A WHITE WOMAN
STORIES TO DECOLONISE
(HERSELF)

I'M NOT RACIST, BUT...

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I'M NOT RACIST, BUT...

ARE YOU JUST TOO SENSITIVE?
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Laundry is the only thing that should be separated by colour.

Author unknown

*but sometimes attributed to Nietzsche*
In our modern free-spoken society
There is a word that we still hold taboo
A couple of Gs, an R and an E, an I and an N
Just six little letters all jumbled together
Have caused damage that we may never mend

Tim Minchin, 'Prejudice', 2009

Is the n-word the most divisive word in the English language? When it rolls off a white tongue in any tone, it is like an electric shock to all within earshot, a social marker
of an oppressive and violent history. Spat with vitriol, it is a violet racist aural and psychological assault; lobbed in casually, it smacks of lazy white superiority and power; delivered with irony or mischief it still makes a mark, leaking white arrogance. White people using the n-word is a powerful act of white privilege as they gloss over, ignore or forget violent histories because it messes with their comfort zone.¹

The n-word rolling off a black tongue can speak of reclaimed agency, resilience and defiance, but it keeps the word alive. Who can utter the n-word?

Satirical musician Tim Minchin thought he could in his song ‘If You Really Loved Me’ (2006):²

We go together like a cracker and Brie
Like racism and ignorance
Like n*****s and R ’n’ B

Outside his London show, Minchin found himself accosted by a furious black man who called him a racist and threatened him if he sang it again. A white woman buying coffee next to him spat her vitriol in his face, calling him ignorant and offensive. She had walked out of his show in protest. His use of the n-word had caused quite a reaction from which the press made mileage.

In a documentary on the early days of his career, Rock ’n’ Roll Nerd (2008),³ Minchin professed his job as a comedian was less as a judge and more a commentator on issues. The audience see him struggling to come to terms with being labelled a racist:

¹ In these footnotes is the Weaver, weaving the threads of storytelling and research into the twine that holds this collection together.


³ Minchin in Rhian Skirving, dir., Rock ’n’ Roll Nerd The Tim Minchin Story, documentary (Carlton North, Vic.: Letterbox Films, 2008).
The whole song works as a contrast between the innocent and the shocking. I make the point that there’s racism and ignorance, so my position is clear and then I make the point that there’s this industry out there ... that exploits the idea of a n***** as reclaimed by black people ... The word is so loaded that when people hear it, it’s like crackle crackle [he does this loud white noise sound] and the noise around that word is such that they can’t think of anything else.  

He admits that most black people in Britain have probably had a bad n-word experience and that they would find that gag wrong: ‘I guess what they’re saying is you don’t know what it’s like ... and I don’t. So I dropped the word.’

Minchin is correct about the word being loaded: loaded with history and pain, oppression and discrimination. The n-word has emerged from the French negre, from the Spanish and Portuguese negro, and from the Latin niger (black). First recorded in 1587 (as negar), the word probably originated with the dialectal pronunciation of negro in northern England and Ireland.

In the United States, the n-word became a slur in the early nineteenth century in the era of enslavement, a pejorative prefix before a common first name to distinguish the slave from another white person with the same name. It continues to be a slur when used by white people.

There is a wooliness around the rules for using the n-word. I came across a checklist online that I have built on, which addresses when it is appropriate for a white person to say the n-word. The bottom line is never, but I will unpack it point by point.

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
**Can you say the n-word ironically?**

No, not even ironically. Senior Culture writer for the *Huffington Post* Zeba Blay is unequivocal that white people should never use it. ‘That means, colloquially or derogatorily [or ironically], in context or out … The general consensus is the “n” is a word best left for us [black people] to grapple with.’ She highlights the ‘emotional and spiritual labour that goes into trying to explain to non-black people why they shouldn’t say it.’

**What if you have a black friend who said it was okay?**

No. They lied to you. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) want the word buried forever. In 2007, the NAACP held a mock funeral, complete with a plywood pine casket bedecked with a wreath of black roses and pulled by a pair of horses, in Detroit, to say, as Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm put it, ‘Good riddance to this vestige of slavery and racism’. They agitate for all people to stop using the word, especially in comedy routines and rap and hip-hop music.

It is a challenge to the entertainment industry and the American public to stop using the n-word and other racial slurs. Activists carried signs and wore T-shirts saying, ‘Bury the “N” Word’, and others carried a banner saying, ‘Don’t Dis’, Uplift’. ‘This is the first funeral I’ve been to where people were happy to be here’, said NAACP Chairman Julian Bond. ‘The entity in this casket deserves to be dead.’ Several marchers wondered at the time if the event would mark the demise of a centuries-old slur and one proffered that ‘if the N-word is being buried today, it’s being buried alive’.

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9 The NAACP also staged a similar mock funeral for America’s segregationist ‘Jim Crow’ laws in Detroit in 1944, but those laws remained in force until the mid-1960s.

10 I appreciate that there are layers of complexity here, as the use of the n-word among black people may also be a marker of class. However, this is a discussion I am not qualified, as a white writer, to have. The main question I ask here is whether it is ever OK for a white person to use this word.

Can you say it if you are quoting someone else saying it?
No. Just say, ‘the n-word’. An example of the texts *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* were both suggested as pertinent books that use the word and the advice given was that they are valuable teaching tools, but the word should still be bleeped. People know which word you mean.

Can you say the n-word while rapping to a song?
No.

How about when you’ve been invited on stage to rap along with Kendrick Lamar?
No. Especially not then. In May 2018 during his Alabama concert, Kendrick Lamar had a white woman rapping his song ‘M.A.A.D City’ on stage with him. Part way through the song, the crowd began booing. Lamar stopped her after she repeatedly used the n-word, telling her to bleep that single word (I counted eighteen incidents of the word).12 Acclaimed writer Ta-Nehisi Coates, author of *Between the World and Me* (2015)13 and many writings on critical race theory, loves the irony of white people being banned from using the word while singing along to songs. He believes it delivers an uncomfortable truth about race relations:

For white people, I think the experience of being a hip-hop fan and not being able to use the word ‘n*****’ is actually very, very insightful. It will give you just a little peek into the world of what it means to be black. Because to be black is to walk through the world, and watch people doing things that you cannot do, that you can’t join in and do. So, I think there’s actually a lot to be learned from refraining.14

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12 Mohdin, ‘When Can White People Say the N-Word?’.
14 Coates, cited in Mohdin, ‘When Can White People Say the N-Word?’
*Can you use the n-word as a demonstration of ‘free speech’?*

No, definitely not. Most times the word is used, there is negative inference. If a word cannot be used in court, it is not about free speech.

*Can black people use the word?*

Black people are divided on this. Some say it is their word and their right to use it as they choose, and, as I highlighted earlier, others believe the word should be buried forever. It is not our call.

*If black people can say it and white people cannot, is that not double standards, or reverse racism?*

It is worthwhile adding in a brief explainer on racism. Somewhere along the way, the actual meaning of racism became muddled up with other ingredients of racism such as prejudice, bigotry and ignorance. Black people *can* be offensive and express ignorant ideas about white people, and white people *can* experience prejudice from black people and other non-white people. White people *can* feel aggrieved, but they are not *experiencing* racism. Their perceived ‘racist’ experience does not affect their rights, opportunities, social, economic or political location and privileges. Racism has nothing to do with feelings, it is much more complex, and I unpack this further in my chapbook *Skin in the Game*.

Michael Harriot in the African American online magazine *The Root* asserts his and other black people’s right to use the word as they choose. Harriot is unperturbed by perceived double standards, acknowledging some argue they cannot use the n-word in their music, sell it to a white audience and ‘then get mad when Alabama sorority girls use it’, offering ‘it is either disingenuous or stupid to pretend that double standards don’t exist’.15

On the subject of reverse racism, it does not exist, it is not real, it is not a thing, asserts Zeba Blay.\textsuperscript{16} Reverse racism infers there is discrimination or prejudice against a racial or ethnic \textit{majority}, generally as perceived or imagined by white people. Racial prejudice describes discriminatory or derogatory actions and grounded in assumptions about race and skin colour (such as all black people can dance). Racial prejudice can be directed to white people (such as the jibe that white people cannot dance), but it is not racism because of the power imbalance in our society. When racial prejudice is backed with the power of the dominant culture – that is, Eurocentric modes of thinking rooted in colonialism, which privileges whiteness – it enables acts of discrimination and oppression against groups or individuals.

