem to demonstrate the agentic existence of Indigenous people – a reality that unsettles Windschuttle's ontological imperialism in ways that cannot be contained through recourse to narratives of a 'civilising mission'. To counter this, and as has already been alluded to, Windschuttle constructs what may be termed the 'appropriate other',<sup>45</sup> thus rendering Indigenous people always already a part of whiteness. This conceptualisation is reliant upon the equation of whiteness with the normative self, and Indigeneity with the different other, thus positioning Indigenous people as a facet of white knowledges – as objects incapable of looking back at whiteness.<sup>46</sup> Yet these attempts at 'controlling the black gaze'<sup>47</sup> may instead be seen as revealing the constitutional lack of white

belonging. This lack thus demonstrates the failure of representation that signifies white ownership.<sup>48</sup> Windschuttle's attempts at defining the location of the appropriate other are therefore always already constrained by the fact of Indigenous sovereignty.

These attempts at denying the fact of Indigenous sovereignty are also visible in some of the responses to Windschuttle's claim that Indigenous people 'have no role' for the term 'land', or no concept of 'humanity'. In his examination of these claims, Peter Boyce<sup>49</sup> suggests that the evidence that Windschuttle uses is both unreliable, and indeed can be read as 'disproving' Windschuttle's thesis:

In fact, even Peron's [the French naturalist whose written reports Windschuttle cites as proof of the 'violent nature' of Indigenous society] views differ significantly. The naturalist had a friendly meeting at Port Cygnet with the Aborigines, including three men, two women and four children, "providing the most striking example we had ever had of attention and reasoning among savage people".

In using Peron's report of 'attention and reasoning', Boyce effectively reinforces the validity of these terms as important points of consideration in regards to ownership and sovereignty. Likewise, Boyce reinscribes the ontological imperialism inherent to Windschuttle's statement, by defending Indigenous people as 'appropriate others'. In so doing, he does little to move the discussion away from the terms set by white historical research, and instead continues to focus on the values of white people. Thus as Greg Lehman<sup>50</sup> suggests, such an approach 'equates the idea of truth with the search for facts' rather than understanding it as 'a question of authenticity and at the same time of an apprehension of reality'. Lehman goes on to suggest, following Lacan, that 'the desire for recognition produces a primordial confrontation leading to 'the desire for the disappearance of the other'.<sup>51</sup> This is evident in the extracts from both Windschuttle and Boyce, where their apparent desire to recognise the goodness of white people results in a desire to erase Indigenous people, or at the very least, to represent Indigenous people in ways that deny Indigenous sovereignty. This ontological imperialism demonstrates the synchronicity of the past and present, whereby white violence continues to inform the ways in which white historians engage with Indigenous sovereignty, and the accounts of *ongoing* histories that are privileged. In the section that follows, this point will be further elaborated, by returning to the rhetoric of scientific objectivity, and linking this to the explication of ontological imperialism. It will be suggested that together these two rhetorical devices demonstrate the ways in which the 'rules of the game' of white historical research are often engaged to the exclusion of Indigenous understandings of historical truth, regardless of the intent of the author.

### **Complicity, Resistance and Engagement**

In her work on the 'rhetoric of pseudoscience', Celia Kitzinger<sup>52</sup> suggests some of the apparent advantages of using this rhetorical device to refute others' truth

claims, but she also demonstrates the problems of complicity that it generates. Kitzinger proposes that whilst 'the rhetoric of pseudoscience is very attractive to many people because it appears to offer a legitimate and intelligible language with which to discredit unpalatable or oppressive research findings', it does so by 'function[ing] as a jeremiad – a rhetorical form devoted to bringing good out of evil: out of the pseudoscience of the past... a new, truly scientific [form of knowledge] is waiting to be born'. As a result, the rhetoric of pseudoscience is not outside of science – indeed, it is precisely through its claims to knowing what scientific truth 'really is' that pseudoscience achieves its rhetorical effects.

As has already been shown, Windschuttle uses this rhetorical device to discredit his opponents by pointing out the 'flaws' in their research – by claiming that they have produced 'bad historical scientific research'. In contrast to this, he is thus able to suggest that his research represents a 'step forward' towards more accurate (and thus more truthful) historical knowledge. As has also been shown, some of those white historians opposing Windschuttle have similarly drawn on the notion of pseudoscience in order to suggest that Windschuttle's research contains 'elementary errors',<sup>53</sup> and that it demonstrates 'little understanding of the process of footnoting'.<sup>54</sup> These contestations over truth claims thus demonstrate how 'struggles over what will count as rational accounts of the world are struggles over *how* to see'.<sup>55</sup> In this way, both of the white approaches to understanding the history of colonisation represented within this paper rely upon the oppositional positions that are made available through the rhetoric of pseudoscience. Whilst each position argues its case in subtly different ways, they nonetheless rely upon science as a framework – a framework that has long provided legitimation for the oppression of Indigenous people.<sup>56</sup>

