A WHITE WOMAN STORIES TO DECOLONISE (HERSELF)

SKIN IN THE GAME

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SKIN IN THE GAME
IT'S MY PRIVILEGE
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The effect of colonization may seem to be merely academic; sheer physical survival is far more pressing. The problem is that constant efforts by governments, states, societies and institutions to deny the historical formations of such conditions [poverty, dependence, hopelessness] have simultaneously denied our claims to humanity, to having a history, and to all sense of hope. To acquiesce is to lose ourselves and implicitly agree with all that has been said about us. To resist is to retrench in the margins, retrieve ‘what we were and remake ourselves’. The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages and social practices – all may be spaces of marginalisation, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope.

Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 2012

Sometimes people hold a core belief that is very strong. When they are presented with evidence that works against that belief, the new evidence cannot be accepted. It would create a feeling that is extremely uncomfortable, called cognitive dissonance. And because it is so important to protect the core belief, they will rationalise, ignore, even deny anything that doesn’t fit with that core belief.

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1952
Skin in the Game

White Supremacy

The Aboriginal Problem

Constructions of Race

Social Darwinism

Dominant Culture

Colonisation:

Physical

Psychological

Spiritual

Intellectual

Blood Quantum

A.O. Neville

Eugenics

Breed Out the Black

Exemption Certificate

Colonised Mind

Stolen Generation

Passing

Comb Test

Pencil Test

Creates Hierarchy of Blackness

Half Caste

Miscegenation
That some might think of my country as Australia is understandable but in the discourse of my making I would label country as being that of my body - heart, gut, head, if not wispy beard and ashen hair. That country might be ‘mulatto’, ‘half-caste’. ‘Mestizo’, but whatever it is called, dear reader, dear self of tomorrow, you are always welcome there.

‘Ethnicity estimate’, announces the caption. This is what your DNA says about you. It tells you about your ancestry, which may be at odds with who you are, or who you think you are. This estimate is about nature, not nurture.

Two circles hover over his ancestral home, yellow for Caucasus at 54 per cent and green for the Middle East at 41 per cent. ‘If I was any purer bred, I’d be inbred’, my husband quips. These results tell him he is officially 95 per cent Arab, according to the saliva he spat into the tube.

If only I had known where a spit in a tube would lead us.

Just before Christmas 2017, I was musing on gifts for my family who already have too much. My husband and I had discussed gifting experiences rather than more possessions and unnecessary stuff. I settled on the idea of giving each member an ancestry DNA kit, a gift of genealogy: a family tree, the possibility of a deepening of identity. At its most simple, it would be a great conversation and story for us all to share when the results came in.

On Christmas Day, presents unwrapped, one of our sons cheekily wondered if I was looking for Aboriginal branches to my tree. ‘Would you be happy with that Mum?’

I would be proud to be connected to the First Nations peoples, but that was not my intention.¹

At this stage I should tell you how all this ancestry DNA process works. Once in possession of the kit, you spit in a tube, register online and return the sample to the organisation where it is tested using an autosomal DNA test that surveys a person’s entire genome at over 700,000 locations. This test covers both the maternal and paternal sides of the family tree, so it encompasses all lineages. The results include information about your ethnicity across 350 regions and identifies potential relatives through DNA matching to others who have taken the same test. When the results are ready, you receive an email linking you to the information.

¹ This has happened numerous times to me, people making a joke about my advocacy and enthusiasm for First Nations people and culture: ‘she wants to be/thinks she is Aboriginal now’, ‘black on the inside’. It is not true. I do not aspire to be black, but I am curious and respectful and am willing to speak up (I try to be diplomatic) if I am privy to racist or discriminatory comments or attitudes. This makes people feel uncomfortable, it can expose their inner racist. Making a quip or a joke takes their racism off the table and puts the focus back on me.
Our second son had submitted his test at the same time as his father, so their results arrived together. He too had the hovering Arab circles, but there was also a colourful menagerie of smaller circles over Great Britain and Ireland from his mother.

I pondered over his results that pronounce him as mixed-race, 46 per cent Arab, 40 per cent British and Irish, and 14 per cent Other including, inexplicably, the Indian subcontinent, which perplexes us all. Until this exercise, it had never occurred to any of us what percentage of a race we were, what our blood quantum was. When you are white, you don’t need to. We pass into and through the dominant culture with few obstacles. I have unpacked some of this in ‘Dear George’.

No one has ever asked me what percentage Irish or English I am, to fracture my identity in percentages of whiteness. If you are not white, such percentages can write your future, or lack of it.

**White Wealth Built on Black Labour**

I decided to look into the practice of assessing a person’s blood quantum. It led me to the United States and the slave trade.

Black people were property for white people in the slave days, which served to elevate and hyper-value whiteness. A pre-eminent voice in this area is Professor Cheryl Harris, whose fields of expertise include critical race theory and race conscious remedies. Harris’s article in the *Harvard Law Review* called ‘Whiteness as Property’ (1993) continues to be one of the most pivotal in the discipline of critical race and whiteness studies. Do not be
put off by the fact it is in the Harvard Law Review and presume it is legalese; it is a fascinating read, grounded in her family experience.

Harris explains that ‘through slavery, race and economic domination were fused’, driven by economic concerns where the slave trade and slave labour fuelled economic expansion that benefitted the nation. ‘Thus, the tension over the issue of slavery ultimately resulted in the now well-documented set of constitutional compromises that subordinated the humanity of Black people to the economic and political interests of the white, propertied class.’ White people used black slave labour to grow their wealth.

‘Slavery produced a peculiar, mixed category of property and humanity’, explains Harris. There was a ‘cruel tension between property and humanity’ in the way the law allowed the use of the Black women’s bodies as a means of increasing property. This meant that a slave owner could reproduce his own work force by impregnating his female slaves ‘because the children of Blackwomen assumed the status of their mother, slaves were bred through Blackwomen’s bodies’.

Harris begins with the story of her grandmother as it ‘illustrates the valorisation of whiteness as treasured property in a society structured on social caste’. The setting is the Great Migration, sometimes known as the Great Northward Migration, or the Black Migration, the relocation of more than six million African Americans from the rural South to the cities of the North, Midwest and West from about 1916 to 1970. Many were driven to escape the harsh segregationist laws and limited economic opportunities they were subjected to in the South, and headed north to take advantage of the need for industrial workers that first arose during the First World War. During the Great Migration, African Americans began to forge new economic, social and political lives, creating spaces for themselves in public life, while confronting racial prejudice.

Harris’s mother’s family was part of the great river of black migration that flowed north. Her grandmother’s fair skin, straight hair and aquiline features had not saved

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 1719.
5 Ibid., 1713.
her from being born into a life of share-cropping in Mississippi. She arrived in Chicago, a single mother, and presented herself for employment at a ‘fine establishment’ retail store. It was an ‘act of great daring and self-denial’, as she was presenting herself as a white woman. ‘In the parlance of racist America, she was “passing” ... albeit on a false passport, not merely passing, but trespassing.’6 Her grandmother was ‘transgressing boundaries, crossing borders, spinning on margins, traveling between dualities of Manichean space, rigidly bifurcated into light/dark, good/bad, white/Black’.7

The family lived in a black enclave in Chicago, her children went to a black school and she rode a black bus to her white job. Not once did she reveal her true identity and she was never asked, as it was ‘unthinkable’ that a black woman would be allowed to work at such a ‘fine establishment’. She knew all the gossip and details of her co-workers’ lives, but no one knew her and the place she occupied, ‘where white supremacy and economic domination meet’.8 At the end of each day she returned home on the black bus, exhausted, ‘laid aside her mask and re-entered herself’, day after day, switching between visibility and invisibility.9 The price of her keeping her family safe and well was her silence; self-annihilation was her only way to survive. Her grandmother’s strategy for survival is called crossing the colour line and ‘is a feature of race subordination in all societies structured on white supremacy’.10

There is an economic logic to passing, as being white gives higher economic returns and a stronger future. ‘Becoming white meant gaining access to a whole set of public and

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6 Ibid., 1710. In her paper, Harris includes Gunnar Myrdal’s discussion of the phenomenon of ‘passing’ from his 1944 study of race, as it gives insight into the social context of her grandmother’s story and the stories of many like her. I found it so poignant that I have included it too: ““Passing” means that a Negro becomes a white man, that is, moves from the lower to the higher caste. In the American caste order, this can be accomplished only by the deception of the white people with whom the passer comes to associate and by a conspiracy of silence on the part of other Negroes who might know about it”. Myrdal, cited in ibid., 1712.

7 Ibid., 1710.

8 Ibid. I found it important to share an observation Harris makes in one of her footnotes, where she states that ““money whitens” thereby equating “white” with higher class position and reflecting that white is preferred and dominant”. Ibid., 1712.

9 Ibid., 1711. Claudia Rankine also talks about this invisibility in Citizen: An American Lyric (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014). I explore this in the story ‘You’, in I’m Not Racist, but ...

10 Ibid., 1712.
private privileges that materially and permanently guaranteed basic subsistence needs and, therefore, survival’.\textsuperscript{11} Becoming white increased the possibility of controlling critical aspects of one’s life rather than being the object of others’ domination.\textsuperscript{12}

**BLOOD QUANTUM**

The social and economic privileges, and superior status, accorded to whiteness, as described by Harris, have been justified by the presumption that ‘race’ is a quantifiable biological and evolutionary phenomenon. This is the bedrock of the cultural construction that we know as ‘race’. The idea that race is ‘blood-borne’, or hereditary, and determines the essential character of a person is grounded in the racist science of eugenics that flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{13} White eugenicists described race as ‘immutable, scientific, biologically determined – an unsullied fact of the blood rather than a volatile and violently imposed regime of racial hierarchy’.\textsuperscript{14}

The concept of ‘blood quantum’ is a product of racist legislation – known as the ‘blood quantum laws’ – passed by Euro-Americans to regulate who could be classified as Native American or black. This European construct must be distinguished from the concept of ‘indigeneity’, which locates indigenous identity within a complex structure of ancestral ties and cultural practices, and which may be extended to people of other ancestry as well.

From 1492, when Columbus ‘discovered’ America, the First Nations peoples of that continent became defined, within white law, by their racial constitution. The Colony of Virginia was the first to pass the ‘Indian Blood law’ in 1705, thus denying civil rights

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 1713.

\textsuperscript{12} Later in this chapbook, I have a story called ‘The Dog Licence’, where I present an Australian context for passing: the exemption certificate was a licence to pass as white for First Nations people with light skin. But there was a price to pay for the ‘privilege’.

\textsuperscript{13} I remember on a family to trip to Rwanda visiting the Genocide Museum in Kigali and seeing measuring devices introduced by the Belgians to measure ‘native’ heads to discern which tribe had the largest head – and brain – and would therefore be the dominant group. This form of divide and conquer was the precursor to the genocide the Tutsis visited on the Hutus.

\textsuperscript{14} Harris, ‘Whiteness as Property’, 1739.
to any ‘negro, mulatto, or Indian’ and which defined the above terms by stating that ‘the child of an Indian, and the child, grandchild, or great-grandchild of a negro shall be deemed accounted, held, and taken to be a mulatto’. This meant that half and mixed descent individuals were treated as legally inferior persons.\textsuperscript{15}

Virginia’s example was a legal way of determining who was entitled to the privileges of a white person, and colonies and states followed, introducing their own blood quantum laws, and those with greater white ancestry were assumed to be more competent.

Today the practice of assessing worthiness through blood quantum has created damaging divisions in tribes and communities, denied identities and challenged what it means to be family in First Nations cultures.

