placing race and localising whiteness

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Susanne Schech
and
Ben Wadham

IDEALISING PLACE: ART, APPROPRIATION AND THE 'PRE-COLONIAL LANDSCAPE'

Damien W. Riggs
University of Adelaide

Introduction

> The Forest of Dreams: A reminder of earlier landscapes, inviting people to think, imagine and dream. (Former Mayor of Adelaide, Alfred Huang, at the artwork launch, Feb. 18, 2003)

> It may say 'Dreams of the Forest', and if so I like its invitation to imagine a lost or yet-to-be forest a whole lot better. (John Neylon, Adelaide Review March 2003: 21)

> The 'Kaurna landscape memories' which Anton Hart [the artist] cites as part of his inspiration are unreliable… a recollection of perhaps what never was. (Christopher Pearson, Adelaide Review March 2003: 5)

Within the current political climate of Australia, there would appear to be little space for speaking out about the histories of oppression that have shaped the white Australian nation. Moreover, in many of the instances where white people speak out about these histories, the issues raised do little to challenge the hegemony of whiteness in this country. In order to illustrate this point, I draw upon Rey Chow's work on 'constructions of the native', Fiona Nicoll's (2000) work on Indigenous sovereignty and Aileen Moreton-Robinson's (2000) work on incommensurability, to analyse one recent example of such white attempts at 'doing good for the other': an art installation in Hurtle Square, Adelaide, entitled 'The Forest of Dreams'.[i] In focusing on this particular site, I hope to demonstrate some of the assumptions that would appear to underpin the artwork, which limit its role in contributing to the visibilisation of the hegemony of whiteness in this country. Following Chow, I thus suggest that whilst the artwork attempts to acknowledge histories of colonisation, it does so by constructing colonisation as 'something in the past', the consequence being that Indigenous people and cultures are co-opted into a romanticised vision of a 'pre-colonial landscape'. It is because of this that the artwork may thus be understood as reinscribing the imperial move by contributing to the ongoing colonisation of both place and history, rather than challenging white acts of genocide and dispossession (Burman 1996: 138).

Having outlined the ways in which 'The Forest of Dreams' artwork is emblematic of struggles over rights to representation in Australia, I go on to suggest, following Nicoll (2000), that the artwork implicitly positions white ways of knowing as objective and universal through the denial of Indigenous sovereignty. More specifically, I suggest that such practices of representation shape white belonging in this country through the denial of Indigenous sovereignty (or more precisely, the dismissal of Indigenous knowledges and critiques). In this way the artwork is but one example of the 'privilege of location' that ignores Indigenous knowledge in the debates surrounding land rights (for example), and indeed, works to reassert the

normative status of the white systems of representation that define the parameters of the debates themselves (Riggs 2003). In contrast to this, and drawing on the work of Moreton-Robinson (2000), I propose that rather than continuing to privilege white ways of knowing, we need to engage in a 'politics of speaking out' that recognises the incommensurabilities that shape experiences of the social practices of race in Australia.

My intention, then, in examining the cultural practices that the artwork draws upon, is not simply to critique it as being representative of hegemonic white understandings of colonisation, but rather to point towards the histories of exclusion that underpin attempts at developing a post-colonial national space. Thus I suggest that in examining the practices of whiteness we need to look at *how* whiteness is done, rather than simply *where* it is located (Trinh 1989: 49). In doing so, I suggest that it is possible to read cultural practices (such as the artwork) for their implicit references to histories of oppression. In this way, I propose that whilst the artwork endorses a romanticised version of a 'pre-colonial landscape', it also demonstrates the practices of exclusion that constitute the hegemony of whiteness. And it is because of this that I suggest that a white politics of speaking out must be founded upon an explicit recognition of the ongoing colonisation that is enacted at both social and individual levels, rather than accepting a simplistic now/then understanding of white responsibility. Such an approach may allow for a more critical reading of whiteness in Australia, the outcome being that instead of understanding whiteness as an *a priori* site of power, we may focus on its unstable foundations that render it contingent upon the repression of white histories of violence against Indigenous people. In this way, the artwork evidences an attempt at managing the unsettling that Indigenous sovereignty produces, and thus may be seen to render visible our problematic location as white people in Australia.