As was suggested earlier in this paper, these apparently oppositional positions may instead be understood as representing but one small aspect of the possible approaches to understanding colonisation: claims to right wing ('denialist') or left wing ('apologist') positions do not even come close to exhausting potential readings of colonisation. Rather, they represent the dominant white modes of historical accounting. Keith Jenkins'<sup>57</sup> work on historical research demonstrates some of the problems that inhere to notions of 'left and right'. Jenkins suggests that if one particular position is taken as representing a central neutral point (and in this paper it has been suggested that 'objective historical research' is purported to occupy this position), then this notion of neutrality is deployed to manage the position of those researchers whose work is deemed to be oppressive. In this way, the spectrum of possible historical knowledges is defined by its relation to this apparently neutral centre. Yet, if we are to understand this entire reading of historical knowledge as founded solely on the values and beliefs of white culture, then it may instead be seen to represent just one aspect of a much larger spectrum of possible readings. Thus as Jenkins suggests, 'a spectrum cannot have a centre'.<sup>58</sup>

What this elaboration suggests, then, is that instead of perpetuating the notion that scientific knowledge represents a universal truth, white historians need to recognise the locality of all knowledges. Thus rather than continuing to marginalise Indigenous accounts of history by contrasting them with the

'objective' analyses which are produced by white historians (such as Windschuttle), it is important to acknowledge that white histories represent truths that come from a particular, invested, perspective. Fiona Nicoll<sup>59</sup> suggests that this notion of 'perspective' is used to contrast what are termed 'Indigenous perspectives' with 'white objectivity', thus legitimating the hegemony of white truth claims. However, if we are to understand Indigenous accounts of history as pointing towards the locatedness of all knowledge, then it may be possible to understand the work of white historians as 'just another perspective'.<sup>60</sup>

The unfortunate problem with this is that white historians most often do not position their work as historically and contextually contingent, but rather rely upon claims to universality to justify their work. What is required, then, is a form of critical reflexivity, where we acknowledge the locality of our work, but at the same time focus on the ways in which our work is made possible by the privilege of the location that is whiteness. Thus my suggestion is not that we should ignore the ways in which white writing props up the institutions of whiteness, but rather that we must engage in a 'politics of location'.<sup>61</sup> This would also entail a willingness to engage with the critiques that Indigenous people continue to make, and to recognise the sovereignty of Indigenous people as the ground upon which white historians attempt to generate truth claims. For, as is evidenced in the work of Windschuttle, if we are to continue to privilege white ways of knowing (specifically the claim to objective truth based on the written word), then we perpetuate acts of colonising violence against Indigenous peoples.

This approach to understanding histories of colonisation may therefore represent a more ethical engagement with Indigenous sovereignty. Instead of taking the white desire to 'know the other' as its starting point, it would acknowledge the need for white historians to account for their privileged position, and to shift the focus 'from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served'.<sup>62</sup> This should not be read as a naïve attempt to enact benevolence through 'restoring the defiled native object',<sup>63</sup> but rather an acknowledgement of the ongoing histories of oppression that have shaped the white nation, and the intimate relationship between white privilege and Indigenous disadvantage. From this perspective, any notion of scientific objectivity, and more precisely, the claim that scientific knowledge represents a universal truth, may more transparently be seen to demonstrate the violence of scientific knowledge: it is founded upon an attempt to generalise white values ('metonymise the world'<sup>64</sup>) in order to justify white violence, and legitimate white belonging.

An ethical response to this understanding of history (as a 'scientific practice') would thus entail a focus on whose history is being told, and to what ends – how do dominant historical narratives perpetuate social hegemony? This paper has demonstrated one way in which this focus may be engaged – by examining how white truth claims are achieved, and thus by turning our attention to how white belonging is justified. What this suggests is that we need a 'history of the present'<sup>65</sup> – a more adequate engagement with how white privilege now is founded upon over two hundred years of violence. Such an understanding of the 'present past' may allow white historians to move beyond the 'now/then'

mentality that often appears to dominate white historical research, and instead to recognise how 'the past' continues to exist 'in the present'.

