

# Turning the screw: The double terror of whiteness

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## Abstract

Henry James' novella *The Turn of the Screw* is a poignant reminder to us that what we see is often not what is there, and conversely, that what is right in front of our faces can be precisely what we cannot (or refuse) to see. James' novel speaks of lost objects, of melancholic identifications, and most importantly, of how the ghostly, and in particular the ghostliness of whiteness, is reflected back upon those white people who speak as if it were they who were being haunted. As such, the novel brings us to the heart of what I refer to in this paper as 'white terror', and illustrates its double nature: the term refers to both the ongoing hegemony of white imperialism, and the simultaneous ways in which white hegemony is challenged at the very moments of its greatest enactments. As a result, I propose within this paper that what is required is an understanding of how forms of white terror are constitutive of white subjectivities. In bringing psychoanalytic and critical psychological concepts to bear upon the issue of white terror and white subjectivities, I contend that such subjectivities within the context of Australia may be understood as thoroughly social practices that are constituted through melancholic forms of identification. Whilst such melancholia is often managed rhetorically through the forms of historical accountability employed by white people, it nonetheless continues to unsettle white hegemony, and thus, through its metaleptic effects, turns acts of white terror *back upon themselves*. In this sense, to speak ethically as a white subject in a colonial nation is not to either politely acknowledge, or vehemently claim, a place within white terror, but rather to work precisely *within* the discomfort that the double effects of metalepsis and melancholia produce.

## Introduction

In his novella *The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James (1898/1999) presents us with a compelling framework through which to view the operations of terror. Whilst his novel focuses primarily on terror that comes from experience of ghostly hauntings or acts of repression (depending on your reading of the text), his insights into how terror is both acknowledged and repressed provides us with a useful entry into understanding how terror functions within national spaces, and in particular at the borders of Western nations and through the enactment of particular subjectivities. The female protagonist in James' text speaks both of a terror that she is confronted by, and one that she cannot name – one that is disavowed through the very voicing of the terror of confrontation. In this sense, the terror that she experiences when

confronted by the apparitions she witnesses – a terror that she largely dismisses as manageable – is in effect secondary to a primary terror that cannot be mentioned – one of boundaries crossed and identities unsettled (Savoy 2004). This primary terror is thus in my reading the focus of the book, and it is why the book functions as it does – to incite feelings of horror or dread without clearly voicing that which we are supposed to be horrified by.

In regards to white terror, which I take as referring primarily to the dominance of white Western ways of knowing over, and at the expense of, all others, we may see that such terror is produced in multiple ways similar to those within James' novella. On the surface there are the forms of white terror that are enacted on a daily basis and of which we are largely aware – when white truth claims are taken as commonsense, and white knowledge is represented as universal. This we see occurring in the so-called 'War on Terror', where Western nations are depicted as being at threat of violence. Constructions of terror, such as these, which depict it as coming from *outside* of whiteness, are relatively transparent attempts at shifting attention away from the terror that is enacted *in the name of whiteness* – war crimes against Iraqi soldiers; trade sanctions against non-Western countries; and acts of dispossession and genocide against Indigenous peoples to name but a few. But this passing off of acts of white terrorism as 'natural' responses to initial 'acts of terror' *against* Western nations is in my reading a symptom of a deeper terror – one that comes from a fear of boundaries crossed, territories challenged and identities fragmented.