Reconstructing the past – appropriating history

In looking at how 'the past' is constructed in the art installation 'The Forest of Dreams', I draw upon the work of Rey Chow (1994: 126-27) to explore how the artwork evidences notions of what Chow terms 'restoring the defiled native object'. Chow suggests that attempts at reparation often resort 'to the idealist belief that everything would be all right if the inner truth of the native were restored'. In the Australian context, I would suggest that this is evident in the ways in which white involvement in the reconciliation movement is often directed by what may be termed a 'missionary desire' to do good for the wronged other. This performance of the subject position 'good white person' works to manage the unsettling that results from the recognition of our complicity with oppressive practices (Riggs 2004a). As a result, rather than being confronted by the challenge of Indigenous sovereignty, the white nation is able to maintain a belief in the benevolence of white people in general through recourse to colonisation as the enactment of white good (Nicoll 2000: 379-81; Rutherford 2000: 7-9).

Such constructions of (white) history achieve numerous outcomes, and specifically in relation to the artwork, they perpetuate the subject/object split that has shaped relations in Australia between Indigenous and white people since colonisation (Moreton-Robinson 1998: 276-78). I would suggest that through notions of a 'pre-

colonial landscape', the artwork positions Indigenous people as always being the object of the western colonial gaze (Fanon 1967; hooks 1992: 168-69; Moreton-Robinson 2000; Riggs 2004b). Thus the artwork itself stands in for the position of the subject, the corollary being that the 'dreams of the forest' are rendered the object. This romanticised white understanding of history locates an Indigenous presence firmly in what 'might have been' – 'what has gone before' (to paraphrase John Neylon 2003).

In addition to this, the location of the artwork *on* Kaurna land itself contributes to the ongoing colonisation of Indigenous space (or more precisely, the ongoing assertion of white rights to define space). And it is in this way that I see the artwork as contributing to, rather than offering an acknowledgement of, the dispossession of Indigenous people from country. Such acts of appropriation serve to recoup history in a way that simultaneously recognises, and dismisses, the location of white people upon this land. Thus, whilst the Lord Mayor suggests that the artwork '*reminds* us of earlier landscapes', such an understanding is reliant upon the conflation of 'landscape' with Indigenous people in ways that work to reinforce the fiction of Terra Nullius. Thus the suggestion that the artwork 'invites people to think' constructs the category 'people' as referring to non-Indigenous people. As I will now elaborate, these forms of categorisation work to clearly position who has rights to representation in regards to history and place.

Framing & naming: struggles over representation
In regards to representation, Rey Chow (1994: 126) suggests that the ongoing efforts of white nations to maintain hegemony is evident in attempts at keeping Indigenous people within the 'frame of the native'. Such framing works to deny the resistances that Indigenous people continue to make against the colonisation of land, bodies and cultures. In the artwork, this 'keeping within the frame' is achieved through specific constructions of what constitutes 'knowledge' and 'remembering', specifically, through the usage of white understandings of language, and what constitutes 'poetic imagery'. Thus the fact that the words 'the forest of dreams' purport to capture memories of what 'has been before', suggests that the most valid constructions of history are those which are formulated within white systems of representation (cf.. the brief for the artwork provided by the artist, Anton Hart, 2002).

The positioning of the words themselves (upon the land) also serves to reaffirm the normative position of white ways of knowing in regards to histories of colonisation as being above, or on top of, the landscape itself. Such positioning serves to denote the privilege given to white knowledges, and thus does little to unsettle contemporary white discourses surrounding land rights, colonisation and genocide in this country. The words themselves thus become somewhat irrelevant - regardless of the intention, they perpetuate colonial understandings of place and landscape. Instead of exploring ways of challenging the hegemony of whiteness, the artwork instead reasserts the rights to representation that have been claimed by us as whites in this country since colonisation. Thus I would suggest that the *a priori* assumptions that inform the associated privileges of naming implicitly construct the audience of the installation as being the white mainstream.

