PERCEPTIONS OF RACIAL IDENTITY IN AUSTRALIA

A recent court case in Melbourne, Eatock v Bolt, has sparked a heated debate about the definition of Aboriginality. The legal focus of the debate centers around the Racial Discrimination Act (Connor), and whether journalist Andrew Bolt is in breach of the law for publishing material that contravened the legislation. The real crux of the matter, however, seems to be a debate about racial identity. The applicants in the case are challenging Bolt's acerbic insinuations about their Aboriginality and also his right to pass judgment upon the topic (Connor: Zyngier). Confounding the debate, and at the heart of the matter, there appear to be two distinctly different perceptions of racial identity. This essay will discuss the concept of racial identity in general, before concentrating its focus upon racial identity in post-settlement Australia. It will discuss the factors that contribute to a Settler perception of racial identity before going on to explore the factors that contribute to the racial identity of Indigenous Australians.

THE CONCEPT OF RACIAL IDENTITY

There is great confusion on the notion of race (UNESCO 2)

It would be foolish to attempt a discussion of racial identity in Australia, without first endeavoring to define the idea of ‘race’. There have been various understandings of the meaning of ‘race’ throughout Australian history (Heiss 18), many of which have appealed to some aspect of biology. The United Nations study on ‘The Race Question’, which was issued in 1950, describes “a race, from a biological standpoint” as “one of the group of populations constituting the species Homo sapiens”. It acknowledges that “by virtue of the isolating barriers which in the past kept them more or less separated”, that different groups have tended to “exhibit certain physical differences as a result of their somewhat different biological histories” but the study states emphatically that “for all practical social purposes “race” is not so much a biological phenomenon as a social myth” (UNESCO 8). This understanding of race has also been acknowledged by Australian courts, which have recognized race as having “a wide and non-technical meaning” (Shaw 118: Tasmanian Dam Case).

The social origins of the concept of race cause it to take on certain characteristics. Firstly, ‘race’ is a term that is often used to highlight difference. Aileen Moreton-Robinson puts it this way: “race is deemed to belong to the other” (Moreton-Robinson 76). The allocation of ‘race’, can be dependent upon many types of difference.“To most people,” declares the UNESCO, “a race is any group of people whom they choose to describe as a race” (UNESCO
This means that “national, religious, geographic, linguistic, or cultural groups” (UNESCO 6) have been described as such throughout history.

Another characteristic of the definition of ‘race’ is that it is dynamic concept. Because it is so closely linked to social discourse, it is bound tightly to politics and is never far from “the passions and prejudices of the moment” (UNESCO 3). For much of the history of colonized Australia, Settler rhetoric has dominated the discourse of racial identity, and this has meant that racial identity was often strongly influenced by Settler political opinion. Tony Birch suggests that Indigenous racial identity, in particular, has been vulnerable to political rhetoric and states that colonial powers have “both erased and reconstructed categories of ‘Aborigines’ to suit the governmental policy in vogue” (Heiss 18: Birch).

Racial identity, then, is fundamentally a social construct and, as such, has a non-technical meaning that is generally used to describe ‘the other’ and is ultimately tied to the political discourse of the day. Marcia Langton would describe race, in fact, as “a field of intersubjectivity” that is “remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, of imagination, or representation and interpretation” (Langton 33).

**FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO** Settler perceptions of racial identity

*the ‘ordinary’* (Hage 64)

There are many factors, then, that contribute to the formation of Settler Australians’ perception of racial identity. Perhaps the three most prominent beliefs that underlie a Settler approach to racial identity, however, are the Anglo-centric concepts of ‘whiteness’ and ‘white colonial paranoia’, the assumption of universalism, and the veneration of egalitarianism.

The phenomenon of ‘whiteness’ has exercised a significant influence over the formation of Settler racial identity in Australia. It can be defined as the implicit assumption that white European society is superior to any other, and has its roots, worldwide, in European colonialism. “The European tribes of colonial capitalism”, states Hage “constructed themselves as the ideal type of what it means to be a human being”. Whiteness is also something that extends beyond appearance. Moreton-Robinson states that it “is not just about bodies and skin colour; instead it is ‘more about the discursive practices that, because of colonialism and neocolonialism, privilege and sustain global dominance of white imperial subjects’” (Moreton-Robinson 78: Shome). Whiteness can be seen to be an important part of early Settler Australians’ perceptions of racial identity and, despite the vast array of cultures that comprise modern day Settler society, it continues to have a significant influence in Australia today (Hage 51).
Another factor that is believed to affect non-Indigenous racial perception has been described as “white colonial paranoia” (Hage, 47). This tendency is closely linked to whiteness, and exists among those who believe that their whiteness is threatened somehow. Hage describes this paranoia as “a pathological form of fear based on a conception of the self as excessively fragile, and constantly threatened”. He believes, although this paranoia is “often unconscious”, that it has “structured Australian nationalism from the time of its birth” (Hage 47). It stems from “fear of loss of Europeanness or Whiteness and of the lifestyle and privileges that are seen to emanate directly from that” (Hage 49) and it has been linked to the creation of “negative iconic images of Aboriginality” (Tynan 287). Michael Tynan highlights an example of this in his study of the Rumbalara Football and Netball Club, in which he interviews a non-Indigenous footballer who is uncomfortable with his wife accompanying him to the Aboriginal club’s ground. “My wife wouldn’t go...” he says, “and I probably wouldn’t feel that safe with her sittin’ in the car while I’m playing footy. But I’d probably go to another ground and feel [fine]...” (Tynan 284). This response displays a fear based upon negative images of Aboriginality, and is an example of a modern expression of paranoia. It is fuelled by an inheritance of negative images of Aboriginality. Langton explains that the problem is that “Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists” (Langton 33). It is possible that white colonial paranoia would not exist if a greater number of Settler people had the opportunity for personal interaction with Indigenous Australians. An equivalent kind of paranoia does not occur amongst Aboriginal people, presumably, because Indigenous people form opinions of Settlers based upon actual experience, rather than ‘negative iconic images’.