Although there was some overlap, there were classifications for blackness in the United States. Blackness was conferred via the ‘one-drop rule’ that decreed a single drop of ‘black blood’ makes a person black: that is, \textit{any} black ancestry. This concept evolved over the nineteenth century and was codified into law in the twentieth to become integral to the racist Jim Crow laws passed between 1910 and 1931. Regardless of appearance, any person with African ancestry was legally black for the purposes of segregation.

Both the blood quantum rule and the one drop rule are examples of \textit{hypodescent}, a policy that can operate in societies where the dominant culture regards some races as dominant and superior and others as subordinate and inferior. Hypodescent automatically assigns children of a mixed-race union to the subordinate group. If I applied this rule to my offspring, they would all be ‘classified’ as Arab, but curiously, the DNA results say our third son is less Arab than his sibling: that is, he is more from my ‘side’.\textsuperscript{16}

As I read further into this space, I became aware of how racial classifications through the lens of the dominant culture have seeped into my psyche and that I have


\textsuperscript{16} Hypodescent’ is the term used by anthropologist Marvin Harris to describe the American system of racial classification in which the subordinate classification is assigned to the offspring if there is one ‘superordinate’ and one ‘subordinate’ parent. Under this system, the child of a black parent and a white parent is black. For more information see Marvin Harris, \textit{Patterns of Race in the Americas} (New York: Walker, 1964).
been socially conditioned to be cognisant of a racial hierarchy. I began to look up words that I somehow know: *mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, hexadecaroon.*

These are words from slave societies in the Americas and written into law as we saw in Virginia. I suspect I know them from the television series *Roots* (1977 and 2016), which traces stories of slavery in the United States. Both versions of the series and Steven McQueen’s film *12 Years a Slave* (2013) had an enormous impact on me. When defining these words, many online dictionaries preface the definition with ‘now archaic’. Archaic may deem them ‘old-fashioned’, but they still echo in the present. These words were part of a code of discrimination and dehumanisation in seeking out a person’s percentage of blackness and assigning the person of a mixed union to the subordinate race.

Colonialism created a racial hierarchy and race-based ideology that led to a structure of domination that privileges white people over black people. This is not the sort of stuff we learn in school. I had to find this out the hard way, reading, the sorry realisation seeping in to me of the legacy of whiteness. Some of the prominent voices in this field are Frantz Fanon (*Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin White Masks*), Aimé Césaire (*Discourse on Colonialism*), Paulo Freire (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (*Decolonising Methodologies*) and James Baldwin.

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17 *Roots*, television program (Burbank: ABC, 1977). The show was remade in 2016 and aired on the History Channel.

18 Steve McQueen, dir., *12 Years a Slave*, motion picture (Los Angeles: Regency Enterprises, 2013).


Terms like mulatto, quadroon and half-caste were incorporated into American state laws, defining rights and restrictions. Skin colour justified enslavement and oppression, and became a way to stigmatise and prevent social advancement. In slave times, the darker the skin, the harder the labour. Lighter-skinned slaves were considered worthy for lighter duties and domestic work indoors. Discriminating between black slaves and servants by the hue of their blackness or brownness also occurred in Australia and I will discuss this later in this meander through blood percentage and skin colour.\textsuperscript{21}

The lighter-skinned slaves were classified by their percentage of black. The child of a black mother and white father (the usual way of things at the time) was called a hybrid, mixed-race, mixed-breed, half-breed, half-blood, half-and-half, half-caste, with caste situating the child in a social hierarchy.\textsuperscript{22} Under slavery, it was common for white plantation owners to rape their black slaves,\textsuperscript{23} and the progeny of such unions were referred to, perversely, as ‘Children of the Plantation’ and mulattoes.

Definitions of the word \textit{mulatto} are prefaced with cautions. Mulatto is a loaded word. The American \textit{Merriam-Webster Dictionary} warns ‘now sometimes offensive: the first-generation offspring of a black person and a white person’ and ‘now sometimes offensive: a person of mixed white and black ancestry’. The British \textit{Oxford Dictionary} is also wary, foregrounding with ‘dated, offensive: A person of mixed white and black ancestry, especially a person with one white and one black parent’. The Australian \textit{Macquarie Dictionary} presents similar definitions, but without critical comment on their history or appropriateness.

The etymology of \textit{mulatto}, according to the \textit{Online Etymology Dictionary} and many other online sources, provides insight into why the word is loaded.

\textsuperscript{21} I also discuss discrimination by shades of blackness in my story ‘Hair’, this volume.

\textsuperscript{22} J. K. Rowling played with this concept in \textit{Harry Potter} when Harry was called a ‘half-blood’ – half Muggle and half witch – by the pure-bred wizard, Draco Malfoy. See J. K. Rowling, \textit{Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets} (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), 86.

Mulatto surfaced in the 1590s to denote the offspring of a European and a black African, from the Spanish or Portuguese mulato, meaning ‘mixed breed’. Literally, the word means young mule, which is a reference to the hybrid nature of the beast, half-ass. The children and the grandchildren of the mulattoes would also be subject to their identity in fractions, which limited their chances of advancement. A child three quarters European and one quarter black would be referred to as a quarter-caste, quadroon, quarteron, cuarteron, morisco or a chino, depending on where they were in the world. Those with one-eighth black were called octoroons, mustees or tercerons. Those who were one-sixteenth blacks were quintoons, hexadecaroons, quinterones, mustefinos or marmelouks. By the time you got to this fraction you were barely black to look at, but still black by definition.

In colonised places, people of colour, gens de couleur, mixed-bloods, blends of peoples found names imposed and adopted to describe their shades: Cape coloured, creole, cholo, criollo, chindian, marabou, mestizo, Metis, maroon, pardo, zambo, sambo, garafuna, hapa, dougla.

My encounters with these terms is not limited to the slave biopic of Roots. The ironically titled Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia, Auber Octavius Neville (1875–1954), and his colleagues, also used these terms to describe the First Peoples as they conspired to take their children from them to assimilate and breed out the colour.

Neville, Chief Protector from 1915 to 1936, and later Commissioner for Native Affairs from 1936 until his retirement in 1940s, held the belief that the assimilation of First Nations peoples of mixed descent could only be achieved by biological absorption: that is, by breeding out the colour. Aligned with the thinking of Daisy Bates, who thought that the best thing whites could do was to ‘smooth the pillow of the dying race’, Neville believed that First Nations ways of life, languages and culture were already disappearing under a wave of European progress. This was articulated in his evidence to the Moseley Royal Commission of 1934:

The Commission will learn during its peregrinations how numerous these cross-breeds are, but particularly in the South-west and coastal towns in the North. There are half-castes married to aborigines and their progeny. There are three-
quarter castes married to other aborigines or quarter castes and their progeny. There are off-spring of a white woman by a half-caste father living with a half-caste woman. There is the union of a full-blood aboriginal with a white woman and their offspring. There is the Asiatic admixture, and the Afghan and Negro admixture, complicating matters generally. They have, like other cross breeds, an inherent dislike of institutionalism and authority, yet above all things they have to be protected against themselves whether they like it or not. They cannot remain as they are. The sore spot requires the application of the surgeon’s knife for the good of the patient, and probably against the patient’s will.\textsuperscript{24}

In 1947 Neville published his manifesto \textit{Australia’s Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community}, asserting his views through photographs showing a progression from full blood First Nations person to mixed to white Australian.\textsuperscript{25} His arguments are grounded in social Darwinism and eugenics.

Social Darwinism, popularised in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, used the Darwinian theory of natural selection – in the \textit{biological} evolution of plants, humans and animals – to explain the \textit{social} evolution of humans. One of the central premises of Darwin’s theory of natural selection is that the organism that is best-adapted to its environment will flourish more than others. Social Darwinists used this theory of ‘survival of the fittest’ in proposing that the strong triumph over the weak; and they applied this understanding to race, arguing that the white race was both the strongest and the most perfect of all the human races.\textsuperscript{26}

The related science of eugenics held that human breeding could be socially engineered to produce human social and biological perfection. It came from the British natural scientist and cousin of Charles Darwin, Francis Galton. The dominant theory among most European eugenicists was that perfection led to whiteness, and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} A. O. Neville, \textit{Australia’s Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community} (Sydney: Currawong, 1947).
\item \textsuperscript{26} In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were debates about whether black people were human at all.
\end{itemize}
that the white race needed to remain pure in order to perfect itself, which meant that interbreeding between races was discouraged.27

In Australia, we can see the workings of eugenic theory in the pages of A. O. Neville’s Australia’s Coloured Minority. Neville’s ideas are a blueprint for how we have been socially engineered to not see Aboriginal Australia and, when we do see it, to look down upon it. The book opens with Neville’s Glossary, his code to humanity in fractions. We are confronted with the following definitions:

BLACK –
A term often applied to the Aboriginal, though the pigmentation of the Aboriginal is not black but charcoal brown.

COLOURED PEOPLE –
People of Aboriginal descent but not the full-blood.

FULL BLOOD –
Pure-blood Aboriginal of Australia.

HALF-BLOOD, HALF-CASTE –
Offspring of full-blood Aboriginal and a white person.
Offspring of two persons both half-blood.

OCTOROON –
Offspring of Quadroon and White parents.

QUADROON –
Offspring of Half-blood and White parents.

27 Devotees of the eugenic sciences were not always united in approach, however. There were some white eugenicists, such as Charles-Auguste Vandermonde, who believed that interbreeding would strengthen the white race. See Sean M. Quinlan, ‘Inheriting Vice, Acquiring Virtue: Hereditary Disease and Moral Hygiene in the Medicine of the French Enlightenment’, Bulletin of the History of Medicine 80, no. 4 (2006): 649–75. There were also indigenous thinkers, such as Māori anthropologist Te Rangi Hiroa, who turned eugenic theory to their own purposes to promote self-determination. See Jane Carey, ‘A “Happy Blending”? Maori Networks, Anthropology and ‘Native’ Policy in New Zealand, the Pacific and Beyond’, in Indigenous Networks: Mobility, Connections and Exchange, ed. Jane Carey and Jane Lydon (New York and London: Routledge, 2014), 184–218.
Offspring of two persons both Quadroons.  

Neville’s eugenic program aimed to absorb people of part-Aboriginal descent into the white mainstream community with the end goal of eliminating First Nations peoples by biological means through controlling reproduction. His insensitivity was draconian: The theory was that Aboriginal children with white genetic heritage would be lighter than the Aboriginal mother, and if later they married whites and had children, these would be lighter still, and that by the third or fourth generation, no sign of native origin whatever would be apparent. Subject to this process, a half-blood mother is unmistakable as to origin, her quartercaste or quadroon offspring is almost like a white, and an octoroon is entirely indistinguishable from one. A quadroon child may become darker by the time adolescence is reached, but even then, would pass as a Southern European.

**PASSING**

If my husband were a dark-skinned Arab instead of the fair-skinned man he is, more like his Christian mother from the north of Iraq than his swarthy Muslim father from Baghdad, our children would appear as more mixed-race than they do. In some societies, they would be half-castes, coming from the Latin castus, which means pure. They may be ‘impure’ hybrids, but their access to opportunity, wealth and power in the Western world is linked to their whiteness, which is their ‘Heinz 57’ mother. Although my own blood – like everyone else’s – is far from pure, it is my whiteness that evokes images and impressions of purity.