We as white people like to believe we live in a meritocracy, that the world is a level playing field, but it is not. Some white people are determined to protect this idea that we are all the same, we are all human beings, every man for himself, we live in a melting pot, I don’t see skin colour, fantasy land. In my experience it is those individuals who protest with reverse racism accusations. There are six instances where I have seen this in action.

One, when the white person is trying to deflect a conversation away from themselves and their own racist opinions. Two, when a person is in denial of their own white privilege. Three, when a white person is ‘left out’ of something like a black club, initiative or other ‘safe space’. Four, when the white person is intent on showing the person of colour that they really do not have it that bad, or they are not the only ones at a disadvantage. Five, when white people are alerted to their whiteness by people of colour. People of colour have fewer opportunities to express prejudice against white people because of society’s power imbalance, so white people react badly when this happens. Six, when a white person feels they have received or witnessed a racist or offensive act that is equivalent to such acts visited on ethnic minorities (I cannot think of an equivalent, can you?).

Reverse racism is a myth because it tries to ignore the fundamental question of who holds more power and privilege between the individuals, groups and communities involved. Zeba Blay sums it up: ‘If you think about it, reverse racism is actually kinda

\textsuperscript{16} Zeba Blay, ‘4 Reverse Racism Myths That Need to Stop’, Huffpost, 6 June 2017, \url{https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/reverse-racism-isnt-a-thing_us_55d60a91e4b07addcb45da97}. 
great. Because if it did exist, it would mean we lived in a society in which all racial groups have an equal amount of power. But we don’t.’

**Why do white people want to use it when they know it is taboo?**

Harriot does not mince his words: ‘Black people getting upset about something never stopped white people from doing anything. They are always going to want to use the n-word. I just wish they would stop innocently pretending that they aren’t racist when they use it.’ He goes on to say that the word has been ‘fetishised’ and infers that it is used to posture white supremacy. It hits hard when he asserts that our position as colonisers, which we are, comes with the attitude that everything belongs to us. “They [America] planted a flag on the moon. The motherfucking moon! You think the n-word is any different?” He goes on to say that the word has been ‘fetishised’ and infers that it is used to posture white supremacy. It hits hard when he asserts that our position as colonisers, which we are, comes with the attitude that everything belongs to us. “They [America] planted a flag on the moon. The motherfucking moon! You think the n-word is any different?” Like, the colonisers in America, we in Australia believed we could claim an entire already

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17 Ibid.


19 Ibid.
populated continent by simply declaring it as our own. Cherry picking from another’s language is a small step after that.

The word wounds in Australia too. The Songman once told me about a time he was walking past the National Gallery of Victoria when a man unknown to him came and yelled in his face, ‘extinct n***** piece of shit’. When I asked how he responded to the racist attack, he said he ‘protected the old dark-skinned feller he was walking to work with’.

In the story ‘Raced Places’, in this collection, you will meet Murri Elder and activist Sam Watson during his fight to keep Brisbane’s racist Boundary Street names rather than to sanitise history and change them to Boundless Street. This was one of many battles Watson has fought for his people and there is another point that is pertinent to this discussion of the n-word.

In 1973, Watson was working as a young Aboriginal legal service worker. During a work trip in the Atherton Tablelands, he drove past a road sign bearing the name N***** Creek. Watson stopped the car and ‘got a couple of tools out of the boot and liberated the sign. I thought, this is a blot on the landscape’. It may have taken forty-four years, but in 2017, Queensland authorities finally wiped the map clean of the n-word. Ten place names containing the n-word were given new names: Mount N***** Head and seven spots named N***** Creek.

Whereas it was right to preserve history and keep Boundary Street to remind Brisbane of its racist past, these names needed changing, argues Watson. In many people’s eyes they are words ‘just placed on those creeks and other geographical features as an insult to Aboriginal people ... There’s nothing to be gained by leaving those names be’. Other Queensland place names reflecting its violent history remain on maps, including Murdering Creek, Skull Hole and The Leap.

The n-word changes were implemented at a time when there have been parts of the population agitating to change the date of Australia Day and hot debate over pioneer statues and inscriptions. University of Queensland research fellow Jonathan Richards

advocates teaching the Australian community true history, ‘not the “whitewashed versions” because as long as memorials to frontier “heroes” remain in place and uncorrected, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are always reminded of the cruel and violent racism of Australia’s past’. The message is that history must be inclusive and respectful of First Nations peoples’ experiences.  

I wondered at the resilience of the word. Other slurs such as faggot, chink, dago, spick and wop have thankfully phased out as people admitted their offence, acknowledged it was unacceptable and attitudes shifted. I am not saying that the tidying and taming of our tongues is evidence of a reduction in our prejudices, but I sense that society is becoming more mindful, or cautious, of what can and cannot be said (some call this political correctness). Perhaps it is also because there is a personal cost to being caught out as racist. ‘These are hard, hard, bigoted words’, says Abraham Foxman, national director of the America’s Anti-Defamation League. ‘There are consequences for their use – social consequences, political consequences, commercial consequences.’

A CNN article titled ‘Why the N-Word Doesn’t Go Away’ helped me understand why and how the n-word persists. It was published on CNN’s website after then President Obama used the n-word in a podcast. The author is Stephen A. Holmes, a veteran journalist with more than forty years in the business, who put himself through college by driving a New York City taxicab at night. He was an editor at the Washington Post and reporter and editor at the New York Times, where he was part of a team awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2001 for reporting on race relations in America.

‘There’s that word again,’ he begins, ‘muscling its way into the public square, prompting sharp intakes of breath, embarrassed silences, euphemisms and lots and lots of heated discussion.’ Unlike other slurs, there is ‘one slur that has refused to be consigned to the dustbin of linguistic history and one whose target is clear: n*****’. 


23 Holmes, ‘Why the N-Word Doesn’t Go Away’.

24 Ibid.
The word’s resilience is ‘evidence that bigotry against black people is more virulent than animus toward any other racial or ethnic group’, claims Holmes. As Obama said in the podcast, it is no longer polite to use it in public, especially among white people, but it is driven underground, dwelling there ‘like subsurface magma rather than dying out like other slurs’, with ‘a half-life that rivals plutonium’.  

‘Let’s face it’, broaches Holmes. ‘Another reason the n-word has a half-life that rivals plutonium is that black people keep it alive’. Holmes asks Randall Kennedy, a Harvard law professor and author of *N*****: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word* (2002) his opinion:

When I was growing up, black people would get together in a group, and we would use it ... But it was for in-group use only, and we would be watchful that other people didn’t hear us. Today, you’re on a bus, or in the subway or in a mall and people are just out-and-out using it. There’s no self-consciousness, no embarrassment. It’s normalised. That too has led to its singular prominence in the society.

African-Americans have all had to negotiate the same oppressive situations and were born into a world where anti-black prevails. They share a collective condition to which Richard Pryor, Chris Rock, and their n-heavy comedy routines, and rappers like Kendrick Lamar give voice. Black artists such as these have all played a part in the word’s tenuous public acceptability.

The n-word has what other racial and ethnic slurs lack: ‘a constituency, a broad-based coalition whose component parts have embraced the word for their own reasons’. As Holmes suggests, white people will use it because they are racist; black musicians and entertainers ‘make millions of dollars exploiting a word associated with poor people in the ghetto’; black people of younger generations embrace it as a cool term of affection;

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26 Holmes, ‘Why the N-Word Doesn’t Go Away’.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
and there are ‘whites who are not racists but who want to sound cool and feel protected by black people’s use of the term’.  

Perhaps this last is the category Tim Minchin falls into?