Another characteristic that distinguishes Settler from Indigenous worldviews is the assumption of universalism. Settler society throughout Australian history has had a tendency to universalise – to “normalise whiteness as the measure of being human” (Moreton-Robinson 77). This is seen especially in policies of assimilation such as the ‘White Australia Policy’ of the early twentieth century, which comprised of “a domestic policy geared towards the continuing extermination of the culture of the colonised Indigenous people and an immigration policy geared towards excluding non-Whites from Australia” (Hage 53). The effect of policies such as this has been to create the impression that whiteness -and Settler racial identities – are the norm in Australia. Settlers, states Hage, have been allowed to view themselves as “the ‘average’, the ‘mainstream’, the ‘ordinary’” (Hage 64) and Indigenous cultures have been allowed to be made “invisible” (Dodson 17). While Indigenous Australians’ perception of racial identity has included a constant awareness of the Settler other, the universalism present in Settler society can cause non-Indigenous Australians to be blind to Aboriginality.

Perhaps the most dangerous factor that shapes Settler perceptions of identity, however, is a fervent attachment to what has been termed “Australian egalitarianism” (Tynan 289).
This egalitarianism – a desire that “everyone be treated ‘equally’” (Tynan 281) - is apparently innocuous and even admirable. The danger occurs when this desire for equality becomes translated into a desire for homogeneity, and the word ‘egalitarianism’ becomes a euphemism for universalism or white colonial paranoia. Tynan, in his discussion of Settler attitudes towards the Rumbalara Football and Netball Club, wryly refers to the “unquestioning reasonableness of Australian egalitarian logic” that, although seemingly inoffensive, ultimately can lead to a mindset that perceives “contemporary Koori cultural practices which differ to an idealized mainstream norm as intrinsically deficient or inferior” (Tynan 290). A prominent characteristic of this type of egalitarianism is an “ignorance regarding the historical context of Koori marginalization and the continuing repercussions of this for negotiating Koori identity” (Tynan 289). A clear example of this is can be seen in the conclusion to Andrew Bolt’s article (Bolt). His enjoiinder to readers to “go beyond racial pride” and “be proud only of being humans” appears to display a laudable egalitarian ideal, and yet, accompanying that ideal, is the Anglo-normative assertion that racial “differences and rights” are “trivial” (Bolt). Bolt, in this instance, attempts to justify his arguments with an appeal to the Australian value of egalitarianism and yet fails to notice the way in which his arguments echo the idea of universalism and the sentiments of white colonial paranoia. The Settler perception of racial identity, then, is particularly susceptible to an egalitarianism that attempts to mask historical racist attitudes.

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO INDIGENOUS PERCEPTIONS OF RACIAL IDENTITY

Nothing is the whole story by itself (Lucashenko 23)