29 Ibid., 59.

30 ‘Heinz 57’ refers to someone who has ancestry from a multitude of ethnic backgrounds. In his text, *History and the Poet*, Robert Wood ponders his identity as a ‘half-caste’, ‘a person of colour and a white ally working for solidarity and justice’ who passes, ‘walking in two worlds’. His reflections prompted me to think of my children, who are half ‘pure-bred’ Arab and their identities. My twenty-seven-year-old is already feeling as though one half of him has been whitewashed, as, like Wood, being a white man is only half his story. Wood is speaking from the inside when he tells what matters him: white men fail to see the invisible forms of group solidarity, their shared experiences of the body, and their political position as a collective rather than individuals. Wood, *History and the Poet*, 69.
The construction of white racial superiority, with its false foundation in biology, is implicit in our language. White denotes pure, as in baptismal robes, virginal wedding gowns, angels, God in white robes. Black is evil, depression is a black dog, the devil is always black, and I wonder if the Tasmanian version would have been so called if he were tawny? We affix meanings to these colours metaphorically and linguistically, muddying humanity, dictating what is good, insinuating binaries. My husband and hence our children can ‘pass’ as white, he aided by his well-educated English accent. They are racially ambiguous. Unbeknownst to them, they enjoy the trappings of a racist culture.

A SPIT IN A TUBE

A week or so after our son’s DNA results returned, I received an email.

Hi Melissa, my name is BM [name deleted] and I’m looking for pieces of my story. I was born on [date deleted] 1963 at the [place deleted] Hospital in [place deleted], NSW to [name of mother deleted] of [place deleted] NSW who relinquished me for adoption. Based on genealogical research and DNA testing I believe that we are first cousins, and that one of your uncles is my birth father.

The man’s email lays out a family tree for me, going as far back as a James Fenaughty (1836–1909) and Ellen Higgins (1843–1918), informing me that we share them as great-great-grandparents and that we also share the same paternal grandparents. Based on the DNA, BM claimed that one of their four sons was potentially his birth father. He continues:

The newest DNA matching information I’ve found has shown, by direct inference, that your father is my paternal uncle, and could not be my birth father. However, I don’t know which of the brothers this removes from the list as I don’t know which is your father? Could you help me, please? I understand that an email like this is likely a surprise to you. It’s my hope that, as a teller of true stories, you will help me find a small piece of my own. Please feel free to reach out to me if you have any questions. Many thanks ...
Any questions? I call the phone number at the end of the email immediately. BM lives in the United States, and I was sure that 10.30 pm his time was not too late for the answers he offered.

We are a big family. I am the eldest of six children. There are four boys and then my sister. She calls us the bookends. My mother had us all in just under ten years. We are a warm and colourful collection of extroverts who fall in and out with each other, but our bonds are strong. We adore our mother and despise our father in varying degrees. I am estranged from him. He was a good provider but a nasty husband and a serial philanderer. The father in our lives and grandfather to our children is my mother’s second husband of 30 years. He is a wonderful man and is loved by all who know him. I have three stepbrothers and in total there are 22 grandchildren.

With such an unfaithful father, we siblings had always joked that we had siblings out there, hence the sense of inevitability.

The phone rings in North America and BM is astounded I call. Apparently, this is not how it usually works. I learn that he had written to my father and his brothers a year earlier, telling his story and explaining one of them was his father, to no response. Later, when I ask my aunts and uncles about the letter, they dismiss it as a scam. ‘Some Nigerian on a boat off Majorca scheming to extort cash from them.’

With each moment the story grows. He knows so much about us. He found some distant cousin of mine who has been building the family tree and she has kindly helped BM in putting together the pieces of his story. He knows that my father is the eldest of the five brothers (there is a sister in the mix too), and of the circumstances in which the youngest had died. The youngest brother was a gay man and this was not welcome in this staunch Catholic family with clerical vocations across generations. Family attempts to ‘fix’ him with gay conversions grounded in faith were devastating and he took his own life in the 1980s. I am moved to discover that life can write its own poetry; BM is a proud gay man. And married.

31 Why is it that the conmen and culprits are always imagined as black? Why are these black people imagined as stateless or ‘floating’?
He explains that our son’s DNA is the strongest connection he has so far, most probably a second cousin, and asks who my father is in the band of brothers, so he can rule him out. Knowing the characters of the men involved (one is a priest) and the timeline, I convey to BM that the only brother who can be his father is my father. My father lived in Sydney at that time and everyone else was Melbourne-based. His conception and birth were prior to my father’s engagement to my mother. The repercussions of this are devastating. I am no longer the eldest.

BM protests at my certainty, positive that our son’s DNA is only strong enough to be a cousin, but I am steadfast. It is the only possibility. Later he checks the fine print and messages me to say that within that category, he could also be a half-nephew. I know he is, but we need more proof.

We say goodbye and I promise I will get to work to help him with his jigsaw. I caution that he should be content with a few missing pieces. You will love all of us, we’re great, I say, but you will not want to know our father. BM is astounded that I seem so ready to welcome him. We knew you were out there, I assure him.

I forward the email to my siblings. All are surprised, but not. The news spreads across the family and the phone rings hot and we are surreptitiously stalking each other’s lives and genes online. His pictures make me gasp. He is dead ringer for my father and awfully like our first son.

The poor fellow finds himself in a Facebook chat group with the six of us before he knows it. The thread throngs with welcomes and questions and he struggles to keep us at bay. This is what it must feel like to go mad, he writes. How can you be so sure? he wonders. The photos say it all, as do the circumstances, but understandably he wants DNA proof.

My sister volunteers to harvest spit from our octogenarian father and she does so a week later in a wily way. Now we must wait the six weeks or so for the results.

While we wait for the news, I get back in contact with the sceptical aunts and uncles. It’s not the Nigerian fraudster on a boat in the Med, I assure them. I send them the photos and they agree the likenesses are hard to argue with.

During the weeks of wait, the flurry of the Facebook chat settles, and we limit contact to liking each other’s photos until BM posts ‘I have news on the DNA tests’.
I think he is permanently logged into the Ancestry database. We ping back excitedly, waiting.

Our hunches were correct. He is our brother from another mother.

A few weeks later a sibling delivers the news to our father. He was completely uninterested. He refused to discuss his ‘new’ son, our brother, or look at a photo. He was interested in the blood quantum, curious at the lack of Spanish (the Armada must have missed our Irish village) and keen to discover his percentages of Irish, Welsh and English blood.
Dear Professor Yancy,

I am writing to thank you for your letter, ‘Dear White America’, posted on the New York Times website on Christmas Eve, 2015.32

Sadly, it has taken almost two years to get to me, but on reflection, the delay is welcome as I feel I am now in the right space to listen to and digest your words.

Of course, I do realise that your letter was not addressed to me.

Although white America is not my tribe so to speak, I feel that white Australia

is closely related to your desired audience. In our country, ‘race continues to function in painful ways’ too, so I began to read with great curiosity and, I must admit, some trepidation.

Before I continue, may I call you George? We Australians are an irreverent lot. We resist such formalities. We like to think we are all equal, but more on that later ...

Your letter laid bare my whiteness in a wily way. I commend you on your (canny) admission of and reflection on your own sexism to illustrate to us all in a familiar frame the insidious nature of racism. Your confession shows me how we all need to take risks to genuinely address the lies we all tell ourselves (like we are all equal, or that our nations were ‘discovered’ and ‘settled’ rather than invaded and stolen).

You risked your reputation to get your point across. ‘African American Philosopher Confesses He Is Sexist!’ is not a headline you would court, but nor did you court the vitriol and hatred that was the response to your extraordinary letter. I note you are now a ‘Dangerous Professor’.  

Yours was not a lame confession angling for forgiveness for your sexism. You acknowledge that although your intentions are good and you try not to be sexist, you ‘perpetuate sexism every day of your life’. You don’t hate women or desire to oppress them, but your actions are at odds with your intentions. Being an ‘enlightened’, educated, ‘good’ man, or a fan of feminism, does not let you off the hook.

As I sit with your words, I can feel myself being deftly (willingly) lulled into a reflection on my own stealthy racism. You say that as a sexist you failed women (which is half the population!), and, following this thread, as a racist I have failed humanity; by failing to speak out against sexism you have been complicit in the oppression of women,

33  This is fascinating. Yancy was informed by his students that he had been placed on the ‘Professor Watch List’, a website created and run by a conservative youth group called Turning Point USA. He was one of some 200 professors marked on this site as advancing ‘leftist propaganda in the classroom’. The goal of the watch list is to ‘out’ professors for their progressive views and it is also fuelled by their race. Yancy said he is used to being marked by his race, but never before had he been marked by his ideas. The watch list attempt to shame Yancy and other professors into silence. Yancy warns that a watch list such as this one can have an effect similar to Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon, which essentially created self-censorship and mental imprisonment. The watch list is designed to not only have others spy on these professors, but also to try to psychologically implement self-policing on their thoughts and ideas. George Yancy, ‘I Am A Dangerous Professor’, Standing Against Violent Extremism (blog), 3 December 2016, https://www.busave.org/single-post/2016/12/03/I-Am-A-Dangerous-Professor-Summary.
and my silence has made me an accessory to racism; your failure to engage critically and extensively with women’s pain and suffering in your writing suggests your empathy is selective, as is my compassion for the Other. Your failure ‘to challenge those poisonous assumptions that women are “inferior” to men’ can be aligned to my reticence to stand up to anti-Semitism or anti-Muslim sentiments in my community.

Sadly, we both live in societies with industries that sexually objectify and dehumanise women, disseminating a diet of images that degrade and ‘fragment women into mere body parts’ for ‘visual and physical titillation’. The ‘collective male imagination’, the male gaze, deludes itself with assumptions and false narratives that women enjoy being treated as sexual toys. The complicity, the responsibility, the pain caused runs deep, and each woman feels the sexual degradation in their own unique way. The benefits of these industries are wealth and power and we are all complicit by accepting their presence. None of us are innocent.

Curiously, it feels cathartic to apply your reflections on sexism to my racism. It has helped me to voice what my conscience was telling me. I had already commenced building my own bridge over the cultural abyss. (Have you heard of Richard Frankland, a Senior Man of the Gunditjmara people – I call him The Songman? He opened up this idea to me.) Inevitably, through my research, I find myself narrowing down my gaze to a particular flavour of Australian racism: indifference, dismissal and disdain for the First Nations peoples, homogenised into one indistinctive mob – Aborigines – when, in fact, there are more than 270 unique First Nations across this continent.

I can see how our society continues to dehumanise the First Nations peoples and disseminate a diet of reductive stereotypes that degrade, abuse and exoticise. Sometimes, it feels like the collective Aussie imagination, this white gaze that comforts itself with assumptions, myths and false narratives that the traditional owners and

34 How many middle-class lapsed housewives say this? Following this decolonising path has been a lonely and, at times, polarising trek. The subject matter and the philosophies that I read are at odds with my well-off, middle-class tribe. An important observation is that most of my peers are not interested in my work, but young people are. My children’s friends seek me out to discuss my research at twenty-first birthday parties and gatherings. They tell their friends. Here I was thinking I was writing to my peers, a ‘reluctant audience’ whom I must treat with kid gloves and keep in their comfort zones. After one altercation with an older white man, my eldest (26 years old) said, ‘Mum, who gives a shit? He will be dead soon; we are your market. My generation want to know about this.’
caretakers of this continent are Stone Age people – primitive, nomadic savages who were destined to die out. More than 60 per cent of Australians have never met a First Nations person, but nevertheless, these impressions are deep set.\textsuperscript{35} As a white Australian, I benefit from racial inequality and I am complicit in the ongoing pain and trauma that impinge upon the lives of First Nations people and their families. We have built our wealth and power on the backs of their dispossession and unpaid labour.

Please make yourself comfortable (while I squirm), as I attempt a response to your "weighty request ... to listen with love, a sort of love that demands that you [I] look at parts of yourself [myself] that might cause pain and terror".\textsuperscript{36}

In the twelve months before I read your letter, I had been wrestling with my own whiteness and privilege, guilt and innocence, acceptance and denial, responsibility and complicity, virtue and failings, gaze and colour-blindness. I have read your reflections, the nineteen interviews that fuelled your letter, and the further fifteen interviews you conducted after its publication.\textsuperscript{37} Your words and those of the philosophers and scholars who shared their thoughts and wisdom have galvanised my battle (with myself) and I would like to share my reflections with you.