My feeling is that this is a habit of white privilege, the well-intentioned liberal non-racist ‘I don’t see colour’ voice, who is oblivious to the connection between race and space. Minchin may have presumed the space was racially neutral, colour-free, which is how the ways of white habits dominate; they are effective because they are invisible to us. His use of the n-word in a song is an example of white privilege because ‘it is the privilege of those who are not racially oppressed to see or treat race as optional. People who are discriminated against because of their race generally do not have the choice of whether to view race as relevant. It is relevant because it is forced on them by a racist world.’

Minchin and I were (are) completely unaware that we have permanent membership of a group that shares ties to white privilege and ideals, which does not see or notice whiteness as a race and which regards race as a topic for non-whites. There are unconscious habits of white privilege that most are unaware of. White scholar Shannon Sullivan explains that the (alleged) superiority of white people exists as a tacit assumption, rather than something that is explicitly taught; it is a ‘knowing’ of white superiority that is manifested in all we do, in our transactions with the world. Perhaps this collective white privilege slid, undetected, into Minchin’s habits.

Minchin apologised fully for using the word. Rhian Skirving, who filmed Minchin’s anguish over his earlier song, says: ‘He learned very quickly and painfully the power of language and ownership of language.’ Skirving says that Minchin’s response, to write a new song he calls ‘Prejudice’, addresses that lesson.

I wonder what you think?

I have been in the audience when Minchin has played this song. At the time I was

29 Ibid.


31 Ibid., 95.

32 Minchin in Skirving, Rock ‘n’ Roll Nerd.
unaware of its history. I felt the whole room clench as he cleverly spells out the letters in song. For two-and-a-half minutes we squirm as he sings about letters that spell the n-word. I have watched it many times since, along with eleven-and-a-half million others on YouTube. He begins with sombre piano tunes that accompany a spoken-word intro:

This is a song about prejudice
And the language of prejudice
And the power of the language of prejudice
It’s called ‘Prejudice’

Then tunes and tones are stronger, serious, more dramatic as he sings:

In our modern free-spoken society
There is a word that we still hold taboo
A word with a terrible history
Of being used to abuse, oppress and subdue
Just six seemingly harmless letters
Arranged in a way that will form a word
With more power than the pieces of metal
That are forged to make swords

Is Minchin saying the pen is mightier than the sword? The words wound like swords? The tune changes to sound more like a nursery rhyme to spell out:

A couple of Gs, an R and an E, an I and an N

He does that slightly crazy side look at the audience as he dwells on the ‘n’, and the audience begins to titter:

Just six little letters all jumbled together
Have caused damage that we may never mend
And it’s important that we all respect
That if these people should happen to choose
To reclaim the word as their own
It doesn’t mean the rest of you have a right to its use

So never underestimate
The power that language imparts
Sticks and stones may break your bones
But words can break hearts

A couple of Gs, jeez, unless you’ve had to live it
An R and an E, even I am careful with it
An I and an N; in the end, it will only offend
Don’t want to have to spell it out again.

Is he is saying here that he’s learned his lesson, that racist words are harmful and that white people like him don’t have the right to use the n-word because he’s not ‘had to live it’? What is interesting here is that Minchin then does a musical segue, where he appears to imitate the intonations of a black rapper’s ‘yeah’. Then he starts playing blues chords. Is he being playful, mischievous, provocotive?

Only a ginger can call another ginger ‘ginger’
Only a ginger can call another ginger ‘ginger’
So listen to me if you care for your health
You won’t call me ginger unless you’re ginger yourself
Only a ginger can call another ginger ‘ginger’

When you are a ginger, life is pretty hard
Years of ritual bullying in the school yard
And all the ladies, they agree it’s a fact
Once you’ve gone ginge, you can’t go back
Yeah go ginge, go you funky motherfucking ginge
Yeah, funky ginger mofo
Most listening will not know of his previous transgressions, so his satire is not always fully understood.

How sorry is he?

He is saying here that only a n***** can call another n***** n*****. Is he lampooning the idea that black people in the US and UK have chosen to reclaim the word to take the sting out of it?

By this stage of the song, it becomes clear that Minchin is mocking a presumed ‘double standard’. In a way, he is echoing Holmes’s theory that when such a word is reclaimed by the people it was originally intended to harm, it is kept alive to use as a weapon of racism. Through ironically twisting his own experience of being ‘called out’, he implies that if black people do not want the word used, then they should stop using it to refer to themselves.

His clever plays with homophones connecting with phonetic pronunciation of letters with full words is where the mischief really starts. As highlighted earlier, the audience clenched, he has built up palatable tension in this uncomfortable space of the n-word and all it represents and then he lets us off the hook in a deliberate misdirection: many do not realise that ‘ginger’ is an anagram of the n-word.

If I were to don my critical race studies lenses (and the Yancy team of scholars and philosophers around my desk – see my meander ‘Dear George’ in Skin in the Game), Minchin’s entire song is a facetious comparison, often in ‘their’ vernacular, between hate against black people and hate against redheads, which undermines the black lived experience of oppression, and the transgenerational trauma, that the n-word evokes.

I confess, I love this song and Minchin’s acerbic brilliance, but through the prism of critical race studies, it is problematic. His song ‘Prejudice’ undermines his apology. A friend with more musical sense alerted me to the point where he seems to be mocking the whole scene when he uses (black) blues chords as the background to the ginger stuff (only a ginger can call another ginger a ginger). Because he can – because he is white and privileged and race does not affect him – he thinks he can use race for comic means. Does the use of irony and lack of humility mean that he actually hasn’t learned anything?

Do I condemn Minchin and appear to my fellow whites as a PC spoilsport?

My quandary is: with my newfound knowledge of whiteness and privilege, do I allow myself to laugh at this anymore? Has my sense of humour been changed?
You arrive to your yoga flow class in a heated studio. The realisation hits you before you take off your jumper to place it in the locker with your personal effects.

You have forgotten to put on an exercise singlet. You have nothing to conceal your middle flesh from your fellow yogis. Your middle speaks of a comfortable life, it’s best not shared. Your only solution is to miss the class or rummage through the lost property box and borrow something. There is another woman’s (let us call her Betty) white, short sleeved t-shirt with her dried sweat stains. You steel yourself and put Betty on.

When at capacity, the studio is steamy and sweaty, thirty-five flowing bodies in 27-degree Celsius heating. The class is full. As you heat up, so does Betty. She wafts up to you, around you; as you move around the mat, your aromas merge into a new unwelcome
concoction. There are two of you on that mat. Every sense is aware and wary of Betty seeping, cringing at your odorous intimacy, but in the back of your mind is the wise advice of Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*:

‘First of all,’ he said, ‘If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you’ll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view –’

‘Sir?’

‘– until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.’

Easier said than done, but this experience of exercising in Betty’s sweat is a visceral, embodied experience of discomfort, a sensation not familiar to you. You cannot wait to wash her off.

How does it feel to read ‘you’? Did it make you cringe? Could you smell Betty’s sweat? This was an exercise in thinking about the literary device of using the second person narrative to pull you into the experience. If I told the story with first person ‘I’, you would be distanced from the experience, not feeling it as yours. Third person ‘he’ or ‘she’ has the same effect of allowing distance from the narrative.

The power of ‘you’ is heavy and unsettling in the hands of a bold poet like Claudia Rankine. In 2014 she published her collection titled *Citizen: An American Lyric*, winning multiple awards and accolades and becoming a New York Times Best Seller. A reviewer for *The Observer*, Kate Kellaway, pronounced it ‘a bold work that occupies

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its own space powerfully, an unsettled hybrid’ of ‘shocking truth’ that ‘eavesdrops on America and a racism that has never gone away’.  

My hunch is that Rankine could just as easily have been eavesdropping on Australia and the way black people are treated here. Her work resonates powerfully with the ‘other’ in general: ‘The most surprising thing has been the number of Asian women who have come up to me at book signings with tears in their eyes to say: this is my life you’re writing’, said Rankine in an interview.