In a similar way, the artwork enacts a form of recoding, where Indigenous resistances are subsumed within a predominantly white context (Chow 1994: 133). Yet, at the same time, following Fiona Nicoll (2000), we may understand that what is written or said by white people is structured by what is not, or indeed cannot, be said within white systems of representation. In other words, Indigenous sovereignty may be understood as that which cannot be represented by white ways of knowing – 'Indigenous sovereignty exists *because* I cannot know of what it consists; my epistemological artillery cannot penetrate it' (Nicoll 2000: 370). Thus attempts at reinscribing the 'pre-colonial' landscape as being 'a memory' may instead be understood as firmly located upon a desire to manage the unsettling that Indigenous sovereignty produces. In this way, whilst the artwork may indeed be understood as a further act of colonisation, it also points towards the instability of positioning that shapes the white nation. The need to assert rights to representation; the placing of words upon the land; and the structuring of a very specific version of history all demonstrate the very tenuous claims to ownership and belonging that the white nation seeks to hold on to.

White belonging and the challenge of indigenous sovereignty

Thus far I have outlined some of the white assumptions about Indigenous cultures that would appear to inform the artwork 'The Forest of Dreams'. Specifically, the artwork would appear to rely upon the reification of white ways of knowing as both universal and *a priori*, in the sense that they claim to reflect an 'objective truth'. Such assumptions work to: locate Indigenous people 'in the past'; minimise the challenge that Indigenous sovereignty presents to the hegemony of whiteness in Australia; and thus reassert the normative status of whiteness in this country. Yet at the same time these assumptions render visible the anxious foundations upon which white belonging rests (Riggs and Augoustinos 2004: 122-24). Thus it is precisely because Terra Nullius has been recognised as fictitious that there is a constant need for white belonging to be justified.[ii] I would suggest, then, that the artwork is but one site where these 'practices of belonging' are enacted.

In connecting the artwork to the broader practices of white hegemony, I would thus suggest that the artwork provides a means to comfort white anxiety. In other words, in contributing to the legitimisation of white ways of knowing, the artwork confirms the 'rights of white belonging' that are currently under contestation. In doing so, it sets the terms for where Indigenous sovereignty may be located in the story of the artwork. Thus an Indigenous presence is constructed as being non-threatening as it is it located 'in the past', and as secondary to a white presence (Kurtzer 2003: 183; Nicoll 1999: 130). Such constructions may be understood as reliant upon the 'privilege of location' that informs white belonging (Riggs 2003). This privileging allows for our opinions and beliefs as white people to be taken as truth, for white understandings of 'location' to maintain hegemony and for our location as white people upon this land to be left unquestioned.

Understood in this way, the term 'sovereignty' itself is predominantly defined through white discourses of ownership and law, which attempt to preclude Indigenous involvement through the reassertion of their normative status (Jaimes Guerrero 1997: 106). Thus the privileging of sovereignty as a white term for determining the 'merits'

of Indigenous land claims (for example) works to reify the concept of land as connected to particular white understandings of ownership and belonging (Strelein 2003: 86-87). Yet, if we are instead to focus on the ways in which white belonging is constructed through a reliance upon the *a priori* assumptions of imperialism, then it may be possible to better understand the challenge that Indigenous sovereignty (as defined by Indigenous people) presents to the hegemony of whiteness. Such a challenge questions the status of discourses of law and ownership themselves, and therefore unsettles the 'privilege of location' that lends whiteness its hegemonic status.

Furthermore, whilst the cultural practices that the artwork would appear to draw upon work to reproduce their normative status, they also (implicitly) reveal their contingency on ongoing histories of oppression. For example, even if white audiences of the artwork are to accept the location of Indigenous cultures as being 'in the past', it is somewhat more difficult to deny the presence of Indigenous people 'in the present'. In much the same way, despite the promotion of Hurtle Square as 'an attractive, people-friendly space' (Adelaide City Council 2003), there continues to be a presence of homeless people, many of whom have lost their 'space' as a result of these ongoing practices of exclusion (Lipmann 2002; Middendorp 2002). Consequently, in drawing attention to the 'politics of space' that structure white belonging in this country, the artwork incidentally contributes to the ongoing visibilisation of histories of oppression. In doing so, the artwork (or at least a critical reading of it) has the potential for rendering visible *how*, rather than simply *where*, whiteness is located (Trinh 1989: 49). Thus, whilst 'the phrase, ['The Forest of Dreams'] was chosen to evoke a sense of the landscape, which existed *before* white settlement' (Adelaide City Council 2003, emphasis added), it also demonstrates the ongoing acts of colonisation that make possible such an understanding of 'the landscape'.