As you suggested, I have used ‘this letter as a mirror, one that refuses to show you [me] want you [I] want to see, one that demands that you [I] look at the lies that you [I] tell yourself


\textsuperscript{36} Yancy, ‘Dear White America’.

\textsuperscript{37} All of these interviews are in in George Yancy, \textit{On Race: 34 Conversations in a Time of Crisis} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[myself] so you [I] don’t feel the weight your [my] whiteness’.\textsuperscript{38} You tell me this is a ‘gift’ you want me to accept and embrace, and that you want me to imagine the impact that my acceptance might have on me and the world. My gift is ‘a form of knowledge that is taboo’: I am racist.

You suggest taking a deep breath. I feel I need to release a big (white) sigh here. Allow me to explain. My sigh is not like poet Claudia Rankine’s weary sigh, a form of quiet toleration of everyday racism.\textsuperscript{39} Rankine says the world does not like sighs. They are not like a moan that elicits laughter: they upset. Her sighs make people feel uncomfortable because they are possibly the result of something they did or said. My sigh is less self-preservation and more trepidation, nervousness at the prospect of self-exposure, of vulnerability, of bucking the system and volunteering my whiteness.

OK. I accept the racism within myself and the truth about what it means to be white in a society that was created for me. Next, you ask me to ‘trace the binds that tie me to forms of domination’ that I would rather not see. This means acknowledging that I walk in the world with absolute assurance. It never occurred to me that I \textit{couldn’t} be anyone I wanted to be or do anything I wanted to do.\textsuperscript{40} Essentially, there is a social contract that I have ‘signed’ that guarantees me social mobility and safety.

I think you are asking me to tear up that contract. You put it in a particularly visceral way when you use the word ‘un-

\textsuperscript{38} Yancy, ‘Dear White America’.

\textsuperscript{39} I explore Rankine’s discussion of the sigh in the story ‘You’, in \textit{I’m Not Racist, but} ...

\textsuperscript{40} I now realise that when people say, ‘the world is your oyster’, implicit in the sentiment is that you can afford the meal.
sutured’ and, yes, it does evoke the feeling of pain and an open wound as you suggest. This is the pain of lancing my white innocence to see what is underneath.

**White Innocence**

Dear George, my understanding of white innocence is that it is the passionate denial of racial discrimination and its violence. It is where white people refuse to see the sins and crimes of their forefathers and their legacy today.

In North America, it might be denial that one’s family ever owned slaves or were party to lynchings. It may be expressed in the protest that once the process of white settlement had begun, it was too late to return the land to the First Nations who had lived on and with the land before invasion. In Australia, the denial is wrapped in the myth of *terra nullius* (nobody’s land). I think it would be fair to say that most white Australians are not even aware that we built the wealth of this nation on black labour. We, too, had forms of slavery. Both First Nations and South Sea Islander peoples worked as indentured labourers harvesting sugar cane in Queensland, and some South Sea Islanders were brought there against their will – kidnapped, or ‘blackbirded’; First Nations stockmen worked the land and their wages were either underpaid or never paid; in Western Australia, First Nations people who interfered with pastoral expansion by refusing to work on the stations or killing cattle were neck-chained by police to keep them from escaping; and Stolen Generations people were ‘put’ into domestic service in exploitative working conditions.

White innocence finds a defence for these indignities in the argument that throughout human history, slavery has been practised in many non-white cultures, too.

There are a few ways of thinking about white innocence to unpack over the next few pages. You referred me to the writer James Baldwin, who declares it a crime against generations of black people, but he also posits innocence as projected white inhumanity and fear, and therefore a trap for us all. There is also the other side of the coin to white innocence, which is white guilt, which no one wants to feel. As that which protects against bad feelings and inhibits self-reflection, white innocence is a source of white power.
In his book *The Fire Next Time* (1963),\(^{41}\) James Baldwin brings this legacy of a lifetime of discrimination and dehumanisation home to me. (Another gift you gave me was an introduction to the works of James Baldwin, and for this I am eternally grateful.) White innocence is the crime of which Baldwin accuses his country and countrymen, the way they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it. ‘But it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.’\(^ {42}\)

This crime is laid out in a letter to his teenage nephew, James (his namesake), titled ‘My Dungeon Shook: On the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation’, and mentions the boy’s similarity to Baldwin’s father, the boy’s grandfather:

Well, he is dead, he never saw you, and he had a terrible life; he was defeated long before he died because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him ... you really are of another era, part of what happened when the Negro left the land and came into what the late E. Franklin Frazier called ‘the cities of destruction’. You can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger. I tell you this because I love you, and please don’t you ever forget it.\(^ {43}\)

He describes the teenager as a baby, whom the family loved ‘hard, at once, and for ever, to strengthen you against the loveless world’, and explains the root of his dispute with his country.

This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish ... You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set for ever. You were born into a society


\(^{42}\) Ibid, 5–6.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 4.
which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity.\textsuperscript{44}

When Baldwin says the details and symbols of black lives have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you, that black men are inferior to white men, I acknowledge that it happens here for the First Nations people. The Songman, Richard Frankland, calls it internalised racism and the colonised mind.

To look at it from another angle, white innocence is a protective delusion. Baldwin paints white innocence as a self-imposed snare, a denial that traps white ‘innocent people’ (that is, the dominant culture) in a history which we do not want to understand; and until we understand it, we cannot be released from it. In a way, it is a double snare, as black people cannot be free until white people are free.\textsuperscript{45}

Another way of viewing white innocence is to consider what happens when it is exposed as a front to cover up past and present crimes. It is less about perceptions of black inferiority and more about the shame and terror of inhumanity within the self that white people cannot face. Inevitably guilt arises, and it is a profoundly uncomfortable place. A common defence is to assert that we cannot blame someone for the sins of his father. In Australia, this equates to a refusal to acknowledge that we

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\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{45} In many ways this is a recurring theme for me throughout this collection: that the civilising mission decivilises the civiliser; my liberation is tied up in the liberation of the oppressed.
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live and thrive on stolen lands, and that the nation’s wealth is built, in part, on exploited black labour.

Black writer Sam McKenzie Jr frames white innocence as a form of racist revisionism that is itself ‘a source of power that’s menacing with its denials’. McKenzie lists white innocence’s ‘inventory of star witnesses it runs to the witness stand’, including protest of interracial relationships, time passed, personal hardship, individuality, progress (which begs the question, progress in which demographics?), and the superficial support of social justice causes. Preserving white innocence – that is, avoiding white guilt – gives rise to behaviours such as turning the gaze back on communities of colour and blaming them for crime, for their own dysfunction, and for poverty.

This defence mechanism projects the cause of the problem of racial inequality (ourselves) onto the peoples we oppress, as though the deleterious effects of racism were their fault. It brings to mind the many reports and statistics churned out, in Australia, about First Nations health, incarceration, deaths, violence, and more. They seemed to be superficially defined by numbers and deficits, not by people. A notorious example of this tendency to blame the victim is the Northern Territory Intervention. In 2007, the Australian Government sent the military into the Northern Territory as an ‘emergency response’ to claims that neglect and sexual abuse of children in First Nations communities had reached crisis level. Seventy-three First Nations communities were subject to increased military and police surveillance, along with draconian restrictions on welfare payments.

White innocence – denying responsibility for the oppression of people of colour – fuels white supremacy, so to expose fake innocence assails its power. I can see that change among individuals (like me) is necessary, but the problem is also systemic. Our institutions are structured and shaped to uphold, vouch for, enforce and reinforce, protect and perpetrate whiteness. We do not have to look too closely at the media, our history books, the criminal justice system or the government and its policies around First


47 McKenzie, ‘White Innocence Isn’t a Crown’.
Nations peoples and refugees to see how closely our society guards white innocence.

I can see that you are not asking me to take on the world of whiteness just on my own. Cutting into my skin, peeling back the layers to expose my white insides (this is not self-harm, more a revelation) has shown me why you keep referring to this knowledge as a gift. Whiteness is a trap that locks me in and locks others out. Neither of us can be free until I deal with my own whiteness. You are offering (conditional) freedom.

I think that what you are saying to me is that change starts within each of us. That is why you ask me to recognise my inherent (albeit unwelcome) racism and to admit I am racist. The Songman sings to this tune too, in arguing that all of us need to examine our inner racist. I asked him recently, What if a person says they don’t have one? He answered, then they still have a lot of growing to do. What he is saying here is that this person is not yet aware of how they are socially conditioned.

Today, I have a healthier understanding of our complicated Australian history, its half-truths, the whitewashing, its privileging of Western ways of knowing and being. I understand that to stay silent is to be complicit; but it is one thing to ‘know’ and another to create change. As Baldwin says, ‘people find it very difficult to act on what they know’.⁴⁸ Lancing my white innocence is useless unless it motivates me to act on it in some way.

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Until I read your letter, I will confess I was more distressed at being labelled a racist than in changing my racist ways. This is a difficult journey. I am having to rupture my own foundations and to refuse complicity through silence. Baldwin writes to my quandary – my terror – of standing up and saying something when I see injustice. He says, ‘to act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger’. This translates as social suicide, as I live in the midst of overt white supremacist privilege. To challenge our ‘good history’ of terra nullius and benign settlement with ‘dangerous history’ of invasion and frontier wars and a nation built on stolen wealth ruptures the foundations of the average Australian. The danger is that it undermines the national identity. I like the analogy Baldwin uses:

Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature. Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one’s sense of one’s own reality. Well, the black man has functioned in the white man’s world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar: and as he moves

49 It is an incendiary statement. Calling someone a racist seems to overwhelm anyone’s critical thinking and rationale with indignation and protests. Having said that, when I say I am white and therefore I am racist, it also sets off fireworks as it applies to them by association. Calling someone racist is rarely constructive. McKenzie says: ‘Despite the ever-increasing evidence, racism is still a cued script for white innocence to shrug its shoulders with disbelief in synchronicity.’ The problem cannot be named or solved, as white innocence is firmly in the way. McKenzie, ‘White Innocence Isn’t a Crown’.

50 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 9. May I just bring your attention to the date of *The Fire Next Time*: 1963, written fifty-six years ago, before I was born, and, sadly, still as relevant as ever.

51 I know I need to pick my battles. Some people are not worth tackling. Other times it is too irresistible not to try out some new insights. At a recent party, some white fellow was grumbling about refugees and the ‘why can’t they be more like us’ assimilation line. I wondered out loud why he would want that. All of a sudden, I had race scholar Robin DiAngelo, a specialist in white fragility, in my ear whispering words from her podcast. The fellow was continuing with his alarmist racist opinions when I asked him if he had ever met a black person. Ah, no. Have you ever met a Muslim person? No. Well, I said, kind of gently, I do not think you are qualified to have an opinion, then, are you? He had to agree.

52 I explore good and dangerous history in ‘Right Way’ in *The White Woman*. 
out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations.\textsuperscript{53}

You are sending me on a journey. This is the journey to tell the truth. James Baldwin said that a journey is called that because you cannot know what you will discover on the journey, what you will do with what you find. You also cannot know what that which you find will do to you.\textsuperscript{54}

\textbf{Love}

Dear George, returning to your letter, am I listening ‘with love’, as you petition? I agree, so much of our discourse is about hate and terror and locking people up and keeping people out. This love needs unpacking, as you are not talking romantic, happy love, but a much scarier variety, ‘the kind that risks not being reciprocated’.\textsuperscript{55} The love you call for is the sort of love ‘that demands that you look at parts of yourself that might cause pain and terror’. You suggest James Baldwin has something else I need to hear.