There are no hints about Rankine’s identity in the publication; no picture or author’s blurb. We do not know of her Jamaican origins, nor the identities behind some of the interactions she shares. In this way, she prevents the reader from slipping into stereotyping. She writes of tense relations and troubling exchanges between black and white, but we do not know who is who. Rankine achieves this, unsettling the reader with ambivalent pronouns, making us work to find our positioning, but also pulling us towards a universality. ‘Language reveals something that happens so fast. It is language that pulls moments into their reality’, explains Rankine. By deploying ‘you’ she is asking me to try it on, walk in another’s skin, pointing a finger, wrong-footing me and my ‘perspective pivots, unannounced and ambiguous, on a single shifting pronoun, you, effectively creating a curiously intimate, disorienting sense of participation’. I find myself in Betty’s sweat. If Citizen were written in third person, ‘they’ or ‘she’, I could and would keep my distance, reading the protagonists as ‘the other’. 

Citizen is an unflinching confrontation of casual racism that leads you to question your own assumptions about constructions and enactments of race. I study the work slowly, letting the words steep and swill, reading the poems more than once. Her words


37 Ibid.

are sparse on bright white pages, calling to the colour-blind who see white as ‘colourless or race-less and so far in the background that it is barely visible, if it even exists at all ... [Rankine’s] monochromatic texts help to make whiteness visible against efforts to obscure it.\textsuperscript{39} I marvel at the way the poet’s tone manoeuvres us as she mirrors the experience of microaggressions she and others encounter. If her anger was too overt, it may alienate a delicate reader.\textsuperscript{40}

Sometimes racism is so subtle that neither victim nor perpetrator may entirely understand what is going on. It is an invisible violence with a toxic cumulative effect on the victim, eroding people’s mental health, job performance and the quality of social experience.\textsuperscript{41} These subtle exchanges, known as microaggressions, are ‘brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults to a target person or group’.\textsuperscript{42}

They often arrive unconsciously via snubs, dismissive looks, gestures or tones and ‘are so pervasive and automatic in daily conversations and interactions that they are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocent and innocuous’.\textsuperscript{43} This subtle form of racism maintains white privilege as it deems the space and the encounter race-neutral, non-racial and colour-blind, and, combined with ordinariness, it is resistant to critique.


\textsuperscript{40} This ‘alienating the reader’ issue is something I have been on constant alert about during the writing and curating of this collection. Early on in my research, I was repeatedly warned to curb my activist voice, which was very difficult as I was so angry at what I was learning about our past and present transgressions against First Nations peoples. As it settled with me (I am still angry, but cleverer about it, I hope), I could work out ways to approach it in softer, less confrontational ways. My method of evocative autoethnography has been an enormous help in this process as it gives me a way to put myself in the stories without it really being about me, and it gives the reader a framework for putting themselves in there too.

\textsuperscript{41} See \textit{The White Woman} and the story of the racist slur on the suburban footy field in ‘Microaggression’, this volume.


\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
'How do you criticise a hierarchical formation if it is rendered nearly invisible by its colour (white) and positioning (background) in the contemporary so-called colour-blind or post-racial US?\textsuperscript{44}

As a white person, you cannot fully appreciate the dehumanising effects of discrimination and microaggressions that are part of the everyday for racial minorities. Racism is neither evident nor relevant to your everyday existence and therefore you do not bear the brunt of its ill effects. Rankine knows this and deliberately does not racialise her speakers or addressees, thereby humanising their experiences as ‘you’; the reader cannot assign racial positioning.

Rankine shares her exhaustion at bearing witness to and bearing the brunt of racist exchanges, especially from those she knows and loves. In her poetic confrontations with casual racism, Rankine writes of sighs, our involuntary acts of physically and mentally resetting our emotions. Sighs are there when words are too much, or not enough. They speak of sadness, resignation, frustration, a weariness, of too much to bear. They make people feel uncomfortable, as if they might be responsible in some way.

To live through the days sometimes you moan like a deer. Sometimes you sigh. The world says stop that. Another sigh. Another stop that. Moaning elicits laughter, sighing upsets. Perhaps each sigh is drawn into existence to pull in, pull under, who now, truth be told, you could no more control those sighs than that which brings the sighs about.\textsuperscript{45} The sigh is a pathway to breath; it allows breathing. That’s just self-preservation. No one fabricates that. You sit down, you sigh. You stand up, you sigh. The sigh is a worrying exhale of an ache. You wouldn’t call it an illness’ still it is not the iteration of a free being. What else to liken yourself to but an animal, the ruminant kind?

\textsuperscript{44} Adams, ‘Black Lives/White Backgrounds’, 55.

\textsuperscript{45} My curiosity prompted me to investigate the moan of a deer. Online I discovered it is a death moan, a moan of pain after the deer has been shot, or the moan of a young buck hit from a cross bow held by an eleven-year-old boy dressed in camouflages on a hunting trip with his father.
A friend writes of the numbing effects of humming and it returns you to your own sigh. It’s no longer audible. You’ve grown into it. Some call it aging – an internalised liquid smoke blurring ordinary ache.  

It is easy to assume that Rankine’s ‘you’ is black and the others are white, but she begins ‘muddying the personas and pronouns in a way that forces us to work a little harder’. She is humanising the dehumanised by disarming and circumventing our defences, suggesting we could be racist too. She coaxes us to imagine ourselves as the subject of our own unconscious racism. One particularly poignant moment is found in Rankine’s short poem:

And when the woman with multiple degrees says, I didn’t know black women could get cancer, instinctively you take two steps back though all urgency leaves the possibility of any kind of relationship as you realize nowhere is where you will get from here.

Using ‘I’ as the first person would have deactivated this scene, explains Rankine. I appreciate what she means, as the exchange would then be passed off as Rankine’s experience. With ‘you’ she makes it ours to share. In these encounters, the black and brown body need the white body, there is a ‘dynamic ... fluid negotiation’, which combines with the ‘you’ to expose the latent, tacit racism. It highlights the language and the violence of language between the bodies ‘as it arrives from one body to the other. It becomes the thing in-between the bodies’. By coaxing us to share another’s sweat, she is making a body accountable for its language.

46 Rankine, Citizen, 60, 151.
48 Rankine, Citizen, 45.
50 Ibid.
How do I feel reading Rankine’s ‘you’? I see how she coaxes me into cross-racial identification through varying thoughts and positionings to encounter my blind spots when it comes to racism. It’s like holding up a mirror. I feel the ugliness of racism as it is expressed socially and in institutions. I feel how unconscious bias is embedded in me and am a witness to the actions of casual racism and its ‘death by a thousand cuts’ injuries, from faux pas, slights, slippages, slips of the tongues or faux tact. I am drawn into the cultural abyss, disoriented and shamed by a multiplicity of violence – language, body, psyche – but emerge with greater empathy and self-awareness.

You feel the words land.

In her teaching role, Rankine has had to counter students in this ‘post-race’ age when they claim they ‘don’t think about race’ or they ‘don’t see race’. When she gives them something like her accounts of microaggressions to read, some say ‘that’s a white person’ or ‘that’s a black person’, illustrating they clearly do see colour as they are race-ing these people in order to understand the dynamic. Rankine wanted this positioning to happen for her readers.51

Another rhetorical strategy at play is Rankine’s questioning style directed towards the second person – you – and it troubles you by inhibiting your ability to distance yourself from the experiences she recounts. ‘In this way, Citizen exposes and unsettles the harmful aesthetic and political distancing strategies of white liberal subjectivity’, observes Adams.52 She makes me realise that one habit of my white privilege is I see race as elsewhere, ‘in places and bodies where whites are not implicated’.53 This, in turn, ‘reproduces the racist binary opposition between them and us, and also removes blackness and whiteness from the historical scene’. Adams suggests that by calling to us through the ‘you’, Rankine alerts us to that which would normally go unseen, to ‘make visible the complicated history of the black/white dynamic’.54

The cultural abyss becomes more and more visible and visceral as Rankine stacks each experience. Rankine said she wanted that feeling of accumulation, for ‘the moments

51 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
to add up ... to accumulate in the reader’s body in a way that
they do accumulate in the body. And the idea that when one
reacts, one is not reacting to any one of those moments. You’re
reacting to an accumulation of those moments ... The feeling of
saturation. Of being full up.55

This is about not becoming invisible, invisible via
microaggressions that dissolve, decimate and nullify. The space
Rankine conjures is prickly, uncomfortable. You thought that
you were tolerant, but you do not see the pattern of bias as
you are blinded your own morality as one of the ‘good white
people’.56

Rankine has made me confront the fact that my tolerance
is racism too. I think it is the silence she leaves on the page.
Some of Rankine’s racial encounters are unfinished, left
hanging: her speaker’s questions unanswered, or unanswerable.
It speaks of the complicity in silence, of not saying something,
its blankness sometimes incriminating, telling, a mirror.