This terror, which, as I suggested in relation to James' novella, may be read as being the primary terror, is one that relates not only to the ongoing acts of violence enacted by Western nations, but also to those that are largely foundational to the existence of such nations; namely colonisation and other such acts of empire. In this respect, this primary terror is one based on a lack foundational to white hegemony – one that positions both white nations and white people as forever engaged in struggles over both claims to ownership, and the denial that such claims are premised upon (i.e., histories of violence). In the context of Australia, which this paper primarily focuses upon, Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos (2004) suggest that white subjectivities demonstrate an 'ontological disturbance' – that any possibility for belonging as a white person in Australia is thoroughly unsettled by the relationship that white people are always already in to Indigenous sovereignty. Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos suggest that in order for those of us who identify as white to claim a valid sense of belonging we require a recognition of our 'right to belong' at an ontological level. Yet, as a result of the fact that Indigenous sovereignty has been denied (though not overwritten) since colonisation, there can be no possibility of such recognition from those who would be in a position to recognise white people as subjects-who-belong. As a result, white subjectivities in Australia are constituted through a terror that comes from a foundational inability to acknowledge this lack of recognition, for to name it would be to recognise its implications in regards to claims to ownership and possession.

These points about the multiplicities of white terror are ones that I believe hold important implications for how we understand everyday examples of racism, particularly within a psychological framework. Discussions of racism within the mainstream of psychology are, on the whole, marked by their focus on either social or individual causes. In contrast, critical psychological approaches have sought to examine how it is that racism itself is productive of a range of racialised subject positions, and how such subject positions (and in particular those of dominant group members) are founded upon acts of disavowal and repression. This represents an important reversal of the logic of anti-racism, as it seeks not to examine how 'racist people' enact racism, but rather to explore how a context of racism produces subjects who are rendered intelligible only within that particular racialised location (Gilroy 2005). In other words, critical psychological work on racism has sought not to label particular people as 'racist', but instead to explore how racism is formative of particular identities (Riggs and Augoustinos 2005).

My own focus in the remainder of this paper is on the ways in which those of us who identify as white in Australia live within a relationship to a series of racialised norms that accrue to us particular privileges, and which also position us within an ongoing relationship to histories of colonisation and genocide. To refer to someone as white is not to naively accept that race as a category is useful, or a biological fact, or internally coherent. Rather, to speak of race is to acknowledge that the assumption of racialised differences continues to inform how we relate to one another as people, and that this is the legacy of histories of violence that have been perpetuated in the name of imperialism and empire against people classified as racial others. To speak of someone 'being white' is thus to unsettle the norm of white privilege – to refuse to allow those of us who identify as white a position of invisibility – to challenge any claims to 'racelessness', and to locate white people as benefactors within the discriminatory classificatory system that is 'race'. Whiteness may thus be understood as a form of cultural capital that, whilst being differentially distributed amongst those variously identified as white, does nonetheless result from the oppression of those people identified as not being white (Fine 1997).

In the case of Australia, the privileges that accrue to white people come primarily at the expense of Indigenous people: through the genocide of Indigenous cultures, the theft of Indigenous lands, and the removal of Indigenous children from their families. For those of us who identify as white, then, the enactment of white subjectivities is always already premised upon, and is a direct result of, colonisation. As I shall explicate throughout this paper, I understand subjectivity as referring to the ways in which we are brought into being as viable subjects under particular regimes of power, ones that prioritise particular subject positions over others (Butler, 1997). To be a subject in this sense – to be recognised as a knowable entity – is to always already be located within a relationship to particular norms, and to have incorporated those norms at the very moment of our being identified as a subject. Thus, as I will now elaborate, to become an intelligible white subject is to be always already positioned in a relationship to the forms of terror that I outlined earlier.

## Racial Melancholia

In his 1917 essay on 'Mourning and Melancholia', Freud proposed two distinctly different forms of grief: the first – mourning – involves the acceptance of loss, and the acknowledgment that the lost object can be relinquished. In Freud's understanding, mourning is a process that leads to acceptance. In contrast, however, the experience of melancholia is less about acceptance, and more about a refusal to let go of that which has been lost. This results in a form of 'psychic consumption', where the lost object is 'taken in' – it is retained by the melancholic subject and incorporated into (and indeed instantiates) their sense of self. Whilst this may produce a subject who appears to have come to terms with their loss, it in fact constitutes a subject who continues to seek nourishment from that loss – the lost object becomes central to who they are.