This ‘love’ you speak of; it is not a love for you or others, it is a self-love, my love for me. Baldwin argues for a type of love that is ‘a state of being, or a state of grace – not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough universal

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\textsuperscript{1} Baldwin, The Fire Next Time, 10.
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\item \textsuperscript{53} We saw what happened to AFL footballer Adam Goodes when he contested the white domain of the footy oval with his overt Aboriginality. See ‘Microaggressions’, in I’m Not Racist, but …
\item \textsuperscript{54} Based on a quote from James Baldwin in the documentary I Am Not Your Negro (2016). It reminds me of The Songman’s caution to me to be careful as I might find my humanity among the dehumanised.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Yancy, ‘Dear White America’.
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sense of quest and daring and growth’. The antithesis of self-love is self-loathing, and Baldwin sees the lack of white self-love as the source of the need to dominate and oppress the Other.

Before Baldwin speaks of love in this passage, he alludes to mirrors and the white man’s profound desire to not be seen as he is, our yearning to be released from the tyranny of our mirror, and this is why ‘love is so desperately sought and so cunningly avoided’. If we love, that love removes the masks we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.

Critical race scholar Professor Shannon Sullivan argues for self-love in acknowledging whiteness. Instead of distancing myself from my racial identity, I need to understand I am implicated and learn to love it, to come to grips with it. To accept is to be mindful that I, too, am bound by my skin, though I may wish to be unburdened of its emotional weight, its violence: ‘Whiteness is not a club in which a white person can just decide to drop her membership.’

American author, feminist and social activist bell hooks calls for the same sort of love in her book, *All About Love* (2000): ‘To truly love we must learn to mix various ingredients – care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication.’ Hooks’s kind of love is inclusive, public and expansive, which is crucial to overcoming racial hate. She conceptualises love as the

56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
60 bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2000), 27. bell hooks is the pen name for Gloria Jean Watkins. The name ‘bell hooks’ is derived from that of her maternal great-grandmother, Bell Blair Hooks. She is a significant social commentator, writing of the intersectionality of race, capitalism, and gender and their ability to produce and perpetuate systems of oppression and class domination. She has published over thirty books and numerous scholarly articles, appeared in documentary films, and participated in public lectures. She deliberately writes her entire name in lower case.
opposite of estrangement and as essential to social transformation. Love as action is the key to authentic connection with others.

It is about being vulnerable.

I think this is what The Songman has been telling me. He said I might find my humanity among the dehumanised. He was so right in many ways with this statement, as my research has shown me dehumanisation. I had never noticed; it was off my radar. As a lucky white person, I was blind to it as it did not appear to happen in my world, or when it did, it was normalised, it went unnoticed, unchecked. If to be *humane* means showing compassion, then *humanising* a space or community is improving it in a way which makes it a safe and welcoming place for fellow humans. We need the ‘will to humanise’, extols hooks. ‘I can’t think of another way to imagine how we are going to get out of the crisis of racial hatred if it’s not though the will to humanise’.

Before I set off on this decolonising journey, I don’t think I always saw individual people. Growing up, the Other was a spectre to me and inevitably I will always have to fight that as it lurks in my unconscious. I lumped Other people in together, almost like a too-hard basket. I must have found the love you speak of along the way – really meeting people experiencing homelessness was my first step, as I see persons now, not just people. As Baldwin says, ‘Without ... love people are unable to learn to see real human beings behind the categories, labels and prejudices created by the loveless, and horrifying results of such blindness are evident in the history of the twentieth century’. 61

You and your peers are advocating a dynamic reframing of love as I know it. It is a centring of yourselves, a decentring of my own entitlement and privilege, a loving acceptance of myself and others. It demands a willingness to be relentlessly critical of my whiteness and care enough about its effects to make changes. (My apologies if this is exhausting to read; it is tough thinking and writing this.)

You are packaging love in terms of *my own* personal growth and courage. A gift. This is why you call the love transformative: it is an undoing. As I slowly unravel myself, I am becoming ethically aware, accepting the responsibility I have to you, and then,
to myself. No one will thank me for doing this personal undoing, nor should I expect it.

In my head I have questions like:

How do I live now as a white person who is critically aware of her whiteness?

What do I do about unacknowledged racism among friends and family?

How can I build in my family awareness, skills and strategies to move them away from the habits of white privilege and domination?

How do I live in ways that do not reproduce white racism?

This whiteness work is gruelling.

**DON’T SHELTER FROM RACISM**

Dear George, I must admit to the ‘racist poison’ inside of me. I am white therefore I am racist, just as you say you are male therefore you are sexist. You ask that I do not seek shelter from my racism by hiding from responsibility. This is where I put into practice being vulnerable. You are deaf to my protests that I am one of the good ones, a good white person, a liberal – none of this will ‘get me off the proverbial hook’. Decent human beings can be sexist and racist. You are ready for my excuses:

*But I have black friends*

*I am married to an Arab*

*I would have voted for Obama (if I were an American citizen)*

*I don’t use the ‘N’ word or the other racist slurs*

*I hate the white nationalists*

*I think Australia Day should be on another day*

*I was so sad when Gurrumul died*

*I’m not racist. I love Cyril.*

1 hooks, cited in Yancy, On Race, 19.
None of these protestations absolve me from the fact that I somewhere harbour racism and I benefit from it. I am part of the system. These protestations are a sign that I am failing to listen to you, that I am rejecting your gift. ‘Don’t change the conversation.’ I didn’t mean to, it is difficult when you want to defend yourself. But I am indefensible.

Thanks to you (and The Songman), I have well-informed arguments with racists at parties now and fewer friends – not quite the fissure you asked for, but they were not up for the journey with me. My kids are proud of the undoing I have undertaken, though. Which brings me to your last gift (I am sure you can imagine; I was very wary of your gifts by this stage).

At the close of your letter, you ask me to find a space to love and mourn for those who have ‘died at the hands of a racist system’. You ask me to feel out the shape of that love in my own family:

Take one more deep breath. I have another gift. If you have young children, before you fall off to sleep tonight, I want you to hold your child. Touch your child’s face. Smell your child’s hair. Count the fingers on your child’s hand. See the miracle that is your child. And then, with as much vision as you can muster, I want you to imagine that your child is black.63

I have not taken your weighty gifts lightly, as you have gathered by now. This visceral bedtime vignette pulled at my heart, as you knew it would. It stayed with me and it helped me tell a devastating story about a man I never knew.

In ‘The Mopoke’ (in the chapbook My Conscience Is a Many Feathered Thing), I write of a boy called Malcolm Charles Smith. Malcolm was taken from his family by the state at the age of eleven, and for the next seventeen years, he was bounced from abusive boys’ homes to violent prisons. He never learned to read and write so on release he could never survive, let alone thrive; he had become institutionalised. Eventually his despair was so overwhelming that he took his own life.

Malcolm Smith is one of many First Nations people who have died at the hands
of a racist system. I had written thousands of words about Malcolm and his family, but I couldn’t feel the grief of it until I cut into my skin and held it there. You said: ‘I want you to imagine that your child is black.’ With you on my shoulder, I went through that document, line by line, imagining that the black boy was my white boy, my first-born son. Every Malcolm I changed to Ziggy, and my heart began to ache, and my fingers struggled to type. I could feel my pulse throbbing with fury and shame: THIS WOULD NEVER HAVE HAPPENED IF HE HAD BEEN A WHITE BOY.

You sent me on a journey I was reluctant to take. You sent me to war with myself, my white identity, my white power, my white privilege. You introduced me to scholars who shifted habits of thought that I had not known were there. You asked me to open myself out, to feel what it is like to love expansively. I want to say thank you. Your gift helped me to see myself in ways I had not before.

Yours sincerely,

MELISSA
'May my daughter touch your hair?'

The young African girl is holding her mother’s hand, looking up at me shyly. I am part of a group of travellers in this small Kenyan airport, conspicuous in our whiteness. ‘Of course’, I beam.

As a writer and researcher on whiteness, this request bemused me as it is against the way of things. I am pleased they felt they could ask. The tables turned, I lean over so the girl could run her fingers through my fine, soft, straight (dyed) blonde hair. She and her mother are truly tickled by the encounter. It feels like a small moment of poetic justice for all those who have been othered by their own hair, an intimate instant of sharing and enjoying each other’s differences. Hair has been a weapon of whiteness for
centuries and I will share with you how hair was used in an official way to classify who was black.

In South Africa during apartheid there was the pencil test. The hue of one’s skin affected access in all parts of everyday life, and people of mixed race were granted a slightly higher status than blacks. Their homes and schools were relatively better and they were not compelled to carry a pass that allowed them to enter white areas as black people were mandated to.

This ‘thread of privilege came at a price’, writes award-winning African American journalist Lydia Polgreen. The Population Registration Act (1950) codified racial categories under apartheid, slotting non-whites into ‘a crude hierarchy’, ranking people against people by the tint of their skin. A variety of humiliating methods were deployed to determine race, but the most absurd was the pencil test. A white bureaucrat would put a pencil into the hair of a person whose racial origin was uncertain. If the pencil fell out, the person was white. If it stayed put among the tight curls, the person was black.

For around thirty years during apartheid, officials used the pencil test to classify some coloured people as black and others as white. This and other tests caused thousands of families to be torn apart when paler or darker-skinned relatives, or those

64 Apartheid, which means ‘separateness’ in Afrikaans, was a system of institutionalised racial segregation that blighted South Africa from 1948 until the early 1990s. Apartheid was characterised by an authoritarian political culture based on white supremacy that encouraged state repression of Black African, Coloured and Asian South Africans for the benefit of the nation’s minority white population.


66 Ibid.
with curlier hair, or different features, were placed in separate categories and were therefore forced to live apart.\textsuperscript{67}

Such tests are examples of ‘colourism’, which refers to prejudice on the basis of differences in the darkness of skin tone typically among people belonging to the same ethnic or racial group.\textsuperscript{68} The origins of colourism are rooted in slavery practices of placing lighter-skinned slaves in the ‘privileged’ position of household labour while sending darker-hued slaves to hard labour in the field. As D. Danyelle Thomas explains, ‘Despite fairer hues being evidence of rape at the hands of white men, the seeming ease of working in the house compared to the fields began the decades long “light skin vs dark skin” war in our community’.\textsuperscript{69}

In her article, Thomas shows how colourism became integrated into the black church. She references E. Franklin Frazier’s landmark book \textit{The Black Bourgeoisie} (1857)\textsuperscript{70} to explain that the descendants of the free mulattoes held themselves aloof from the Negro masses, including in their religious affiliations. The church was divided by skin tones and the lighter skinned blacks tended to align themselves with historically white denominations such as Episcopalians, Catholics and Presbyterians. ‘Whiteness was (and is) prized as the penultimate marker of civility ... as long as society kept pushing

\textsuperscript{67} Nosimilo Ndlovu, ‘The 21st-Century Pencil Test’, \textit{Mail & Guardian}, 24 May 2008, https://mg.co.za/article/2008-05-24-the-21st-century-pencil-test. As a curious aside, discrimination based on hair is a fascinating narrative thread in ABC Television’s \textit{Cleverman} (2016), a home-grown story that combines superheroes, horror, dystopia and the Dreaming. The Hairypeople, ‘Hairies’, are a superpowered Indigenous minority who are hated, feared and shunned by normal humans. Forced to live in a ghetto, Hairies face constant police surveillance, harassment and are thrown into prison for minor infractions where they are humiliated and tortured. The aim is to dominate them and shave their hair to change their appearance, so they assimilate. The Hairies are called ‘subhumans’, but this does not prevent their women being fetishised and raped. The narratives parallel Australia’s First Nations peoples’ experience of the Stolen Generations, systemic racism and discrimination. \textit{Cleverman}, television program (Sydney: ABC, 2016–2017).