The tolerance that is apparent is Rankine’s. She shows
how she must ascribe an excuse or justification for someone’s
actions or words, explain them away as unintentional, not
really prejudice. It becomes enabling to the perpetrator, and
the victim is also tragically complicit. This is often referred to as
internalised racism or the colonised mind. ‘And you never called
her out on it (why not?) and yet, you don’t forget’.57

55 Rankine, cited in Sharma, ‘Claudia Rankine on Blackness as the Second
Person’.

56 It was brought to my attention that even using ‘tolerant’ is problematic as
it implies I am willing to put up with something unpleasant or unsavoury. Who
am I to choose what is socially acceptable? I can see that by choosing to use that
word, I have elevated myself in a hierarchical position of being the arbiter of what
is welcome in my little world.

57 Rankine, Citizen, 7.
What happens when you are accused of a microaggression? Do you say your accuser is overreacting, paranoid, too sensitive, too politically correct, petty? Are you calling me a racist? Through the rose-tinted white lens, these are innocent blunders, a one-off. And with a whisper of erasure, white people whisper in the black ear: ‘Come on, let it go. Move on’. 58

Citizen: An American Lyric calls out to me to consider what it means to be a good citizen. I can be a spectator, watching, onlooking, observing, but is there a turning point where I must switch away from the silence and complicity and turn towards seeing, commenting, attesting, testifying, verifying, revealing, corroborating. It is about bearing witness and calling out racism.

When Kate Kellaway asked Rankine why it is so hard to call out racism, she answered that ‘making other people uncomfortable is thought worse than racism’. 59 But don’t you need that uncomfortable edge where learning happens? Unless you are made to feel uncomfortable about making a racist comment, then you may not stop making them. White people cannot fully appreciate the effects of racism, but experiences like inhaling and sweating, wincing and cringing in Betty’s sweat are attempts towards understanding in a visceral way the bodily assault that racist words can inflict.

Without vigilance, racism can lodge in you, seep in and seep out of your pores. Being racist demeans your own life as well as the lives of people of colour.

58 Rankine, Citizen, 151.
59 Kellaway, ‘Claudia Rankine’.
We do not object to these aliens because of their colour. We object to them because they are repugnant to us from our moral and social stand-points ... I want to say, however that our intention in regard to these alien races is perfectly honourable, and that we have no racial hatred or antipathy towards them. We wish them all well; we desire to do them good, but we do not believe that by allowing them to come among us we shall do anything to elevate them. It is just like that which very often happens. Some pure-minded, noble woman marries some degenerate debauchee, with the hope of reclaiming him; but the almost inevitable result is that the man drags her down to his level. So, with these inferior races.

James Black Ronald, 11 September 1901
It was the 1970s. We were five kids, or perhaps six by then, all bundled into the station wagon, our bags packed with beach clothes. In my bag was my burnt orange terry towelling hat, the one I was wearing when a kangaroo scratched my face at a wildlife park.

It was the days before seat belts and we squished four across the middle bench seat with two in the boot in what we called the dickie seat. There probably would have been a baby car seat, too, so it was a tight squeeze. This was our annual migration to Queensland for the September school holidays. Sometimes we drove the thirty-six-hour trip, which was torture. We would fight and squabble with each other. After one fracas, my father kicked me out of the car. I remember him driving off. I chased the car, crying, running in my socks. As we all got bigger, some flew with mum, some got the short straw and drove with dad.

As we headed north through the city, we would pass bland towering blocks, ‘the Commission Flats’. To my barely teenage eyes they were looming concrete blocks of ‘the foreign’ and ‘the poor’, layers of homogeny of not-white, not-us. I was aware there were nicknames for these others: boongs, coons, wops, wogs, Eyetalians, chinks, even the n-word. I don’t know when I realised they were racial slurs.

How were these towers spectres of otherness to me? How did this come to be my impression? Was my perception of them cultured from occasional titbits (sideswipes) from family as we stared at the towers on the way to our holiday? The residents were foreign to ‘us’ in every way: nationality, creed, culture, affluence, worldview, opportunity. Undoubtedly, my unconscious prejudice, this white terror, was part of the lingering legacy of the White Australia policy that continued until 1973 (I was age eight) when it was legally terminated by the Whitlam Labor government. The government implemented a series of amendments to prevent the enforcement of racial aspects of the immigration law. Many of the residents of these towers were and are the people the White Australia policy hoped to keep out.

**THE WHITE AUSTRALIA POLICY**

There was never a specific White Australia policy as such. It was more an umbrella term contrived to encapsulate a series of policies designed to exclude undesirables. Who,
exactly, did the nation want to exclude? It began in the goldfields with tension and competition between the British and Chinese miners. The discovery of gold in 1851 saw all sorts of fortune-seeking migrants flooding in with axes and picks, which, inevitably transformed the colony economically, politically and demographically. In 1851, there were around 200,000 settlers in New South Wales and with the news of gold, 40,000 Chinese men and over 9,000 women immigrated to the goldfields over the next twenty years in pursuit of prosperity.\(^60\)

The goldfields in New South Wales and Victoria became tense sites of jackpots and resentments. White miners resented the successes of Chinese miners, provoking protests and riots. My ancestors from the Kemp side had the first brewery in Ballarat, Black Horse Brewery (1862), during the Gold Rush days. I wondered whether their brews were available to Chinese miners in the pubs around the town.

In 1854, Governor Hotham appointed a Royal Commission to deal with the grievances and problems. The outcome was to place restrictions on Chinese immigration and levy residency taxes on the Chinese already here, although other immigrants were exempt.

Pacific Islanders imported to work in the sugar plantations in Queensland were also viewed as a further ‘threat’ to Australia’s racial and cultural homogeneity at this time. These migrants were both cheap labour and ready to work in a tropical environment. As indentured labourers, the men were bound by a signed or forced contract (indenture) to work for an employer for a fixed time and often sold on to a third party. In what is known as ‘blackbirding’, unscrupulous farmers would recruit, kidnap and trick people from Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, the Loyalty Islands (part of New Caledonia), Papua New Guinea, Tuvalu, Kiribati and Fiji to labour on plantations.\(^61\) In the 1870s and 1880s trade unions began to protest foreign labour, arguing they were taking white jobs.


White discontent was simmering in the lead-up to Australian Federation with immigration as a dominant issue. Not long after Australia became a federation in 1901, parliament designed and debated policies to maintain the monoculture of the young nation as white and British. Naturalisation would be governed by the *Naturalisation Act* of 1903, under which indigenous people from Asia, Africa and the Pacific Islands (excepting New Zealand) were prohibited from becoming British subjects.

It is shocking to immerse yourself in these debates and documents around the hopes and dreams for this ‘new’ nation to discover discussions were mediated by a pervasive and incontrovertible racism. At its heart was the assertion of white genetic and cultural superiority. At its core were anxieties about racial intermingling, blood-mixing, contamination, and the dilution and degeneration of the white race. Its end game was white racial purity.\(^{62}\)

Central to the argument is that during the Federation period whiteness operated as a cultural ideal critical to the formation of an Australian national identity. Through propagating fears about the loss of the white nation-self, the Parliament sought to transform whiteness into a normative national category; Federation sought to indigenise whiteness.\(^{63}\)

The new Commonwealth Parliament was dominated by spokesmen for a white Australia and their voices were dominant in the first great debate involving the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* and the *Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901*. From today’s perspective, the debates contain unmistakable seeds of white supremacy and the overwhelming support of the Bills’ restrictive measures evidences attitudes which are nakedly racist.

