



# Experiencing and writing Indigeneity, rurality and gender: Australian reflections

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## A B S T R A C T

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This paper has two interrelated aims. The first is to contribute to knowledge about rurality, gender and Indigeneity. This is undertaken by the first author, Bebe Ramzan, an Indigenous woman living in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands. Bebe shows similarities across rural and remote areas in Australia and details her knowledge and experience of home, rurality, rural communities, land and gender. The second aim of the paper is to examine issues surrounding the involvement of academic white women in Indigenous research. Writing from the position of feminist white women Barbara Pini and Lia Bryant reflect on theories of whiteness as cultural practice and in this paper contest representations of rurality in rural studies as white.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Bebe, Barbara and Lia

At 30 June 2006, the Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal people in Australia constituted an estimated 2.5% of the population. Of this Indigenous population 69% were living in regional, rural and remote areas of the country (ABS, 2007). There has, however, been little exploration of the relationship between Indigenous Australians and rurality by rural studies scholars.<sup>2</sup> In this paper Bebe Ramzan, an Indigenous woman from the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands informs us about living in a remote community. She describes how she came to live in the APY Lands and provides background on the establishment of Homelands in the area. Bebe's experiences and interpretations of living in rural Australia are infused by the political. Through her narrative she draws attention to the dominant racialised imaginings and knowledges of rurality on subjects such as home, communities, farming, land and gender.

Bebe's knowledge is significant for feminist rural studies as she places rurality at the centre of her experience. In the paper Barbara Pini and Lia Bryant, white academic feminists, explore this by turning to critiques of feminism from Indigenous feminist scholars. Given the need to contextualise Bebe's lived experiences of the rural and to situate Barbara and Lia as white feminists, particular focus is given to the work of Australian Indigenous feminist scholars.<sup>3</sup> These scholars have argued for the particularity of the Australian case. In examining European colonisation for example, Huggins (2002, p. 4) asserts that 'in Australia's case, the situation is in many senses worse' in that whites declared Australia "terra nullius" and no formal agreement or treaty with traditional owners of the land was ever made. As a consequence of this Indigenous women in Australia do not have the same citizenship and human rights as white women (Behrendt, 2005). Moreover, as Indigenous Australian feminist writers have contended, the dispossession of Indigenous people from their land has afforded white women – and white feminist women – power – which is largely omniscient and invisible across white Australia. This means, as Moreton-Robinson (2000a, p. 127) found in her interviews with white Australian feminists, that even those engaged in 'anti-racist practice' do not experience racism and deny their race privilege.

The scholarship from Indigenous Australian feminist writers raises complex methodological and epistemological questions about research between Indigenous and white women. However, Barbara

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to dismiss the work that has been undertaken on the broad theme of rurality and Indigeneity in Australia. Howitt and Jackson's (1998) review of geographical literature about Indigenous Australians references a number of relevant studies. However, much of the work that has been done and the literature subsequent to 1998 have been concerned with questions relating to governance, natural resource management, mining and Native Title (e.g. Gill, 2005; Gill and Paterson, 2007; Gibbs, 2003; Davies, 2003; Lawrence and Adams, 2005; Palmer, 2006; Porter, 2007). There has been little exploration of how Indigenous Australians experience rurality.

<sup>3</sup> We recognise that the term 'Aboriginal/Indigenous feminist/ism' is contested but use the label here to describe authors if they have used the term to describe themselves (see Green, 2007). The Australian Indigenous feminist scholars we draw upon are Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Larissa Behrendt and Jackie Huggins.

and Lia argue that this work also provides a lens for reading and presenting Bebe's knowledge. For example, one of the arguments made by Indigenous feminist writers is that the conventions of academic writing can result in the objectification of Indigenous people and marginalise their knowledge (Moreton-Robinson, 2000a, 2006). While this is explored in more detail later in the paper, readers will note that the three authors have chosen to structure material in a manner which aims to address these criticisms.

The paper concludes by contending that it is impossible to understand rurality in colonised nations without acknowledging and relinquishing the 'possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty' (Moreton-Robinson, 2000a, p. 6). This means more than generating further knowledge about Indigenous people in rural spaces. It means naming whiteness and recognising the advantages that this affords in a racialised society and privileging rural Indigenous people as holders of knowledge.

## 2. Feminist theorising about Indigeneity

### 2.1. Barbara and Lia

The landmark text by Geonpul woman and academic Aileen Moreton-Robinson *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (2000a) represents a significant challenge and interruption to the universalising and homogenising orthodoxies of white feminism. At the centre of Moreton-Robinson's (2000a) critique is her naming and unmasking of the subject position 'white middle-class feminist'. This subject position, she says, masquerades as the universal woman denying Indigenous women's histories, traditions and experiences. Data from interviews with white feminist academics in Australia and critiques of feminist literature emphasise the normalising of 'whiteness' in the pedagogies, research agendas and theorising of women's studies. In her book Moreton-Robinson (2000a) juxtaposes the contemporary feminist concern with questions of difference with the failure of white middle-class feminists to recognise and critique their own positionality as racialised subjects. She writes, 'whiteness as race, as privilege, as social construction is not interrogated as a "difference" within feminist political practice and theory' (Moreton-Robinson, 2000a, p. xviii). Integral to the privilege enjoyed by white middle-class Australian feminists, the author argues, is colonisation and the appropriation of Indigenous land. She further suggests that feminism will continue to be partial in knowledge and practice and a contributor to racial hierarchy unless white feminists recognise and renounce their power and dominance.