\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.

whiteness as the standard of normal that every other ethnicity to strive towards [sic], colorism was always going to be a problem.\footnote{D. Danyelle Thomas, ‘Colorism at the Cross’.}

The pencil test was not the only way to discern ‘worthiness’. Some American churches used the ‘comb test’ where a fine-tooth comb was used in the hair: ‘If the comb couldn’t pass with ease, the congregant wouldn’t be extended the right hand of fellowship. Similar tests included the door test, where churches would paint their doors the darkest shade of brown allowable to become a member of their congregation.\footnote{Ibid.}

I happened across a curious site called the ‘longhair care forum’, which caters to African-American hair, and found a story there worth sharing:

I was reading ‘Hair Story’ and they brought up something that I hadn’t seen since I was knee-hi to a grasshopper ... ‘the comb test’. There was a church across town in a white neighbourhood. My mom was a live-in nurse, maid to a white woman who invited her to worship there. We went there one Sunday morning. At the entrance of that church was a fine-toothed comb, hanging from a string. I didn’t think anything of it, but apparently, we weren’t allowed in the church. I just thought it because we were black. They would take the comb down and run it through your hair. If the comb got snagged in your kinky/nappy/curly hair, then you weren’t allowed in the lord’s place of worship. Well, it got snagged in my mom’s hair, that’s for damn sure. She said if she couldn’t go in, none of us were going in. So, we all piled back in the truck and took off. That woman knew about that comb ... why did she even ask my mother to go there?\footnote{Femmemuscle, ‘Does Anyone Remember the ‘Comb Test’ in Church?’, \textit{Long Hair Care Forum}, 2 September 2010, \url{https://longhaircareforum.com/threads/does-anyone-remember-the-comb-test-in-church.495831/}.}
Bias within the black community was grounded in the understanding that black people with lighter skin and straighter hair were often more accepted by whites. Black women emulating white women were more accepted by them, deemed ‘well-adjusted’ for straighter hair and ‘cleaner’ appearances.\(^74\)

As division between the hues deepened, individuals understood that investing in a certain look was highly advantageous, and products to lighten skin and straighten hair began to proliferate. Both white and black product advertisers marketed to people of colour in the North who had time to consider their hair and looks. Dangerous products such as arsenic wafers were sold to lighten skin, and lye was sold to straighten hair; both failed to give the desired result and sometimes the products were deadly to the user.\(^75\)

Fast forward to 2016 and ‘good hair’ is fizzing in the popular culture. In her song ‘Sorry’ from the Lemonade album, Beyoncé Knowles set gossipers alight with a line which many presumed was referring to her husband, Jay Z’s, infidelity: ‘He only want me when I’m not there / He better call Becky with the good hair.’\(^76\)

While there may be an element of truth in the gossip, Beyoncé’s allusion to good hair has much more gravitas. The line is less a swipe at a mystery woman and more a cultural reference with its roots in slavery. As I discussed earlier, slave owners would assign slaves with lighter skin and straighter ‘good hair’ to lighter duties, while their darker-skinned peers with ‘kinky hair’ hard-laboured outside. This became a social order that was internalised by people of all shades, disseminating the notion that dark-skinned people with kinky hair were less attractive, less intelligent and worth less. As Rebecca Thomas explains, ‘These damaging messages were passed on for centuries, and black women and girls in particular had to do the work of de-programming … when Beyoncé tells her cheating man he “better call Becky with the good hair” she’s nodding to our historical baggage and signifying far more than just a girl with a bouncy blowout’.\(^77\)

\(^74\) Thomas, ‘Colorism at the Cross’.

\(^75\) Ibid.


As an antidote to the colonised mind, internalised racism and the aspiration for whiteness and its trappings of privilege, I would like to share a story told by my friend Richard Frankland in his children’s book, *The Naming of Yellow Hair* (2014). Frankland recounts how his daughter came home from school one day to ask: ‘Peepay, how come I’m a yellow-haired Aboriginal?’ He answered, ‘Because you bloody well are’ and wrote a book for her, in her voice.

‘I had a fight with Joe … He said I was blond. He says I wasn’t black enough to be Aboriginal.’ The Dad in the story answers: ‘A very wise person once said that being Aboriginal is not the colour of your skin or how wide your nose is. It’s a special feeling of belonging you just know in your heart. It’s difficult to understand if you are not Aboriginal.’

The Dad strokes her fair hair and gives her a gentle hero’s name, *Punda Ngarat*. He named her Yellow Hair in their old language. With this story, Frankland imbues their Gunditjmara identity with pride, grounding his daughter in ‘one thousand five hundred generations’ of family, ‘tens of thousands of years … Every time you walk on this land, you walk in the footsteps of your grandmothers and grandfathers. Every time you look at these stars, you see what their eyes have seen’.

The Kenyan girl and her mother come over to say goodbye to me before they board their flight. She holds out her hand to shake mine and we all look at her small black hand clasping mine. ‘She likes your skin too’, says the mother. ‘She would like to be white like you.’

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78 Richard Frankland, *The Naming of Yellow Hair* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2014), 8

79 *Peepay* is father in the Gunditjmara language. Personal communication.


81 Ibid., 9.
THE ABOREDINAL PROBLEM

WE HAVE NEVER LISTENED TO THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE, ISN'T IT TIME WE DID? #UTOPIA

I COULD LISTEN TO ROSALIE FOR HOURS

Q&A

SOMETIMES WE NEED A SLAP TO WAKE US UP #UTOPIA

Q&A

WANT MORE

WEEDS

WISH WE HEARD MORE FROM HER MORE OFTEN

USER AUS · 3 years ago

WISH WE HEARD MORE FROM HER MORE OFTEN

Aussie 22 · 4 years ago

I AM BOT TRANSFIXED AND HUMBLED. THANK YOU ROSALIE.

THE ABOREDINAL PROBLEM

AUSTRALIA?

WE HAVE A PROBLEM.

IT IS NOT BLACK AND WHITE.

IT IS WHITE.

WHITE IS NOT RIGHT.
In 2018, the Australian Senate almost passed the motion ‘It’s OK to be white’, which has been used by white supremacists for decades. It is a racist meme. See also ‘A Social Order’ in Can Anyone Tell Me What Is Missing?

This is a racist slogan used among white supremacists. The source is a short essay known as ‘The Mantra’, distributed by veteran white supremacist Bob Whitaker, which attempts to rebut accusations of racism by claiming that people who profess to be anti-racist are actually trying to destroy the white race, he equates ‘anti-racist’ with ‘anti-white’. Robert Whitaker, ‘The Mantra’, Bob (blog), accessed 2 April 2019, ‘http://www.robertwwhitaker.com/mantra/.


The ‘Aboriginal problem’ is a pervasive discourse used by white Australia to free itself of any responsibility to past and present injustices experienced by First Nations peoples. This attitude ignores the decades, indeed centuries, of generational trauma, dispossession, Stolen Generations and destruction of culture and language, and blames the oppressed for the dysfunctional state of so many First Nations communities. ‘Get over it’ is the common riposte. ‘Everyone has been invaded at some stage’, ‘that was 200 years ago!’ To add an annual insult to injury, Australia insists Aboriginal people celebrate the day their nations were invaded.

The ‘Problem’ began as a contest over land: that is, a policing problem to prevent First Nations peoples encroaching on settlers’ ‘property’ and dealing with rebels and rebellions. The media played a considerable part in positioning what were, in truth, freedom fighters and defenders of their homelands as problems: instead, the perception was that ‘the blacks’ needed to be taught a lesson. Fear and hatred of First Nations was fostered and disseminated, giving a licence to hunt these rebels down and ‘protect’ white settlers. Tufiwhai Smith explains that ‘the systematic undermining of the legitimacy of indigenous leaders was part of the wider strategy of colonisation’, and it continues today, as ‘contemporary activists are represented in the same ways’.  

The ‘Problem’ kicked into its next phase once First Nations peoples were forced into missions and reserves. Eugenicists suggested the tribes might die out, but they were resilient. Now the problem was embedded in policy and administration discourses which had tentacles across the government as they attempted to control the ‘natives’. This is where blame began shifting, when the First Nations peoples were at fault for not accepting the terms of their colonisation, the civilising mission.

Ultimately, the blame for First Nations poverty and marginalisation came to rest on the dispossessed themselves. When I recall the white board exercises with both Richard Frankland (in ‘Ancestral Twine’, Can Anyone Tell Me What Is Missing?) and Anita Heiss (in ‘The Crow and the Wagtail’, My Conscience Is a Many Feathered Thing), I can see where the blaming and the negative perceptions

86 Smith, Decolonizing Methodologies, 94.
87 Ibid., 95.
emanate: ungrateful, lazy, uneducated, dysfunctional, inauthentic, angry ... The problem became self-fulfilling.

The academy has a role to play in the creation of the Aboriginal Problem, posits Tuhiwai Smith. In the academy, problems and research find each other. ‘For many indigenous communities research itself is taken to mean problem; the word research is believed to mean, quite literally, the continued construction of indigenous peoples as the problem.’

Tuhiwai Smith says we continues this ugly legacy by framing our research in ways that put the heart of the problem with First Nations people.

Framing ‘the ... problem’, mapping it, describing it in all its different manifestations, trying to get rid of it, laying blame for it, talking about it, writing newspaper columns about it, drawing cartoons about it, teaching about it, researching it over and over ... how many occasions, polite dinner parties and academic conferences would be bereft of conversation if the ‘indigenous problem’ had not been so problematized?

So it came to be taken for granted that there was a natural link between the term ‘indigenous’ (and its variations) and the ‘problem’, problems they cannot fix by themselves. This is why self-determination is so important to First Nations communities. The rhetoric in the media and government about general hopelessness, corruption and blame for First Nations peoples’ own failures is communicated back to them through racist attitudes, policy and reports.

Throughout my stories, I have shared with you the myriad ways in which, since 1788, First Nations peoples have been demonised and dehumanised by actions and discourses that are packaged as the ‘Aboriginal Problem’. What is pertinent to me at this point is that we now have a dangerous legacy that affects the achievements of First Nations people who walk in two worlds with such vision and bravery today and refuse to be defined by deficits. The Aboriginal Problem ‘is a dangerously alluring concept that

88 Ibid., 96.
89 Ibid., 94.
90 Ibid., 95.
we as Indigenous people sometimes perform to’ claims Chelsea Bond, Senior Lecturer in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit at the University of Queensland. ‘Demonisation leads us to believe that we are culpable for the racial oppressions inflicted upon us. It is the belief (often instilled in us by our parents) that if we work hard (or ten times harder) we can prove ourselves to white Australia.’ This striving creates a further ‘Aboriginal problem’ because ‘many of us have done just that, and now are subjected to a different brand of Australian racism – the one that tells us that our success and accomplishment voids our claim as “real Aboriginals”’.91

Those who battle to become eloquent and strident spokespeople for their people can then be shunned for being a ‘lippy black’, as is the case with Adam Goodes, who challenged the dominant culture with his celebratory cultural dance on the footy oval and acceptance speech for Australian of the Year, which was disseminated as out-of-context soundbites, to put him in his place.