The detailed accounts of these early debates lead me to the conclusion that the first parliament of Australia was riddled with racism, bigotry and white supremacy.

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63 Ibid.
The language of the ‘purity’ of the white race was exemplified in the speeches of Prime Minister Barton, who declared that democratic principles of equality did not extend to race:

I do not think either that the doctrine of the equality of man was really ever intended to include racial equality. There is no racial equality. There is that basic inequality. These races are, in comparison with white races — I think no one wants convincing of this fact — unequal and inferior. The doctrine of the equality of man was never intended to apply to the equality of the Englishman and the Chinaman. There is a deep-set difference, and we see no prospect and no promise of its ever being effaced. Nothing in this world can put these two races upon an equality [sic]. Nothing we can do by cultivation, by refinement, or by anything else will make some races equal to others.64

The leader of the Australian Labor Party, John Christian [ironic middle name] Watson, was worried about racial contamination and jobs, declaring:

The objection I have to the mixing of these coloured people with the white people of Australia ... lies in the main in the possibility and probability of racial contamination ... At the present time in Sydney, we have whole streets which are practically given up to the businesses conducted by Chinese, Syrians, and other coloured aliens, and one cannot go today into more than five towns of any importance in the country districts of New South Wales without finding two, three, or perhaps half-a-dozen coloured storekeepers apparently doing a thriving business.65

Once in a while during this decolonisation journey, I happen upon something to make me laugh out loud. It seems merchant and Independent Member for Capricornia, Alexander Paterson shared Watson’s concern about the economic threat posed by non-white labour and had his own story to tell.66

The first time the magnitude of this Asiatic pestilence really arrested my attention was under the following circumstances: I had been making a little unostentatious tour through a central section of Queensland, and when I arrived home I found, standing at the back gate of my house, a vegetable cart owned by a Chinaman and driven by a Chinaman.

He tells of ‘trouble in the domestic establishment that day’, which I take to mean the wife was in strife. He says to ‘the domestic’: ‘Why is this? I shall lose my election if this sort of thing goes on’. Such was his shame at buying from a Chinaman, Paterson complained he would ‘go down to the grave unwept, unhonoured, and unsung, instead of speaking in the halls of Parliament’. He was resolved to remedy the domestic’s transgression: ‘This must be altered.’

Thankfully, the domestic was no shrinking violet: ‘It is all very well for you to talk in that strain, but we live 6 miles from town, and how on earth we are to get vegetables from anyone excepting a Chinaman I cannot tell.’

Paterson was adamant that he would ‘eat no soup made from vegetables grown by Chinamen’ and the domestic must buy vegetables grown by Europeans. He got his way, of sorts and was ‘perfectly satisfied’ when the custom of his ‘establishment’ was transferred to a German. Later he discovered the German bought his vegetables from a Chinaman.

Paterson may have laughed at himself, but he quickly switched to cautionary mode, presenting his argument for a means to prevent the ‘pestilence’ and ensure ‘a snowflake Australia’:

While this question has its humorous side, it also has a very painful aspect. How is it that we ever allowed Chinamen to interfere so much with our trade as to put them in the position of being able to dictate to us? ... I look on the [dictation] test as a moral anaesthetic. We have to pull a tooth out of the wolf that would destroy us, and we want to do it painlessly if possible; and the educational test gives us an excellent means.\textsuperscript{67}

In a paper for the Australian Parliamentary Library, researcher Chad Cooper writes that the parliamentary debate over immigration legislation was not about whether it was morally wrong to restrict non-white immigration. Their concern was almost exclusively about whether they could implement the main tool of the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*, the onerous dictation test by which a hopeful immigrant was required to write out a passage of fifty words in any European language selected and dictated by a Customs officer. Those advocating a monoculture for Australia were confident this test would achieve the objective of prohibiting non-white immigration to Australia.\textsuperscript{68}

The dictation test was, in effect, the first building block in the White Australia policy. The Hon. Keith Mason QC has noted that after 1909, not a single migrant who took the dictation test passed it. He explains how far officials would go to exclude non-white immigrants: ‘a Japanese fisherman who entered Australia illegally in 1915 and was discovered fourteen years later was set a test in Greek, administered by a local Greek restaurateur’.\textsuperscript{69}

The unashamedly racist and absurd dictation test did the trick. Between 1902 and 1903, it was administered 805 times with forty-six people passing. Between 1904 and

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{68} Chad Cooper, ‘The Immigration Debate in Australia: From Federation to World War One’ (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2012), https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/2012-2013/ImmigrationDebate#_ftnref20. Curiously, the British Government had a stated policy of non-discrimination on racial grounds, yet this was clearly a racist initiative. They had already sent despatches to Queensland in 1901 and South Australia in 1897 objecting to legislation that prohibited migrants based on race. Prime Minister Edmund Barton cautioned that filtering immigrants because of the colour of their skin could affect Australia’s relations with Britain and make life difficult for the empire. Edmund Barton, ‘Second Reading Speech: Immigration Restriction Bill’, House of Representatives, *Debates*, 7 August 1901, p. 3503.

\textsuperscript{69} Keith Mason, *Bar News* (Summer, 2014): 64.
1909, hopefuls sat it 554 times with only six people successful. After 1909 no person passed the dictation test and people who failed were refused entry or deported.\textsuperscript{70} (Makes me think of being kicked out of the car in your socks and then being left behind in its dust.) Non-white people avoided coming to Australia and shipping companies did not issue tickets to those who were likely to fail the test.

Following the White Australia policy took me back to Federation, where I reluctantly discovered our deeply racist foundations. Early Australian legislation was designed to restrict non-British immigration, and many parliamentarians supported this desire to maintain ‘racial purity’ and ‘racial superiority’.

Up until the 1940s, the dictation test reigned and British migrants were preferred over all others until after the war, when the \textit{Migration Act} was revised in 1958. A simpler system of entry permits was introduced and the controversial dictation test was abolished.

In the immediate postwar period, the Immigration Minister Arthur Calwell pushed for greater immigration in declaring that the country must ‘populate or perish’ to mitigate the threat of Japanese invasion. As Calwell was a strong supporter of the White Australia policy, the invitation was extended to white Europeans, many of whom were part of the large swathe of postwar refugees targeted to work in Australia as low-paid, unskilled labourers.

While Calwell had significantly shifted Australia’s attitude to immigration, coining the moniker ‘New Australians’ to make non-British European migrants more palatable to the English-speaking white Australian public, the White Australia policy would only be abolished in 1966 when non-European migration began to increase. In 1973, the Whitlam Labor government took major steps in the gradual process to remove race as a factor in Australia’s immigration policies, inviting the beginnings of a multicultural Australia.

The White Australia policy was in place for seventy-two years after 1901, deeply ingraining the white superiority narrative and profoundly affecting the newly federated

Commonwealth. It both socially and culturally conditioned the population to believe in the superiority of the British white race. It was a cultural phenomenon that set the (skin) tone for the national identity; changes to policy with acts of parliament could never have been enough to dislodge this deeply cemented, transgenerationally transmitted, cultural belief.

I began this tale wondering about the genesis of my inherited xenophobia. It wasn’t until I moved out of my comfort zone that I even admitted to myself that I was othering and racist, albeit unwittingly. I was surprised and ashamed at this unquestioned superiority with which I was imbued, tinting my lenses. Having said that, my whole world was white. There was only ever white reflected back at me. Our television was white, my home town was middle-class white, my school was private, my netball team was vanilla. My holidays were white. I wonder if I ever shared the waves in Surfers Paradise in the 1970s with other kids whose ancestors had cared for that Country for millennia, the Yugambeh People.

My parents, grandparents, their parents and grandparents, all British and Irish ancestry, would have assumed white was right. I do not think they ever got the parliamentary ‘memo’ that everyone was deemed equal now when the White Australia policy was formally extinguished. Both major parties have endorsed multiculturalism for half a century and it slowly seeps into the national psyche as more than soundbites. The policy may be dead, but that white supremacy ideology that was part of our DNA, as those first debates have demonstrated, lingers in the support for the likes of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party and her quest for a monoculture.