### **Conclusions**

Perhaps one of the most useful points to come from this paper is the way in which it demonstrates how Windschuttle incidentally renders visible the violence of scientific objectivity as a world making practice based on exclusion. Whilst Windschuttle (and indeed those who oppose him) position their debates as being about how history is done, and what counts as history, the debates may also be read as an explication of white violence – of the oppressive practices that constitute white knowledge making. What this point illustrates, is that *white writing about white writing* need not perpetuate the notion that there can be an objective position that is free from accountability – this paper is just as complicit with white privilege as any other. In addition, this paper has sought to point out that white accountability does not need to take as its starting point a desire to recoup a moral position by further colonising Indigenous people. In other words, rather than parading Indigenous accounts of history as a warrant for moral authority, this paper has sought to reflexively engage with Indigenous critiques of white historical research, and to thus be accountable for the privilege that white writing assumes.

Obviously there is a considerable gap between these aims and the effects of white writing. Colonisation is not going to end simply because white people 'engage with their privilege'. Yet, at the same time, continuing to deny the inherent politicality of historical research is not going to result in a substantial engagement with Indigenous sovereignty. What this suggests, then, is that white historical research needs to continue to engage with its own foundational assumptions, and to explicate some of the practices that warrant its authority. Such an approach obviously will entail a continued focus on the networks of power that shape scientific knowledge, and the relationship that this has to white historical writing.

Finally, and as has been emphasised throughout this paper, white historical research represents much more than just an attempt to 'understand the world'. Rather, it may be seen as a social practice that manages histories of oppression, and which is often used to legitimate white belonging and ownership. With these concepts in mind, it may be possible to engage in an ethical dialogue with Indigenous people that is founded upon both the fact of Indigenous sovereignty, and the recognition of white violence. To attempt otherwise would be to perpetuate the types of truth claims that gave rise to the concept of terra nullius in the first place.

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Costantino and two anonymous reviewers for extremely helpful comments and suggestions, both of which have made this paper much stronger, and, as always, thanks to Greg for support and proof reading.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, London, Routledge, 1991.
- <sup>2</sup> Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History: Vol. 1, Van Diemen's Land*, Macleay Press, Sydney, 2002.
- <sup>3</sup> Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, New York, Routledge, 1990.
- <sup>4</sup> J.H. Hexter, 'The rhetoric of history', *History & Theory*, vol 6, 1967, p 3-13.
- <sup>5</sup> Jenkins, op. cit., p. 19.
- <sup>6</sup> Henry Reynolds, *Why Weren't we Told? A Personal Search for the Truth About Our History*, Ringwood, Viking, 1999.
- <sup>7</sup> Cf., Thomas L. Haskell, 'Objectivity is not neutrality: Rhetoric vs. practice in Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*', *History & Theory*, vol 29, 1990, p 129-157.
- <sup>8</sup> Robert Manne, 'Introduction', in R. Manne (ed), *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Melbourne, Black Inc. Agenda, 2003, pp. 1-13.
- <sup>9</sup> Martha Augoustinos, 'History as a Rhetorical Resource: Using Historical Narratives to Argue and Explain', in A. McHoul and M. Rapley (eds), *How to Analyse Talk in Institutional Settings: A Casebook of Methods*, London, Continuum, 2001, pp. 135-145.
- <sup>10</sup> Jenkins, op cit., p. 18.
- <sup>11</sup> Damien W. Riggs, 'Psychoanalysis as 'Post-colonising' Reading Practice: Towards a Discursive Psychological Understanding of Racism-as-repression', *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, inpress.
- <sup>12</sup> Margaret Wetherell, *Mapping the Language of Racism: Discourse and the Legitimation of Exploitation*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1992, p. 185.
- <sup>13</sup> Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'Treaty Talk: Past, Present and Future', *Melbourne Historical Journal*, vol 29, 2001, 7-14.
- <sup>14</sup> Hadyn White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1978, p. 81.
- <sup>15</sup> Greg Dening, *Performances*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1996.
- <sup>16</sup> Moreton-Robinson, op cit., p. 8.
- <sup>17</sup> See also Damien W. Riggs, 'Benevolence and the Management of Stake: On being 'Good White People'', *Philament: Online Journal for the Arts and Culture*, 4.
- <sup>18</sup> See also Jennifer Rutherford, *The Gauche Intruder*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002.
- <sup>19</sup> Damien W. Riggs, 'Repressing a Privileged Location: Exploring the Uncanniness of White Belonging', *Analysis*, in-press.
- <sup>20</sup> Celia Kitzinger, 'The rhetoric of pseudoscience', In J. Shotter and I. Parker (eds), *Deconstructing social psychology*, London, Sage, 1990, p. 71.
- <sup>21</sup> Wetherell, op cit. See also Raymond Martin, 'The Essential Difference Between History and Science', *History & Theory*, vol 36, 1997, p 1-14.
- <sup>22</sup> White, op cit.
- <sup>23</sup> Dening, op cit.
- <sup>24</sup> Windschuttle, op. cit., p. 10, emphasis added.
- <sup>25</sup> Windschuttle, p. 4.
- <sup>26</sup> Windschuttle, p. 402.
- <sup>27</sup> Windschuttle, p. 166.
- <sup>28</sup> Dening, op cit., p. 46.
- <sup>29</sup> Moreton-Robinson, op cit., p. 12.