As ever, political commentator and presenter Waleed Aly ‘nails it’: ‘It’s about the fact that Australia is generally a very tolerant society until its minorities demonstrate that they don’t know their place. And at that moment, the minute someone in a minority position acts as though they’re not a mere supplicant, then we lose our minds. And we say, “No, no, you’ve got to get back in your box here”’.92

My decolonising journey has shown me that the real problem is our attitudes. This was first crystallised for me by a story The Songman tells from his days as an investigator for the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.93

He was at a dinner party in a leafy Melbourne suburb. Across the table from him was a woman. Her dress was red, her skin was white, as were all but one of the other diners around the table. ‘Tell me’, disdain drips from her tongue. ‘Why is it your people kill themselves in jail?’ She follows her question with a flourish of defiance, her red wine sent sideways, splattered across the tablecloth, a gauntlet thrown. He reflects


93 Richard Frankland often tells this story in his keynotes and we have also discussed it in personal communication.
on that dinner often, as he pinpoints it as the moment when he realised, painfully, what was killing his people. It was not a battle for the mind of one individual but a collective attitude towards his people. ‘How dare they kill themselves and make me feel so uncomfortable?’ was her message. She was offended by these suicides, not upset or horrified by that level of despair. Perhaps she thought these suicides in prison was a ‘cultural thing’, that their life was cheap. There was no will or capacity to slip out of her (probably) red shoes into a mother’s shoes and inhabit or even imagine her pain. Her lens was not softened by the welling of a mother’s tears. The Songman calls it the ‘cultural abyss’, the inhuman gulf between what Australia thinks of them and what they think of themselves.

I will finish this meander with a powerful declaration of sovereignty that has guided my thinking and purpose along my decolonisation journey.

The scene is Monday night television: Elder Rosalie Kunoth-Monks is speaking in her gravelly and precise way to an audience and panel on ABC Television’s Q & A.

‘You know, I have a culture.’
‘I am a cultured person.’

She then says something in her language.
‘I am not something that fell out of the sky ... for the pleasure of somebody putting another culture into this cultured being.’

She points to herself.
She speaks to an ‘ongoing denial of me’.
The gathering is awe-struck:

‘I am not an Aboriginal. Or indeed indigenous.’
‘I am Arrernte, Alyawarre First Nations person. A sovereign person from this country.’

She speaks in her language again.
‘I did not come from overseas; I came from here.’
‘I speak my language, in spite of whiteness trying to penetrate into my brain by assimilationists.’

Tweets praising her crawled across the bottom of our screens.

‘I am alive. I am here and now and I speak my language, I practice my cultural essence of me.’
‘Don’t try and suppress me.’
‘And don’t call me a problem!’
‘I have never left my Country, nor have I ceded any part of it.’
‘Nobody has entered into a treaty or talked to me about who I am.’
‘I am Arrernte, Alyawarre female Elder from this Country.’
‘Please remember that.’
‘I am not the problem.’94

You have fair skin; you are a fair-skinned Aboriginal ... Some might say you are lucky enough to have a choice.

You are born in the 1940s. You are a survivor of the Stolen Generations. That great protector of Aboriginal children, Mr A. O. Neville, took you from your family as a toddler.

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‘for your own good’, because of the shade of your skin, which, ironically, was not black enough for you to be left with your mother. She tried to blacken your arms and face and legs with charcoal before they wrenched you from her arms. Neville was your legal guardian, as he was for every First Nations child at that time under the *Native Welfare Act 1905*, an Act giving him extraordinary power to intervene in the lives of Aboriginal families. No ‘half-caste’ child was safe from his mission to breed out the black.⁹⁶

His master plan was that in a few generations, your offspring and their descendants would be white if he kept you away from your mob. The plan was that by removing ‘half-caste’ Aboriginal children from their cultural ties and educating and raising them as white, they would enter the white community and marry white and raise families with fairer skin.

You are told you were an orphan, despite knowing you are not.

Neville’s instructions were that children placed by him in the missions and schools were never to be released to their parents, as this was counter to the segregation principle.

You are institutionalised for eighteen years. You are put in a home called Sister Kate’s, but you could hardly call it a home. It was a sterile, regimental existence. There are always chores to be completed.⁹⁷

Your bedroom is a dormitory, with children coming and going. Your ‘house mothers’ came and went. People, everyone, comes and goes.

There is never a bedtime story, but there are always prayers. You bless Protector Neville, bless whichever house mother is in charge at the time, bless everyone who cares for you. But is it caring? No cuddles, no kiss good night, no tucking in.

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⁹⁶ *Australia’s Coloured Minority* was eugenicist Neville’s manifesto for breeding the black out of First Nations peoples.

You become like an ice block inside. How can you love if you have never been loved? How do you nurture someone if you have never been nurtured? You are all like ice blocks in a tray, unable to console each other. There is nothing to cherish in your little world.

There is no training in life skills, no preparation for the world. You learn how to wash and iron, all day to the sound of reciting rosaries. You do not know what is happening to your body as breasts begin to grow and you bleed for the first time.

At age twenty you are sent into the world to work. You are told by your keepers to not associate with Aboriginal people as they are not nice people. You think you are white, but the outside world does not see you that way. You are called a boong, a coon, a black gin.

You find an exemption certificate among your papers. It unsettles you because you think you are white. Later, you realise the exemption certificate is a testament to your assimilation, a final whitewashing of your history, denouncing your ancestry. It is a licence to pass, to live in the white man’s world.

What was this exemption certificate? Why did Aboriginal peoples scathingly call it a ‘dog licence’ or ‘dog tags’? From the 1940s, in most parts of Australia, the state governments issued thousands of ‘licences’ for First Nations peoples to live in a white man’s world.

A gentle reminder here: you, as an Aboriginal person, live ‘under the Act’. The life under the Act means a life of subjection and servitude, without being entitled to any of the freedoms enjoyed and taken for granted by the non-Aboriginal community. You are under constant surveillance, your present governed, your possibilities limited and your future out of your hands.

The exemption certificate gives you citizenship rights that you didn’t have previously because you were, then, considered Aboriginal. The rest of the Australian population enjoys these rights without any licence.

Your [dog] licence allows you to enter town, vote, go into hotels and send your children to the local school. It means you are exempted from the restrictions of state protection laws: the laws that govern the entire lives of First Nations peoples.

You wonder how it would be if the exemption certificate hadn’t been among your papers when you were released from the mission into the world of servitude. Would you have chosen to escape the misery of the Act and apply for one?

The exemption certificate came with conditions attached. While it may have offered the promise of escape from the watchful eyes of Protectors, there were rules and a price to pay.

The first rule was that you had to be ‘half-caste’.

The second rule – for those living on missions, settlements or reserves – was that you had to leave your home and all extended family behind, physically and emotionally. The exemption form clearly stated that you were not to ‘habitually associate

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98 In Victoria there was the *Aboriginal Protection Act 1869*, designed to regulate the lives of Aboriginal people. It was made law at the same time as democratic reforms were being achieved in Britain and the Australian colonies. These reforms included extending the right to vote to all men (not women), not just the wealthy, and measures such as free public education. This did not extend to First Nations people. The Act gave the Board for the Protection of Aborigines powers to control where people could live, where they could work, what kinds of jobs they could do, with whom they could associate and whom they could marry. In 1886 in a further Act, Victoria also initiated a policy of removing Aboriginal people of mixed descent from the Aboriginal stations or reserves to merge into white society. The Queensland version of the Act was called *The Aboriginals Protection and the Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897*. In NSW, the *Aborigines Protection Act 1909* was introduced to exercise a general supervision and care over all matters affecting the interests and welfare of Aborigines.

99 In my meander ‘Raced Places’ in *I’m Not Racist, but …* I discuss the origins of Boundary Street and how it was created to keep First Nations people out of town.
with Aboriginals’ and must ‘live in a civilised manner and associated with Europeans usually’. You had to relinquish all connections to your traditional culture and kinship.

Once cut loose in the outside world, you had to demonstrate to the Chief Protector’s satisfaction the capacity to survive, and that meant keeping your home clean, being of sober disposition (which includes not buying grog for family members) and keeping out of trouble. Your assimilation into the dominant culture also came with a subscription to capitalism, which meant you had to concentrate on work, money and time, and be able to say how much money you had in the bank. Paradoxically, it was a ‘freedom’ to create a new self that was shaped and dominated by ‘the Act’. Your licence always had to be on your person and produced on demand. Your ‘freedom’ was a reward for toeing the line.

You may have thought that being an exemptee meant you had escaped the suffocating surveillance, but you hadn’t. ‘Self-regulation was an on-going requirement in order to avoid having the certificate revoked’, explains Waka Waka/Kalkadoon Elder Judith Wickes, whose honours thesis explores the impact of the certificate. She tells of the shock of one exemptee who discovered in her files that she had been kept under active surveillance for thirty-two years of her life.

Not only was the certificate hard to get, it was hard to keep. To be caught fraternising with relinquished kin would risk your certificate being revoked without warning and you would be forced to return to state-institutionalised life. You would have been fearful of being seen in the company of Aboriginal people other than your family members. Your freedom was conditional, always on approval:

100 See Wickes and Aberdeen, ‘The Diaries of Daisy Smith’, 63n8.

101 Ibid.

102 Waka Waka/Kalkadoon Elder Judith Wickes gives us valuable insight into this appalling practice in her highly personal and comprehensive honours thesis. Wickes traces the story of her maternal grandfather gaining his Certificate of Exemption in 1926 at Purga Mission, near Ipswich in southeast Queensland. She investigates the impact of this system on those who gained an exemption and the painful legacy for their descendants, covering the Queensland legislation from 1897 to 1967. See Judith Wickes, ‘Never Really Heard of It: A Study of the Impact on Identity of the Queensland Certificate of Exemption for Aboriginal People’ (honours thesis, University of the Sunshine Coast, 2006), 22.
Those who gained exemption could never forget, however, that if they infringed the rules, the exemption could be revoked at any time. The records show that this power was regularly exercised for a variety of reasons. This fear of revocation was instilled into the psyche of every exemptee and their descendants, serving as an instrument of control that persisted for generations.  

In 1971, the South African anti-apartheid activist Stephen Biko declared that ‘the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the minds of the oppressed’. Biko was saying that the Australian Government has done such a great job at oppressing you, that you keep on oppressing yourself. Your mind has been colonised and your racism has been internalised, so you see yourself as inferior, sub-human, lesser, which is then manifested in apathy, doubt, alienation and a devaluing of yourself and your culture.

Frantz Fanon elaborates:

Every colonised people – in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality – finds itself face to face with the language of the civilising nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonised is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards.

You, with your exemption certificate, are unwittingly elevated above jungle status because that certificate says you have adopted the mother country’s cultural standards; you have been assimilated into the dominant culture. Dr Jeff Corntassel of the Cherokee Nation enables us to see that this is a problem for all colonised First Nations peoples: ‘This is what states had planned for Indigenous people – to forget who we are and become part

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103 Ibid., 26.


105 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 18.
of the dominant culture ... colonial powers are like shape-shifters, constantly inventing new ways to erase indigenous histories and senses of place.’

And you thought, as a fair-skinned Aboriginal, that you had a choice. Perhaps you wonder where your choices have led and whether your choices were ever really yours at all.

I bought a coolamon once, over the phone from an Anangu lady in Adelaide. Transferred the money by EFT.

It was from one of the wily, weaving Pitjantjara ladies I had met on the Women’s Law Camp I had attended on their lands. I was beguiled by their craft with grasses. In Adelaide they could not access the *tjanpi*, the native grass they use for basket making, so I would buy them raffia, send it over from Melbourne, they would weave the baskets and I would buy them back. Sometimes I flew over to collect them. My husband despaired at the arrangement, but I justified it as a worthy social enterprise.

One day they offered me a coolamon to buy. It seemed like a bargain and I jumped at the chance. My mind’s eye entertained images of chubby, naked dark-skinned
infants, snug in these wooden bowls. Perhaps it had once been lined with soft sheets of paperbark. My own genuine artefact!

I began to weave my own narrative in anticipation ... My coolamon had been cut from the side of hardwood tree; the scar left behind a permanent reminder that this was an authentic artefact of Country.

My coolamon was moulded by an old lawman over a fire on a clear starry night, working gently and persistently to shape its womanly curves.