Academics Dr James Jupp, one of Australia’s leading specialists on migration, and Associate Professor Gwenda
Tavan, a researcher of politics and history of immigration and multiculturalism, both argue that the White Australia ideology is still shaping Australian immigration policies in the twenty-first century, particularly in our approach to refugees. Although immigration and refugee policy are no longer officially discriminatory, its implementation appears so and has bipartisan support.

It is around 2 pm on a Wednesday. Thirty years on, I am up close to these concrete towers, standing on the edge of a community soccer pitch. At their base, the drab grey is the backdrop to human vibrancy and colour. My gaze takes in abundant community gardens that are tended by African grandmothers and Asian grandfathers keeping one eye on grandchildren playing among the pumpkins and beans. An early learning centre with games painted onto the playground throngs with families. Later, when school is out, older kids in various incarnations of uniforms file into and around the towers. The boys, often with a soccer ball at their feet, stop to watch what is happening on their soccer pitch.

I am on the sidelines of the weekly training session for the Big Issue’s Street Socceroos. There are asylum seekers, people struggling with addictions, ex-inmates, welfare workers, and people from support organisations arranged into two ragtag teams of laughter and fun for two hours a week.

This is a double first time for white, middle-class, middle-aged me – visiting housing commission flats and meeting a homeless person. I am quite out of my comfort zone, my privileged reality: nice cars, nice neighbourhoods, private schools, resort holidays, sitting up the front in aeroplanes, private health insurance, disposable income. These buffers allowed me to be sheltered from the existence of those less fortunate, perhaps reinforcing that conditioning of superiority.

The buffers also sheltered me from diversity, trapping me in whiteness. I cannot help but wonder what that seven-year-old girl in her socks on the side of the road might have been like if her world had not been so white.

RACED PLACES

Of my mind’s eye
I easily forget
how venom is always ahead
Dark and deadly and precious and ignored.
Until you wake up on country
you are reminded of how important it is
that some paths need to be crossed

Samuel Wagan Watson, 2014
Do you ever look at the landscape around you and wonder what it was like before the British invaded these shores with ships of convicts and soldiers?

Increasingly, as my knowledge of the life of the First Nations peoples deepens with appreciation and admiration, I look at places and wonder how they were 200 years ago, or 2,000 years ago. On a stormy day looking down the length of the Mornington Peninsula, I wonder whether their possum skin cloaks kept them cozy enough, how they kept out of the rain. I imagine how they managed their homelands with fire as a tool for regeneration and in the twilight. I imagine families cooking their meals on campfires in the distance as I gaze across the views from our home.

Our home on Victoria’s Mornington Peninsula is Boon wurrung Country. They are unceded sovereign lands, claimed by the Crown and government and sold off to settlers and enterprises. There is no treaty. Boon wurrung lands were just taken and fenced as the settlers spread out with their livestock. By saying they are unceded lands, it does not mean ‘they’ will come and take the land off us. I acknowledge the Boon wurrung as the traditional owners as a sign of respect and as a tribute to our shared history.

When we bought the farm, it was (unimaginatively) called Westridge, as it sits on a ridge looking west. I always planned to rename the place, but as my love for the country and its surrounds grew, I knew that it had to be grounded in the language of the First Nations. I wrote to the Victorian Aboriginal Centre for Languages (VACL) to ask a Boon wurrung Elder for some ideas for names and permission to use them. She thanked me for following protocol and asking permission to use these words.

I enquired as to the translation for ‘higher ground’ and her response was biik (ground) neerim (high, elevated), which is pronounced as ‘biik near-rim’, as their ‘ii’ sound is pronounced as ‘ee’. That didn’t feel nor sound right so I asked for some more suggestions.

After our exchanges I now know the visiting mobs of Eastern grey kangaroos who visit are called guyeem, which is pronounced ‘goo-yeem’. The rowdy sulphur-crested cockatoos are called ngayuk, said as ‘nha-yook’ and their cousins, the yellow-tailed black cockatoos, are known as yanggai, ‘yang-guy-ee’. The equally clamorous galah is darrum, ‘dar-room’. Our favourite was the Boon wurrung word for the coast banksia (Banksia integrifolia), of which we have plenty: warrak, spoken as ‘war-rack’ with the ‘rr’s rolling together. Sadly, my tongue will not roll my ‘r’s, but I loved the name and put it to the
family. My husband thought it sounds like Iraq (his traditional country), so it was a fit.

Aside from this small gesture of respect to the First Peoples, my motivation for a name for the farm grounded in language of the traditional owners was to start a conversation with people who may be curious to ask its origins. My thinking is that a little knowledge of the first names of places enriches connections and understandings that in turn open us up to histories before 1788.

From our bedroom window, a large granite hill rises in the distance. In 1802, those sailing on the HMAS *Lady Nelson* through the heads of a bay the Boon wurrung call *Nairm*, but renamed Port Phillip Bay, also saw this hill. The *Lady Nelson* was carrying the first white settlers into this region, among them one Lieutenant Murray, who declared that the hill was ‘Arthur’s Seat’, as it resembled the hill in his home town of Edinburgh.\(^2\) Two months later, his navigator, Matthew Flinders, climbed to the top for a better view of ‘their’ new port.

The hill already had a name. The Boon wurrung people knew this hill as *Wonga* on the high points where springs rise and *Wango* on the lower slopes. It was a place for ceremony, part of their history, their lore. Forty years on, one of the first settlers of the area, the McCrae family, were aware of this first name, but refused to use it, according to Georgiana’s journal:

> Because I had objected to our run being called ‘Wango’ (the native appellation of the survey), it has been decided to retain the name of Arthur’s Seat, originally given to the mountain when it was first seen from the deck of Flinders’ ship by Lieutenant Murray, forty years ago.\(^3\)

Georgiana’s husband, Andrew, their sons, and the boys’ tutor had been sent ahead from Melbourne to build dwellings in the bush, and she includes an account from her

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\(^2\) The Scottish hill is called Arthur’s Seat with an apostrophe. Arthurs Seat on the Mornington Peninsula has no apostrophe.

son Perry on the ‘amity and kindness’ of the Boon wurrung peoples who came to greet them.\textsuperscript{74}

The house isn’t finished; and we are stopping in a hut made of tea-tree sticks and grass outside [the native grass tree \textit{Xanthorrea}] piled on nearly a foot in thickness. We went up the hill and it is very high. A number of blacks were here this morning and they killed a kangaroo. I have a hind leg; and Willie and Sandy have all the other legs ... and they gave the tail to Georgie.\textsuperscript{75}

Georgiana and the rest of their family sailed across the bay with her books, furniture and soft furnishings in June 1844 to join the men and boys to settle into their new bush home. She had a strange fascination with the weather and wrote about it with gusto. We know their first winter on the Peninsula was challenging and she was ‘most unhappy’.\textsuperscript{76} Navigating ‘a white frost’, a drizzling ‘Australian Scots Mist’, thunder and rain, bitterly piercing winds and ‘a brilliant rainbow that spanned the spur of the mountain’ in huts with five young children was exhausting.\textsuperscript{77} As they made themselves at home, the local Boon wurrung clan would visit and Georgiana was always respectful:

‘Mister Mann’, ‘Horsfall’, and two other blackfellows, with their lubra, came to quamby [camp] for the night. After sunset the men went to look for kangaroo and saw five; but their dogs ‘no good’; and ours too supercilious to take their commands. The poor wretches begged hard for the loan of a tumbelgumbel (gun);

\textsuperscript{74} Lord Sydney’s instructions for Governor Arthur Phillip, 25 April 1787, were: ‘You are to endeavour by every possible means to open an Intercourse with the Natives and to conciliate their affections, enjoining all Our Subjects to live in amity and kindness with them. And if any of Our Subjects shall wantonly destroy them or give them any unnecessary Interruption in the exercise of their several occupations, It is our Will and Pleasure that you do cause such offenders to be brought to punishment according to the degree of the Offence.’

\textsuperscript{75} Georgiana McCrae, diary, 25 February 1845.