Incommensurability and speaking out as a white person

In conclusion, the 'The Forest of Dreams' artwork demonstrates that there is inevitably a silencing involved when we as white people attempt to speak out about histories of oppression. This silencing is shaped by the privilege that allows our voices the position required to speak out (for example speaking at a conference about whiteness), and also by the location of white belonging on this country. What this silencing enacts is a focus upon Indigenous people as being passive recipients of colonisation, whilst at the same time being relatively silent about the white privilege that rests upon Indigenous disadvantage (Riggs and Selby 2003: 193). Our privileged status thus enables us to claim a position outside of history, the result being the denial of a need for white accountability (Manne 2003: 9; Riggs 2004b).

What I would suggest, then, is that a 'politics of speaking out' requires a constant engagement with the privilege that enables our voices to be heard. It is not enough to point towards 'what has been', and the allusion of how we '*might'* have been involved in this construction of history as being solely in the past tense. Instead we need to engage with the ongoing acts of history that shape regimes of privilege and oppression in this country. In this way we may understand history as something that we actively produce, rather than as something that naturally unfolds (Osuri 2003).

In relation to this approach to history, we as white people need to engage with the critiques that Indigenous people are continuing to make about whiteness and white privilege. To cease our deconstruction of whiteness at our own analyses is to perpetuate the notion that white systems of representation are adequate for understanding histories of oppression. What is needed is both transparency about the practices with which we are most often complicit, and a response to the challenge that Indigenous sovereignty presents. However, this is not to suggest that we can simply assimilate Indigenous critiques into the work that we do. Indeed, as Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000) suggests, the incommensurability of experience that structures white/Indigenous relations means that attempts at assimilation can only serve to perpetuate colonisation. Instead, what is required is a willingness to examine our privilege in ways that will entail a challenge to the systems that structure white knowledges (see also Frankenberg 1996; Morrison 1992).

In a similar way, I have sought within this paper to demonstrate the continual acts of colonisation that are perpetuated through recourse to notions of 'restoring the defiled native object' (Chow 1994: 127). I have suggested that the art installation 'The Forest of Dreams' relies upon a set of essentialist understandings about Indigenous peoples, history and landscape, and that it indeed conflates these understandings in ways that work to minimise the unsettling that Indigenous sovereignty produces. As a response to this, I have suggested that the challenge that Indigenous sovereignty presents to white systems of representation creates a space for a more productive approach to addressing the hegemony of whiteness. Following Rey Chow, I have thus attempted to both recognise the ongoing histories of oppression and genocide of Indigenous peoples, and acknowledge the challenges that Indigenous people have made, whilst not resorting to a romanticised understanding of a 'pre-colonial moment'.

Finally, in examining the white assumptions that may be understood as structuring the artwork, I have hoped to render visible some of the paradoxes that structure the hegemony of whiteness in this country. Whilst it would appear to be the case that the artwork reinforces the normative status of white belonging, it also demonstrates the anxieties and uncertainties of white belonging. Thus even though the artwork reasserts the dominance of white definitions of land, ownership and sovereignty, it renders problematic these categories by failing to be accountable to Indigenous knowledge in relation to colonisation. These complex relations work to unsettle the location of whiteness within the artwork, and therefore reveal the appropriation that the artwork relies upon as both contingent and open to challenge.

FOOTNOTES

[i] The art installation is described as follows in the Adelaide City Council Annual Report, 2002-2003: 'Local artist, Anton Hart created the $165,000 artwork which included, 17 steel letters 1. 20 metres in height spelling out the poetic phrase, The Forest of Dreams, six granite-faced concrete seats, uplighting and landscaping to surrounding areas. These words have been placed on the four corners of the intersection of Pulteney and Halifax Streets. The elegant, sculptured granite seats have been placed near the text angled towards the green centre of the Square, to provide a place for rest, peace and contemplation. The phrase was chosen to evoke a sense of the landscape, which existed before white settlement.'

[ii] Obviously it is important to recognise that the refutation of Terra Nullius is under continued contestation in Australia at the moment. Yet, at the same time, the recognition that Indigenous people have the right to contest white knowledges (as evidenced in the ongoing fight for land rights) does work to unsettle white belonging (See Riggs in press; Riggs & Augoustinos 2004 for a further elaboration of this).

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