My coolamon was rubbed smooth (like the baby) on the inside, ornately decorated on the outside, scarred deeply with totemic and tribal insignia.

When the baby was too big, my coolamon, was used by the mama to gather bush tucker – seeds, berries, yams, bush opinions, witchetty grubs!

My coolamon had been a special ceremonial vessel, used for smoking ceremonies; they rubbed it with emu fat to keep in good nick.

My coolamon would be front and centre in my inner-Melbourne home – the ultimate trophy for a Friend of the First Peoples like me.

My coolamon would be the ultimate conversation starter, my chance to educate the nescient, a symbol of my affinity and connection.

In the absence of a baby, my coolamon would be elegantly styled on the good dining table, cradling an assortment of passionfruit, avocados and pomegranates.

My coolamon never arrived.  

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107 Anne Elvey’s poem ‘Five Ways of Graphing Colonisation’ speaks to my ignorant appropriation with the lines: ‘My Fantasy/ of a sovereign craft/ buckles on a conjunct/ tale of domesticity/ In the coastal scrub/ wild grasses/ are growing around/ an empty coolamon.’ For me, the image of an empty coolamon, crafted for infants for millennia, is heartbreaking. Anne Elvey, White on White (Carlton South: Cordite, 2018).
In 2015, I conducted a series of 19 interviews with philosophers and public intellectuals on the issue of race. My aim was to engage, in this very public space, with the often unnamed elephant in the room. These discussions helped me, and I hope many of our readers, to better understand how race continues to function in painful ways within our country. That was one part of a gift that I wanted to give to readers of The Stone, the larger philosophical community, and the world.

The interviewees themselves — bell hooks, Cornel West, Judith Butler, Peter Singer, David H. Kim, Molefi Kete Asante among them — came from a variety of racial backgrounds, and their concerns and positions were even more diverse. But on the whole I came to see these interviews as linked by a common thread: They were messages to white America — because they often directly expressed the experience of those who live and have lived as people of color in a white-run world, and that is something no white person could ever truly know firsthand.

That is how I want to deliver my own message now.

Dear White America,

I have a weighty request. As you read this letter, I want you to listen with love, a sort of love that demands that you look at parts of yourself that might cause pain and terror, as James Baldwin would say. Did you hear that? You may have missed it. I repeat: I want you to listen with love. Well, at least try.

We don’t talk much about the urgency of love these days, especially within the public sphere. Much of our discourse these days is about revenge, name calling, hate, and divisiveness. I have yet to hear it from our presidential hopefuls, or our political pundits.

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I don’t mean the Hollywood type of love, but the scary kind, the kind that risks not being reciprocated, the kind that refuses to flee in the face of danger. To make it a bit easier for you, I’ve decided to model, as best as I can, what I’m asking of you. Let me demonstrate the vulnerability that I wish you to show. As a child of Socrates, James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, let me speak the truth, refuse to err on the side of caution.

This letter is a gift for you. Bear in mind, though, that some gifts can be heavy to bear. You don’t have to accept it; there is no obligation. I give it freely, believing that many of you will throw the gift back in my face, saying that I wrongly accuse you, that I am too sensitive, that I’m a race hustler, and that I blame white people (you) for everything.

I have read many of your comments. I have even received some hate mail. In this letter, I ask you to look deep, to look into your souls with silence, to quiet that voice that will speak to you of your white “innocence.” So, as you read this letter, take a deep breath. Make a space for my voice in the deepest part of your psyche. Try to listen, to practice being silent. There are times when you must quiet your own voice to hear from or about those who suffer in ways that you do not.

What if I told you that I’m sexist? Well, I am. Yes. I said it and I mean just that. I have watched my male students squirm in their seats when I’ve asked them to identify and talk about their sexism. There are few men, I suspect, who would say that they are sexists, and even fewer would admit that their sexism actually oppresses women. Certainly not publicly, as I’ve just done. No taking it back now.

To make things worse, I’m an academic, a philosopher. I’m supposed to be one of the “enlightened” ones. Surely, we are beyond being sexists. Some, who may genuinely care about my career, will say that I’m being too risky, that I am jeopardizing my academic livelihood. Some might even say that as a black male, who has already been stereotyped as a “crotch-grabbing, sexual fiend,” that I’m at risk of reinforcing that stereotype. (Let’s be real, that racist stereotype has been around for centuries; it is already part of white America’s imaginary landscape.)

Yet, I refuse to remain a prisoner of the lies that we men like to tell ourselves — that we are beyond the messiness of sexism and male patriarchy, that we don’t oppress women. Let me clarify. This doesn’t mean that I intentionally hate women or that I desire to oppress them. It means that despite my best intentions, I perpetuate sexism every
day of my life. Please don’t take this as a confession for which I’m seeking forgiveness. Confessions can be easy, especially when we know that forgiveness is immediately forthcoming.

As a sexist, I have failed women. I have failed to speak out when I should have. I have failed to engage critically and extensively their pain and suffering in my writing. I have failed to transcend the rigidity of gender roles in my own life. I have failed to challenge those poisonous assumptions that women are “inferior” to men or to speak out loudly in the company of male philosophers who believe that feminist philosophy is just a nonphilosophical fad. I have been complicit with, and have allowed myself to be seduced by, a country that makes billions of dollars from sexually objectifying women, from pornography, commercials, video games, to Hollywood movies. I am not innocent.

I have been fed a poisonous diet of images that fragment women into mere body parts. I have also been complicit with a dominant male narrative that says that women enjoy being treated like sexual toys. In our collective male imagination, women are “things” to be used for our visual and physical titillation. And even as I know how poisonous and false these sexist assumptions are, I am often ambushed by my own hidden sexism. I continue to see women through the male gaze that belies my best intentions not to sexually objectify them. Our collective male erotic feelings and fantasies are complicit in the degradation of women. And we must be mindful that not all women endure sexual degradation in the same way.

I recognize how my being a sexist has a differential impact on black women and women of color who are not only victims of racism, but also sexism, my sexism. For example, black women and women of color not only suffer from sexual objectification, but the ways in which they are objectified is linked to how they are racially depicted, some as “exotic” and others as “hyper-sexual.” You see, the complicity, the responsibility, the pain that I cause runs deep.

And, get this. I refuse to seek shelter; I refuse to live a lie. So, every day of my life I fight against the dominant male narrative, choosing to see women as subjects, not objects. But even as I fight, there are moments of failure. Just because I fight against sexism does not give me clean hands, as it were, at the end of the day; I continue to falter, and I continue to oppress. And even though the ways in which I oppress women is unintentional, this does not free me of being responsible.
If you are white, and you are reading this letter, I ask that you don’t run to seek shelter from your own racism. Don’t hide from your responsibility. Rather, begin, right now, to practice being vulnerable. Being neither a “good” white person nor a liberal white person will get you off the proverbial hook. I consider myself to be a decent human being. Yet, I’m sexist. Take another deep breath. I ask that you try to be “un-sutured.” If that term brings to mind a state of pain, open flesh, it is meant to do so. After all, it is painful to let go of your “white innocence,” to use this letter as a mirror, one that refuses to show you what you want to see, one that demands that you look at the lies that you tell yourself so that you don’t feel the weight of responsibility for those who live under the yoke of whiteness, your whiteness.

I can see your anger. I can see that this letter is being misunderstood. This letter is not asking you to feel bad about yourself, to wallow in guilt. That is too easy. I’m asking for you to tarry, to linger, with the ways in which you perpetuate a racist society, the ways in which you are racist. I’m now daring you to face a racist history which, paraphrasing Baldwin, has placed you where you are and that has formed your own racism. Again, in the spirit of Baldwin, I am asking you to enter into battle with your white self. I’m asking that you open yourself up; to speak to, to admit to, the racist poison that is inside of you. Again, take a deep breath. Don’t tell me about how many black friends you have. Don’t tell me that you are married to someone of color. Don’t tell me that you voted for Obama. Don’t tell me that I’m the racist. Don’t tell me that you don’t see color. Don’t tell me that I’m blaming whites for everything. To do so is to hide yet again. You may have never used the N-word in your life, you may hate the K.K.K., but that does not mean that you don’t harbor racism and benefit from racism. After all, you are part of a system that allows you to walk into stores where you are not followed, where you get to go for a bank loan and your skin does not count against you, where you don’t need to engage in “the talk” that black people and people of color must tell their children when they are confronted by white police officers.

As you reap comfort from being white, we suffer for being black and people of color. But your comfort is linked to our pain and suffering. Just as my comfort in being male is linked to the suffering of women, which makes me sexist, so, too, you are racist. That is the gift that I want you to accept, to embrace. It is a form of knowledge that is
taboo. Imagine the impact that the acceptance of this gift might have on you and the world.

Take another deep breath. I know that there are those who will write to me in the comment section with boiling anger, sarcasm, disbelief, denial. There are those who will say, “Yancy is just an angry black man.” There are others who will say, “Why isn’t Yancy telling black people to be honest about the violence in their own black neighborhoods?” Or, “How can Yancy say that all white people are racists?” If you are saying these things, then you’ve already failed to listen. I come with a gift. You’re already rejecting the gift that I have to offer. This letter is about you. Don’t change the conversation. I assure you that so many black people suffering from poverty and joblessness, which is linked to high levels of crime, are painfully aware of the existential toll that they have had to face because they are black and, as Baldwin adds, “for no other reason.”

Some of your white brothers and sisters have made this leap. The legal scholar Stephanie M. Wildman, has written, “I simply believe that no matter how hard I work at not being racist, I still am.

Because part of racism is systemic, I benefit from the privilege that I am struggling to see.” And the journalism professor Robert Jensen: “I like to think I have changed, even though I routinely trip over the lingering effects of that internalized racism and the institutional racism around me. Every time I walk into a store at the same time as a black man and the security guard follows him and leaves me alone to shop, I am benefiting from white privilege.”

What I’m asking is that you first accept the racism within yourself, accept all of the truth about what it means for you to be white in a society that was created for you. I’m asking for you to trace the binds that tie you to forms of domination that you would rather not see. When you walk into the world, you can walk with assurance; you have already signed a contract, so to speak, that guarantees you a certain form of social safety

Baldwin argues for a form of love that is “a state of being, or state of grace – not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.” Most of my days, I’m engaged in a personal and societal battle against sexism. So many times, I fail. And so many times, I’m complicit. But I refuse to hide behind that mirror that lies to me about my “non-sexist nobility.” Baldwin says, “Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we
cannot live within.” In my heart, I’m done with the mask of sexism, though I’m tempted every day to wear it. And, there are times when it still gets the better of me.

White America, are you prepared to be at war with yourself, your white identity, your white power, your white privilege? Are you prepared to show me a white self that love has unmasked? I’m asking for love in return for a gift; in fact, I’m hoping that this gift might help you to see yourself in ways that you have not seen before. Of course, the history of white supremacy in America belies this gesture of black gift-giving, this gesture of non-sentimental love. Martin Luther King Jr. was murdered even as he loved.

Perhaps the language of this letter will encourage a split — not a split between black and white, but a fissure in your understanding, a space for loving a Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Aiyana Jones, Sandra Bland, Laquan McDonald and others. I’m suggesting a form of love that enables you to see the role that you play (even despite your anti-racist actions) in a system that continues to value black lives on the cheap.

Take one more deep breath. I have another gift.

If you have young children, before you fall off to sleep tonight, I want you to hold your child. Touch your child’s face. Smell your child’s hair. Count the fingers on your child’s hand. See the miracle that is your child. And then, with as much vision as you can muster, I want you to imagine that your child is black.

In peace, George Yancy

George Yancy is a professor of philosophy at Emory University. He has written, edited and co-edited numerous books, including “Black Bodies, White Gazes,” “Look, a White!” and “Pursuing Trayvon Martin,” co-edited with Janine Jones.