Yet Freud does not stop there. He proposes not only that the lost object becomes central to the psychic life of the melancholic subject, but that this subject moves not from dissatisfaction to satisfaction as a result of the incorporation of the lost object, but rather to greater dissatisfaction and resentment for the feelings of loss towards the object that accrue. In other words, as the melancholic subject grows to resent the object for being lost, they too become to resent that aspect of themselves, one that may well be foundational to their sense of self. Thus as Anne Anlin Cheng (2001: 9) suggests:

The melancholic is stuck in more ways than just temporally: he or she is stuck – almost choking on – the hateful and loved thing that he or she has devoured.

As a result, the melancholic subject in effect turns against themselves – they cannot be free of what they have incorporated, cannot let go of their grief, and thus must find ways of disavowing their melancholic position.

In her text *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler (1997) suggests that the effects of melancholia thus in part instigate the illusory binary of internal and external: the incorporation of a lost object produces a psychic space which is claimed as internal – as the property of the melancholic subject. In this sense, such a subject is produced only through its relationship to loss – to be a subject founded upon loss is to always already be reliant upon the lost object itself.

Perhaps the clearest instance of the aforementioned disavowal of melancholia in Australia may be seen in the dogged adherence to the fiction of Terra Nullius, both in land rights cases, where white laws continue to be used to deny Indigenous ownership (Moreton-Robinson 2004), and in the social structuring of Terra Nullius as a founding myth of the white nation. As such, the fiction of Terra Nullius continues to inform government policy in Australia around Indigenous rights, and continues to shape the ways in which white people talk about and represent Indigenous people as somehow undeserving of rights (Riggs and Augoustinos, 2004). These are issues that I will return to in the analysis section, but it should suffice to

say here that the construction of Australia as itself always already a lost object – as something that was claimed at the same time as it was not available for the claiming – continues to haunt or terrorise the white nation. In this regard, both Cheng (2001) and Butler (1997) suggest that notions of melancholia are inherently connected to place, belonging and ownership. Butler suggests that “melancholia produces a set of spatializing tropes for psychic life” (171), whilst Cheng suggests that much like melancholia:

the racial question is an issue of *place*... Segregation and colonialism are internally fraught institutions not because they have eliminated the other but because they need the very thing they hate or fear (12, original emphasis).

Butler’s statement points us towards the notable effects that result from the types of psychic life that are valorised within white Western cultures. The neo-liberal individual is a subject who claims themselves *for themselves*: the white individual subject is self-possessing, belonging to itself, and in control of itself. To claim a place as a white subject is thus to claim entitlement to place itself. Melancholia in this sense works in the service of the white nation, where a psychic life can be claimed on behalf of the nation and its (white) subjects that is all encompassing, all knowing and irrefutable. Yet, as Cheng suggests, these claims are made not because the white nation has actually succeeded in achieving its claims to irrefutability – far from it. Rather, what is being disavowed – what has been lost – is the very ability to be free of that which it hates or fears: that which cannot be incorporated. Thus whilst the white nation may disclaim any notion of melancholia as part of its existence, such melancholia is central to its very claims to sovereignty. Thus we could infer that to be an intelligible white subject is to be a melancholic subject.

These points about a melancholic white subject of course hold important implications for how we understand the operations of racialised power in Australia. As Cheng (2001) suggests, “the model of melancholic incorporation, far from prescribing or reifying the conditions of the racial other, reveals an intricate world of psychical negotiation that unsettles the simplistic division between power and powerlessness” (xi). Importantly, she also suggests that “racial melancholia serves not as a description of the feeling of a group of people but as a theoretical model of identity” (xi). To be an intelligible white subject in this sense is not to be any particular type of person as a result of the feelings that one holds, but rather to be produced precisely because of one’s location in the context of a nation that is itself founded on particular sentiments. Whilst these sentiments may be inherently ambivalent (in that the white nation is reliant upon the incorporation of particular lost objects that it continually repudiates), there is nonetheless a certain national sentiment that we may refer to as melancholic.

