



Affective energies: Sensory bodies on the beach in Darwin, Australia



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ABSTRACT

Emerging debates on anti-racism within white majority cultures centre emotion and affect to explore the visceral nature of racialised encounters that unfold in public spaces of the city. This paper builds on such understandings by conceptualising whiteness as a force that exerts affective pressures on bodies of colour who are hypervisible in public spaces. I show that these pressures have the potential to wound, numb and immobilise bodies affecting what they can do or what they can become. This paper argues, however, that affective energies from human and non-human sources are productive forces that are also sensed in public spaces such as the suburban beach. These energies entangle sensuous bodies with the richness of a more-than-human world and have the potential to offer new insights into exploring how racially differentiated bodies live with difference. The paper draws on ethnographic research conducted in Darwin, a tropical north Australian city at the centre of politicised public debates on asylum seeker policy, migrant integration and Indigenous wellbeing. My attention to affective pressures and affective energies contributes to understanding how bodies with complex histories and geographies of racialisation can inhabit a world of becoming.

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1. Introduction

All over the world, the warm, sunny beach is a fantasy space of freedom and adventure where ‘just about everyone wants to be’ (Freeman, 2008; Godfrey and Arguinzi, 2012; Saldanha, 2007; Taussig, 2000: 252). In Australia, the suburban beach is an icon of a ‘laid back’ lifestyle portrayed vividly in tourist brochures, glossy travel magazines and promotional images on the Internet (Cousins, 2011; Wise, 2009). In summer, white Australian-ness is performed by wetsuit-clad athletic bodies surfing, bronzed bodies wearing bikinis or board shorts swimming, sun-tanning or reading, energetic bodies running or walking dogs and animated children building sandcastles with buckets and spades (Wise, 2009). Such beach activities that centre the human in its relationship with nature are regulated by unspoken rules embodied in rituals of social behaviour that demonstrate politeness and respect for privacy (Noble, 2009). From an early age Anglo-Australians know that the dry sandy area is a place for relaxation, the firm sandy area near the water’s edge is for frivolity and activity takes place in the water (Wise, 2009). Today, however, the suburban beach attracts residents and visitors of diverse ethnic minority backgrounds who use this public space in different ways – ways that do not always conform to acceptable norms of dress and social behaviour. As

shown in research that focuses on race and class tensions that unfold on beaches in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil by Freeman (2008), beaches in Australia are also public spaces of enforced togetherness where intercultural tensions simmer and unfold (Noble, 2009; Wise, 2009). These simmering interethnic tensions and emotional insecurities surfaced and erupted on Cronulla beach, Sydney in 2005, when Lebanese-Australian bodies of Middle-Eastern physical appearance disrupted familiar cultural norms through their style of dress, soccer activity and ‘rowdy’ behaviour (Johns, 2008; Wise, 2009). Moral panic, fear and anxiety fuelled by media reports of global terrorism surfaced in ‘beach riots’ and vitriolic public debates on Australian values and Australian-ness. These debates privileged whiteness as a historically and socially constructed normative position, a set of cultural practices and an ‘Anglo-inspired cultural orientation’ (Hage, 2012: 2); the non-Anglo body was racialised.

This paper draws attention to the hypervisible non-Anglo body to explore the visceral nature of racialised encounters that unfold in public spaces of the city such as the suburban beach. In Australia, such hypervisibility continues to result in increased vulnerability to racism among bodies of colour, evident when a long-term resident of South Asian heritage working with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation was called a “black c—” and told to go back to his country (Levy, 2013). The event was reported widely in the media and stimulated public debate on the need for targeted anti-racist policies. There was little focus, however, on how skin played an important part in the unfolding of this visceral event. Price (2012)

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argues that pigmentation intensities of the skin and its physical configurations (e.g. phenotype) play an important part in racialised perceptions, but there is little research that draws attention to the forceful nature of bodily encounters. From my position as a mature-aged woman of Indian heritage living in Australia, this paper shows that attention to affective pressures provides an understanding of how whiteness emerges as a force that is exerted and felt by bodies. In particular, I focus on Darwin, a north Australian city where whiteness is a racialising force with a history that shapes migrant and Aboriginal bodies. However, rather than focus on conflict, exclusion and violence, or the negativity often evident in literatures on race and ethnicity, this paper also draws attention to affect as a mobilising force that increases the capacity of bodies to become otherwise.