In stark contrast to the Settler conception of racial identity is the perspective offered by Indigenous worldviews. Any comparison of Indigenous and Settler perceptions of ‘racial identity’ must acknowledge the fact that the concept is not completely translatable. In linguistics, the theory known as ‘the Whorfian hypothesis’ suggests that some words are actually unable to be exactly translated from one language to another (Rheingold 5). While each culture has an ability to understand the concepts, they are approached in such a different manner that it is futile to attempt a holistic translation. This appears, in many ways, to be the case with Indigenous approaches to ‘racial identity’. The Indigenous perception of racial identity appears to have found its birth in a different paradigm to Settler perceptions, and this makes any comparison problematic and vulnerable to inaccuracy. If the two are to be compared, however, the differences between Indigenous and Settler approaches can most definitely be seen in the de-emphasis of ‘race’ as a category, the flexibility of an Indigenous definition of race, and the importance of the land in shaping Indigenous identity.
Indigenous approaches to racial identity, in stark contrast to Settler philosophies of whiteness, are characterised by their reluctance to focus upon ‘race’ or upon racial superiority. This is partly due to the fact that ‘race’ as a category is a Settler concept. Before the arrival of European colonists, there was no need for ‘race’ to be a part of Indigenous worldviews – as Langton states, “before Cook and Phillip, there was no ‘Aboriginality’ in the sense that is meant today” (Langton 32). This is not to say that Indigenous people did not perceive the colonists as different from themselves, but “while Aboriginal people saw whites as a group, they did not see them as a ‘race’. This was a concept of the whites” (Langton 32). This reluctance to group people according to ‘race’ might be one of the reasons that Indigenous worldviews have no apparent counterpart to ‘whiteness’ or formal doctrines of racial superiority. Due to culture, or to circumstance, or to the lack of emphasis upon ‘race’ itself, Aboriginal people can be said to have had “no eugenicist theory” and felt “no need to theorise a racial superiority” (Langton 37). In these ways – the significance attached to the conception of ‘race’ and in the marked lack of eugenicist theories, Indigenous perceptions of racial identity are dramatically different to Settler ideas.

Another distinctive attribute of an Indigenous perspective is its flexibility in defining racial identity. “The creation of ‘Aboriginality’”, declares Langton, “is not a fixed thing” (Langton 31). This flexibility is manifest in a pluralistic approach to defining racial identity and an acknowledgement that racial identity is constantly changing. This pluralistic perception provides a sharp contrast to the universalist perception of identity present in Settler mentalities. Aboriginal people are more likely to recognise what Michael Dodson refers to as “the right to self-definition” (Dodson 9). Dodson links the right to self-definition with the right to self-determination, and highlights the importance of subjectivity, declaring that “there can be no closed definition of ‘Indigenous Peoples’” (Dodson 9). He states “I cannot stand here, even as an Aboriginal person and say what Aboriginality is” (Dodson 19). This attitude of flexibility also causes Indigenous people to recognise the shifting nature of racial identities. Because they are considered to be subjective, Indigenous people can understand racial identities as constantly in flux and “infinitely elastic” (Dodson 11). An Indigenous perspective is more likely to recognise the validity of new and changing racial identities and emphasizes “the right to inherit the collective identity of one’s people and to transform that identity creatively according to the self-defined aspirations of one’s people and one’s own generation” (Dodson 9). These ideas of racial subjectivity and elasticity directly contrast with the Settler ideas of racial universality and the unchanging ‘normal’.

Perhaps the most important difference, however, is that Indigenous identities are drawn strongly from the relation of the self to the land. This contrasts with Settler identities, which are drawn only from relations between humanity, and pay little attention to the relation of person to place. “Western culture” states Melissa Lucashenko, “lives in people,
influenced by their environment, which they conceive as more or less separate from themselves. Indigenous culture lives in the more porous space: the relationships among humans, landscape, and animal life” (Lucashenko 28). While Indigeneity is also formed through interpersonal relations (Dodson 18), the importance of the relationship with land to the formation of an Indigenous identity cannot be overstated. The ability to enact appropriate stewardship of traditional country is sometimes presented as the very ability to enact Aboriginality. This is seen in Neville Atkinson’s article ‘The Struggle for Identity’, in which he states that, in the court’s refusal to acknowledge Yorta Yorta land rights, “our identity was effectively declared null and void” (Atkinson, N). It is impossible, then, to conceive of Indigenous racial identity apart from a relationship with the land. As Lucasenko remarks of Aboriginal people, “the landscape which has fed and nurtured our ancestors has shaped us in deep unspoken ways” (Lucashenko 27). It is perhaps these ‘deep unspoken’ relationships between Indigenous people and the landscape that most powerfully distinguish Aboriginal from Settler perceptions of racial identity.

CONCLUSION
The differences, then, between Settler and Indigenous perceptions of racial identities are so fundamental that the two perceptions might be considered incommensurate. Racial identity – a concept that has its origins in social discourse, is often a site of contest within society, with many voices competing to be heard. Settler perceptions of racial identity, influenced by a history of invasion, have been influenced by whiteness and white colonial paranoia, by the idea of universalism, and by the idea of egalitarianism. Indigenous perceptions of racial identity, influenced by a long history of connection to the land, are characterised by the de-emphasis of race as a category, a flexible approach to defining ‘race’, and a focus upon the role of the land in determining identity. While an exposition of the differences between these two perceptions is unlikely to completely resolve the tensions that have surfaced in Eatock v Bolt, an appreciation of the different understandings of racial identity might bring greater clarity to the discussion, especially to non-Indigenous Australians who cannot - and often do not wish to - remain blind to Indigenous perceptions of racial identity.


Parker, Kirstie “Nine sue over race” Koorie Mail 06/04/2011

Rheingold, Howard. They have a word for it: a lighthearted lexicon of untranslatable words. KY: Sarrabande Books. 1998

Shaw v Wolf (1998) 83 FCR 113 [extract]