To be a white melancholic subject produced in a relation to a constitutive loss is thus to be entrapped in a paradoxical relationship to oneself: to be forever engaged in both disavowing one’s own violent histories, whilst claiming for oneself a positive

sense of racial identity (in order to legitimate privilege). As I will suggest in the following section, one of the ways in which this paradox is managed is through particular constructions of temporality.

### **Metalepsis and the Management of History**

One of the way in which we may 'get at' the complex role that melancholia plays in the constitution of white subjectivities is to focus on how history is constructed in markedly different ways according to how particular events are temporalised. Edelman (1991: 96) suggests that this is captured in the term 'metalepsis' – "the rhetorical substitution of cause for effect or effect for cause, a substitution that disturbs the relationship of early and late". I believe the concept of metalepsis holds great potential for understanding how events 'in the past' are disconnected from events 'in the present' in order to deny white accountability for colonial violence. The effects of metalepsis may be evident when white people retrospectively attribute blame to Indigenous people for colonisation, or when white people routinely attempt to disavow our complicity with acts of terror.

This leads me to suggest precisely how it is that psychoanalytic concepts of melancholia and metalepsis may be useful for engaging in a psychological analysis of white people's relationship to Indigenous people and the fact of Indigenous sovereignty. Primarily, I would suggest that the answer to this question lies in the aforementioned notion of metalepsis – if dominant (white) understandings of colonisation rely upon the disavowal of colonial violence, then the unsettling of this may allow for the voicing of a critical reading of colonisation and racism in Australia. This may allow for an understanding of racism that, whilst paying attention to the structural location of racism, may also afford us the space to look at how individual people are invested in racism without resorting to the notion of racism as an 'internal process'.

The extract of talk examined in the following analysis is drawn from one focus group, comprised of four white undergraduate psychology students, conducted in 1995 on 'race relations in Australia'. The time at which the extract was collected is of considerable significance as it was during a period of unprecedented public debate in Australia over Indigenous entitlements to land. In the particular extract that follows we can see the participants engaged in accounting for their own opinions about land rights, and justifying why they believe they, as white Australians, have a right to belong. Of particular interest are the references to historical events, and the ways in which they are managed through particular forms of accounting for white violence.

Anthony: I think the current [Indigenous land claim] just, well, sounds like a circus to me - money money going left right and centre there. But Mabo actually, yeah, I get quite angry about that - I actually don't feel any responsibility for my forebears.

Interviewer: Why's that?

Anthony: Well I wasn't there.

Barbara: Relevant point.

Anthony: Yeah. I don't know. Just something inside, just it really made me quite angry - it is just bullshit, you know why? Well because Captain Cook didn't sign an agreement when he, you know... I really get quite angry - it's bullshit.

Barbara: Yeah I know

Anthony: And I nah, no I don't, I don't feel any, you know, I feel responsible for what's happening currently but I, I don't feel guilt or umm, responsibility for my forebears.

Barbara: You can't be responsible for something you weren't around for.

All of the participants engage in a range of rhetorical strategies in order to justify their location as white people. At the start of the extract, Anthony uses the suggestion that 'I don't feel any responsibility for my forebears' in order to deny any responsibility for white violence, and thus implicitly to deny Indigenous land claims. Yet in so doing, he acknowledges the existence of his 'forebears', thus constructing a now/then model of history, whereby the present is somehow related to what went 'before'. He then goes on to deny the connection between now and then, by stating that he doesn't feel any responsibility because 'well I wasn't there'. In this way, he distances himself from his 'forebears', and denies a model of accountability that rests upon an account of history that separates the 'now' from the 'then'. Another example of this appears further on in the extract, where Anthony states that 'Captain Cook didn't sign an agreement...' to which we could append 'back then', and he then goes on to say that 'I really get quite angry', to which we could add 'now'. Here Anthony implicitly creates a distinction between 'then' (and its implication in colonial violence), and 'now', in which he feels justified in 'feeling angry' (or indeed not feeling guilty).