In her book and subsequent work Moreton-Robinson (1999, 2000b, 2003a,b, 2005, 2006) displaces the white subject of feminism by drawing on theories of 'whiteness' within critical race scholarship.<sup>4</sup> She cites the seminal study by Ruth Frankenberg (1993) in which the author examines whiteness as a cultural practice, socially constructed in the narratives of thirty white Californian women.<sup>5</sup> Like Moreton-Robinson (2000a), Frankenberg's (1993, p. 234) naming of whiteness and white people is explicitly political in that her intent is to help 'dislodge the claims of both to rightful

dominance.' This is consistent with the broader literature on whiteness which began emerging in the 1980s and has since flourished. Collectively, this literature has documented the plurality of whiteness and its historical, social and cultural specificity as well as identified ideologies, practices and discourses which have rendered whiteness invisible but hegemonic (e.g. Bonnett, 1997, 2000; Jackson, 1998; McGuinness, 2000; Twine and Gallagher, 2007). As whiteness has become an increasingly common theoretical lens concerns have been raised about its potentially negative effects. These include apprehensions about the re-centring and reification of whiteness, the appropriation of whiteness studies for recuperative whiteness politics and the possibility of essentialising whiteness (Pease, 2005; Ahmed, 2004, 2007; Riggs, 2004b).

Despite these anxieties feminist scholars such as Moreton-Robinson (2005) and others (e.g. Cuomo and Hall, 1999; Nicoll, 2000, 2004; Brewster, 2007; Gunew, 2007) have argued for the salience of whiteness theories. They have argued for the importance of understanding what Australian Indigenous academic and author Lillian Holt (1999, p. 44) evocatively characterises as 'part of the powerful, part of the fold, part of the majority, which doesn't necessarily have to examine itself'. These feminist scholars suggest that the prism of whiteness is critical to understanding and challenging the production of knowledge and the favouring of particular knowledges. This, they explain is because epistemic practices are inextricably linked to the exclusion of the racialised 'other.' In a particularly enlightening illustration of how this may manifest itself in the daily practices of academic production, Moreton-Robinson (2006, p. 254) analyses negative comments in reviews of her book by white women.<sup>6</sup> She identifies the way in which her own knowledge as an Indigenous woman is dismissed, undermined and caricatured by reviewers who demonstrate 'a limited desire to accept what Indigenous people know about the subject position "middle-class woman" because the white self is not perceived as an Indigenous social construct'. Moreton-Robinson's (2006) paper and the broader critique of the relationship between knowledge and whiteness necessarily raises critical challenges in writing between Indigenous and white feminist women which we address further in the following section of the paper.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Barbara and Lia

This paper has its genesis in our interest in diversity and inclusivity in rural areas. These are issues that have been widely canvassed in feminist scholarship and, more recently, in rural studies (e.g. Cloke and Little, 1997; Cloke, 2006). Collectively we have undertaken a wide range of research projects on gender in rural Australia over a number of years (e.g. Pini, 2004a, 2005, 2006, 2008; Bryant, 1999, 2003, 2006) which have largely focused on white women and men. In conversations with each other about our work we have reflected on our understanding and practice of diversity and found that we had, in many ways, avoided undertaking Indigenous research.<sup>7</sup> There is

<sup>4</sup> The book had approximately 30 reviews, most of which were extremely positive. The book has been shortlisted for a number of prestigious awards and remains on the curriculum of numerous international university courses.

<sup>7</sup> As we discussed our work over this time we did so in a context in which Indigenous issues were receiving a high level of media and political attention in Australia. This was a result of the implementation of numerous highly controversial policy decisions relating to Indigenous Australians by the Howard Coalition government (1996–2007). This included abolishing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, refusing to apologise formally to Indigenous Australians for the stolen generation, amending Native Title legislation and declaring a 'state of emergency' in the Northern Territory in response to allegations of child sexual abuse in Indigenous communities (see Robbins, 2007; Altman and Hinkson, 2007 for a discussion of Indigenous policy under the Howard Government).

<sup>4</sup> Fee and Russell (2007) note that until recently 'whiteness studies' centred on American concerns, but that in Australia Hage (1998) and Stratton (1998) drew on whiteness studies in their respective books *White Nation* and *Race Daze*. However, they argue that 'the most prominent Australian proponent and critic of whiteness theory and studies is Aileen Moreton-Robinson' (Fee and Russell, 2007, p. 202).

<sup>5</sup> Ahmed (2004, p. 1) argues for a genealogy of whiteness studies which recognises and begins with the work of Black feminists rather than later work such as Frankenberg's (1993) in which white academics focus on constructions and experiences of whiteness. Moreton-Robinson (2000a) too, draws on this important scholarship (e.g. hooks, 1981; Lorde, 1983; Collins, 1991) to situate her study. However, in both the study design and analysis of data she draws heavily on Frankenberg (1993).

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