I argue that affective energies from human and non-human sources are productive forces sensed in contact zones of encounter that provide an understanding of how bodies with complex histories and geographies of racialisation can inhabit a 'world of becoming' (Connolly, 2011: 6). The paper brings literature on whiteness, race and ethnicity into conversation with the emerging field of more-than-representational geographies to think about such a world. This is a world where a focus on affect provides an understanding of intensities of bodily experience, the connect-edness of bodies and the situational nature of ethics (Massumi, 2002). Although conceptual conversations on affect, race and encounter have been initiated by Sara Ahmed (2007, 2010), Arun Saldanha (2007), Nigel Thrift (2010), Divya Tolia Kelly and Mike Crang (2010), research that weaves theoretical and empirical insights is just emerging. This paper makes a modest contribution to strengthening these insights by drawing on participant observation in public spaces of Darwin such as beaches, bus transit centres, open-air markets and shopping malls where bodily encounters unfold. I also conducted 13 focus groups with people who meet in public spaces such as beach reserves and community centres. This was followed by 47 in-depth interviews with residents of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds who took 86 photographs of the city and spoke about their sensory experiences in public spaces. Such an ethnography that draws on visual methods and is attentive to emotion and affect in contact zones of bodily encounter is just emerging in contemporary urban research (Lobo, 2013; Pink and Servon, 2013; Wise, 2010). This paper with its focus on the suburban beach shows that a sensory ethnography provides the potential to explore how the racialising force of whiteness unfolds and morphs in Darwin, a city at the centre of public debates on ethnic minority integration, asylum seeker policy and Indigenous wellbeing.

2. The force of whiteness

Emerging scholarship on the intimate turn in geography foregrounds bodily encounter to show that skin plays a central role in exploring racial and ethnic 'contact zones' (Price, 2012; Saldanha, 2006). These zones are conceptualised as places of exposure and expulsion, but also connection, understanding and interruption. Drawing attention to the fleshiness of these encounters, Price (2012) underlines that skin is one of the most visible organs, and skin tone continues to be a primary signifier of race in many societies. This physical body of 'skin, blood and bones' (Saldanha, 2006: 12), however, has attracted little attention because of political correctness, the risks of biological essentialism and the dominance of discursive explorations that focus on language, representation and meaning (Price, 2012; Tolia-Kelly and Crang, 2010). The outcome is that attention to race as a force with a history which is played out on and through the body; a body that can be wounded, numbed, silenced and shattered often escapes focused attention

(Price, 2012). Such attention to emotional and affective states, however, is crucial to exploring how bodies with complex histories and geographies of racialisation negotiate affective pressures and inhabit a world of becoming.

The emergence of whiteness as a racialising force that exerts affective pressures seems evident in recent research that engages with the work of Frantz Fanon, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. For example, Sara Ahmed (2007), Ghassan Hage (2012) and Arun Saldanha (2010) explore whiteness by revisiting Frantz Fanon's (1986) seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks* that focuses on the emotional and affective states of inhabiting postcolonial blackness. Adopting a phenomenological approach, Ahmed (2007) argues that whiteness is real, material and lived and affects the orientation of bodies in space. Such a bodily orientation that is often inherited and reproduced through habitual practices enables bodies who inhabit whiteness to move with comfort through space. In contrast, bodies of colour who inhabit racially marked skin or whose whiteness is in dispute in different social spaces, become 'stress points' (Ahmed, 2007: 160). My contention is that these bodies become 'stress points' because they feel whiteness as a racialising force that exerts affective pressures.

In Australia, Hage (2010) revisits Fanon's work to explore an affective politics of racial mis-interpellation. Hage (2010) argues that structural racism with its traditional focus on class cannot explain the force that debilitates bodies and makes them dysfunctional through misrecognition. Migrant bodies who are denied the ability to vacillate between positions of universality and particularity find it difficult to pull themselves together when difference is denied or recognised (Hage, 2010). Instead, whiteness emerges as a force that materialises through practices of racialised mis-interpellation and bodily intensities of hurt, anger and frustration. Such intensities affect the capacity of bodies of colour to engage in the 'energy consuming centripetal effort' (Hage, 2010: 126) of self-constitution. But perhaps the strength of whiteness as a visceral force that snuffs out life is even more evident when Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers are deprived minimum humanity (Hage, 2012).

The theoretical and empirical exploration of whiteness as a force that is visceral is also explored by Arun Saldanha (2006, 2007, 2010). Saldanha (2010) argues that although Frantz Fanon was perhaps the first person who developed a compelling theory of racism that drew attention to the body and skin colour, he also created an ontological separation between racist discourse and embodied subjectivity. Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Saldanha (2010) negotiates this separation through a focus on affect that is conceptualised as something that 'happens to bodies' (Saldanha, 2010: 2414, original emphasis) and has outcomes for bodily mobility in space. Focussing on trance night parties on Anjuna beach, Goa, India, Saldanha (2007) argues that phenotypical racism routinely unfolds through precognitive categorisations and sensory responses that evaluate people and place. In public spaces such as the beach where bodies aggregate, whiteness emerges as a force that gains strength through its ability to spread, change itself, become viscous and claim space. Such a focus on viscosity, a concept borrowed from fluid dynamics shows that places emerge through the bodily interplay of circulation and stickiness (Saldanha, 2007). In this paper I associate such stickiness with the force field of whiteness that is felt by bodies as affective pressures. In contrast, circulation occurs when the force field of whiteness morphs through the sensing of affective energies in places like the suburban beach.

3. Affective pressures in Darwin

This section shows that the force field of whiteness has a history in Darwin (pop. 75,000), the capital city of the Northern Territory.

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