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- <sup>30</sup> Lyndall Ryan, 'Who is the fabricator?', In R. Manne (ed), *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Melbourne, Black Inc. Agenda, 2003, pp. 233-255.
- <sup>31</sup> James Boyce, 'Fantasy island', in R. Manne (ed), *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Melbourne, Black Inc. Agenda, 2003, pp. 18-29.
- <sup>32</sup> Haskell, op. cit.
- <sup>33</sup> White, op. cit.
- <sup>34</sup> Haskell, op. cit.
- <sup>35</sup> Young, op. cit.
- <sup>36</sup> Young.
- <sup>37</sup> Young, pp. 13-15.
- <sup>38</sup> Cf., Fiona Nicoll, 'Indigenous Sovereignty and the Violence of Perspective: A White Woman's Coming Out Story', *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol 15, 2000, p 369-386; Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'I still call Australia home: Indigenous Belonging and Place in a White Postcolonizing Society', in S. Ahmed, C. Castañeda, A. Fortier and M. Sheller (eds), *Uprootings/regroundings: Questions of home and migration*, Oxford, Berg, 2003; Damien W. Riggs and M Augoustinos, 'Projecting Threat: Managing Subjective Investments in Whiteness', *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, vol 9, 2004.
- <sup>39</sup> Windschuttle, op. cit., p. 404.
- <sup>40</sup> Aileen Moreton-Robinson, 'The Possessive Logic of Patriarchal White Sovereignty: The High Court and the Yorta Yorta Decision' *Borderlands e-journal*, vol 3, 2004.
- <sup>41</sup> Sharon Morgan, *Land Settlement in Early Tasmania: Creating an Antipodean England*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- <sup>42</sup> Windschuttle, op. cit., p. 406.
- <sup>43</sup> Windschuttle, p. 9.
- <sup>44</sup> Cf., Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990.
- <sup>45</sup> Denning, op. cit.
- <sup>46</sup> Rey Chow, 'Where have all the natives gone?', in Angela Bhammer (ed), *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994, pp 125-151
- <sup>47</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, South End Press, Boston, 1992, p 168
- <sup>48</sup> Rutherford, op. cit.
- <sup>49</sup> Boyce, op. cit., p. 65.
- <sup>50</sup> Greg Lehman, 'Telling us true', in R. Manne (ed), *Whitewash: On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Melbourne, Black Inc. Agenda, 2003, p. 175..
- <sup>51</sup> Lehman, p. 183.
- <sup>52</sup> Kitzinger, op. cit., pp. 63-72. See also Damien W. Riggs, 'The Politics of Scientific Knowledge: Constructions of Sexuality and Ethics in the Conversion Therapy Literature', *Lesbian and Gay Psychology Review*, vol 5, 2004, p 6-14.
- <sup>53</sup> Boyce, op. cit., p. 18.
- <sup>54</sup> Ryan, op. cit., p. 233.
- <sup>55</sup> Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, vol 14, 1988, p 587.
- <sup>56</sup> Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 2002; Damien W Riggs, 'Challenging the Monoculturalism of Psychology: Towards a More Socially Accountable Pedagogy and Practice' *Australian Psychology*, vol 39, 2004, p 110-126; Wetherell, op. cit.
- <sup>57</sup> Jenkins, op. cit.
- <sup>58</sup> Jenkins, p. 36.



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<sup>59</sup> Nicoll, op cit.

<sup>60</sup> Jackie Huggins, *Sister Girl*, St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1998. Obviously such a position may be read as suggesting a form of cultural relativism, whereby all 'perspectives' are equal. Yet as Keith Jenkins suggests, this demonstrates a rather naïve reading of historical research that seeks to be accountable for its location. Rather, a focus on individual perspectives does not negate a moral standpoint on issues of violence – instead, it suggests that we must prioritise the 'perspectives' of those whose experiences are ones of oppression and violence, and whose truth claims exceed relativising through the sovereign rights of their knowledges. Thus the point here is not one of relativism, but one instead one of accountability.

<sup>61</sup> Shome, Raka, 'Whiteness and the Politics of Location: Postcolonial Reflections' in *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*, T K Nakayama and J N Martin, (eds), California: Sage, 1999.

<sup>62</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, London, Picador, 1992.

<sup>63</sup> Chow, op cit., p. 126.

<sup>64</sup> Hadyn White, *Tropics of discourse: Essays in cultural criticism*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1978.

<sup>65</sup> Jenkins, op cit.