I would suggest, however, that whilst it may appear that Anthony effectively distances himself from acts of colonising violence, the understanding of metalepsis that a psychoanalytic reading of racism may provide can allow us to view the text differently. Thus Anthony's claim to anger in the 'now' may be read as an enactment of the ongoing violence that he represses when he shifts the talk away from 'Captain Cook... when he, you know...'. In this way, the distinction between now and then is challenged, thus evidencing the disavowal of ongoing acts of white violence. This reading is reinforced in Anthony's last turn, where he states that 'I feel responsible for what's happening currently but I don't feel guilt or umm responsibility for my forebears'. Here, Anthony again returns to a construction of history that denies a connection between now and then that fails to adequately account for why he 'feel[s] responsible for what's happening currently'. His denial of guilt for his forebears may thus be read as an attempt at distancing himself from his reference to Captain Cook and white violence in his prior turn. We can see this in the interactional trouble that he faces in expressing this to his fellow

participants, whereby in his final turn Anthony repeats himself a number of times, changes his claims about accountability (from 'I don't feel any you know' to 'I feel responsible'), and uses the word 'but' to signal a break between what he will and will not be held responsible for (Billig 1999).

From this brief extract of talk I would propose that to feel responsible for something (but to disavow any guilt) may represent a symptom of melancholic incorporation. In other words, to have incorporated a lost object at the level of the collective psyche (such as the lost, but never actually possessed, claim to white belonging) is to be formed in a relationship to that loss. But to acknowledge that loss would be to acknowledge why that loss happened. In the case of colonisation, the narrative of the triumphant white settler requires a disavowal of the failure of colonisation to adequately displace Indigenous sovereignty, or to fully write white sovereignty as an *a priori* fact. Yet this disavowal continues to hold a trace of the original recognition of loss: the affect of white subjectivities is forever marked by this loss – it is something that white Australians are always managing in our day to day relations in the context of a nation that never quite manages to contain its anxieties over ownership.

### Conclusions

To extrapolate, then, from my earlier points on racial melancholia to the previous analysis, we may understand that to feel responsible, but to not be able to state what that responsibility represents, demonstrates how metalepsis functions to repress white violence. Not only, as I suggested earlier, does cause become substituted for effect, but in the analysis above, a particular effect (land claims) produces a particular affect (white anger over land claims), yet no cause for this is elaborated. This disjoining of cause from effect allows white Australians to either claim ignorance of the ongoing effects of colonisation, or to refute that reparation is required as a result of these ongoing effects. But what are we to make of references to 'Captain Cook' and 'forebears'? How do these references fit into a schema of effect that has no cause? I would suggest that comments such as those about Captain Cook demonstrate both the paradoxical nature of now/then accounts of history, and thus highlight the contingency of the 'now' on the 'then'.

In regards to my initial points about white terror, the effects of melancholia evident within the extract of talk demonstrate some of the complex ways in which an awareness of acts of white violence continues to exert a form of terror over white people who live in threat of having our lack of recognition as knowing or owning subjects revealed. In this sense the participants in the focus group are not exceptional for their opinions – rather, they are the norm. In other words, to experience a melancholic position, and to manage this in any way possible is, I would suggest, the primary way in which white people are rendered intelligible as racial subjects. This is of course not to let those of us who identify as white 'off the hook', by excusing our complicity with terror through recourse to the notion that we in effect terrorise ourselves with the knowledge of our location within histories of

violence. Rather, my point is that white terror always involves a series of turns, whereby not only is terror enacted against those positioned outside of the West when Western nations attempt to control their borders or manage their subjects, but terror is also something that always comes back upon itself through the constitution of particular white sovereign subjects who are formed in a relationship to terror.

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