\textsuperscript{76} Georgiana McCrae, diary, 26 June 1844.

\textsuperscript{77} Georgiana McCrae, diary, 28 June 1844.
but I was afraid to lend them Mr McCrae’s though they had no meat for supper and I hadn’t pulgane for them!  

I am fascinated by Georgiana’s respect for the First Nations peoples she encounters. From her arrival in 1839 and her earlier days in Melbourne on the banks of the Yarra, to her life at the base of the granite hill on the other side of the bay, her interactions with the First Peoples were recounted with kindly humour. She shares food with them, allows her children to be taught bush skills, and ‘permits them to camp near their homes’. It struck me that I find the McCrae’s friendly invasion and benign dispossession marginally more bearable, but, by the 1860s, it is thought that of the estimated 300 Boon wurrung who lived on their Country when the *Lady Nelson* sailed through the heads, less than a dozen remained.

The Europeans who invaded Boon wurrung Country came with cattle and sheep, which destroyed the plant life the Boon wurring people had cultivated for food for millennia. One of the greatest losses to the people was a staple plant they called the *murnong*, the yam daisy, which features in a poignant scene from Kate Grenville’s novel *The Secret River* (2005) that captures the essence of the culture clash between the Europeans and First Nations peoples. The story charts the ordeals and triumphs of the quintessential Australian pioneer, William Thornhill, and his family.

It is September 1813 and Thornhill, an emancipated convict, has claimed 100 acres to tame and settle with his family on the Hawkesbury River. His wife, Sal, shows little enthusiasm, but Thornhill is ecstatic to set foot on his own patch of ground: ‘Now there was a place where a man had laid his mark over the face of the land. It was astonishing how little it took to own a piece of the earth.’

On their second day, Thornhill and his boys begin work on a patch of flat land by the river to plant corn, further claiming it as their own. The three notice that the soil seems to have been freshly turned over by someone else. Alarmed and resolved to keep

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78 It was a Port Phillip Association rule (1836) that ‘all parties protect aborigines; but never teach them the use of firearms; or allow them to possess firearms’. Georgiana McCrae, diary, p. 196.


safe his dream to make the land theirs, Thornhill tells the boys it must be the activity of moles, but one son questions him and wonders if the ‘blacks’ may have planted a crop. ‘Them poxy blacks don’t plant nothing’, scoffs Thornhill, and stomps around pulling up the yellow daisies in preparation for his corn. The traditional people tried to stop Thornhill pulling up their crop, but he could not see food in their shape.

This daisy, often mistaken for the common yellow dandelion, is the flower of a native tuber called the *murnong*. It can either be round like a radish or long and tapered like a small carrot, and is best roasted, though it can be eaten raw. The tubers are dormant in summer but after the autumn rains, a circle of leaves sprout up, and from these leaves the new tuber forms and the old tuber shrivels and becomes bitter.

James Dawson, pioneer settler in the Western District and a sympathetic observer of Aboriginal life wrote:

> Of roots and vegetables, they have plenty. The muurang (Murnong) [*Microseris lanceolata*] which somewhat resembles a small parsnip, with a flower like a buttercup, grows chiefly on the open [Western District] plains. It is much esteemed on account of its sweetness and is dug up by the women with the muurang pole. The roots are washed and put into a rush basket made on purposes and placed in the oven in the evening to be ready for the next morning’s breakfast ... sometimes the baskets form a pile three feet high.

The *murnong* was a vital staple of the First Peoples throughout southeastern Australia. It grew abundantly on lowlands and up to snowline in the eastern highlands and was the first plant to disappear when sheep and cattle were introduced. Plains were full of *murnong* for centuries upon centuries, says Bruce Pascoe, who has effectively unsettled the way we look at the land pre-contact with his book *Dark Emu*. He presents compelling and rigorous evidence from the diaries of early explorers to show that

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82 James Dawson, *Australian Aborigines: The Languages and Customs of Several Tribes of Aborigines in the Western District of Victoria* (Melbourne: George Robertson, 1881), 20.
systems of food production and land management were arrogantly understated and ignored in the contemporary tellings of First Nations life.

The key contention in Pascoe’s book is that the whole distinction between the farming colonist and the hunter-gatherer indigene is based on a radical, and frankly self-serving, misunderstanding of the way that the Indigenous peoples of Australia lived in their countries. Pascoe assembles a persuasive case that Indigenous Australians farmed their land, lived in villages, built houses, harvested cereals, built complex aquaculture systems — possibly the earliest stone structures in human history — and led the kind of sedentary agricultural lives that were meant only to have arrived with Europeans in 1788.  

I have found Pascoe to be a wonderful speaker and he transformed my mind’s eye when I play the ‘what was it like pre-contact’ game and he speaks of the Country in their cultural shape.

When Major Thomas Mitchell was in Gariwerd, the Grampians, looking west, the colour yellow stretched to the horizon: yam daisy, orchids, bulbine lily. It all grew through moss along with kangaroo grass. It was a complex system of agriculture crossing four or five language boundaries. All of those clans and tribes cooperated in its harvest and in its protection. It demonstrates a sophisticated social order, a massive system with cultural protocols to maintain the law and order of the crop. Pascoe says that Mitchell extolled the beauty of these planes, assuming that God had made them so that he could discover them, not once thinking how peculiar it was for the best soil in the country to have almost no trees. This was a managed field of harvest. George


Augustus Robinson saw women stretched across the same fields of horticulture in the process of harvesting the tubers. 86

As the first vehicles were brought into plains south of Echuca, settler Ian Kerr noted the cartwheels turned up bushels of tubers.

Once again, some of Australia’s best soils were almost bereft of trees. The plains having been horticulturally altered to provide permanent harvests of tubers. Unlike Mitchell’s self-indulgent congratulations, Kerr was aware who had produced this productivity and later recognised that it was his sheep that destroyed it. 87

By 1843, after being grazed by millions of sheep, the soil was so trampled and compacted that it no longer supported the *murnong*’s regrowth. The introduction of rabbits in 1859 added to the devastation wreaked by sheep, cattle, pigs, goats and horses. Looking down from the ridge where we live, I can plot where the first ‘runs’ were granted by colonial governments and fences were erected to stamp ownership and livestock began to roam within a man’s new boundaries. Across southeastern Australia, First Peoples’ source of meat, such as kangaroos, wallabies and emus, were driven from the lands as the graziers spread. Their health suffered as food resources were damaged and their immunity was unable to reckon with imported diseases. Families perished as smallpox, venereal diseases and other blights spread. Vulnerable, unwell and reeling from such rapid dispossession and destruction, some remaining Boon wurrung succumbed to the ruins of alcohol, supplied by settlers. 88


87 Ibid.

88 Boon wurrung bloodlines did not completely disappear. Whalers and sealers had stolen women and girls in previous years as slaves for sex and seal hunting and they and their progeny survived to carry on their ancestry and culture. This is not to infer that First Nations women did not have the agency to partner with sealers and whalers on their own volition: that is, it is questionable as to whether or not they could be considered to have been ‘enslaved’. Life with sealers gave them more freedom to move than life on the missions. For more on this, see Penelope Edmonds, ‘Collecting Looerryminer’s “Testimony”: Aboriginal Women, Sealers, and Quaker Humanitarian Anti-Slavery Thought and Action in the Bass Strait Islands’, *Australian Historical Studies* 45, no. 1 (2014): 13–33.
The McCraes played their part in the dissolution of Boon wurrung heritage. By conceding to rename Wonga and Wango, they were complicit in dissolving connections, songs, stories and ceremonies severing their ancestral twine. They rewrote the landscape for a new world that no longer carried First Nations histories and events. They clothed their Boon wurrung neighbours in English names: Eliza, Sally, George, Johnny, negating their identity, connections and kinship. Wonga and Wango were superseded by the world’s second Arthur’s Seat, while the area at its base would be named McCrae after the pioneering family.

If I were to frame the McCraes’ renaming of their run through the prism of critical race studies, Georgiana’s refusal to call their new home after ‘the native appellation’ would be referred to as ‘ontological expansiveness’. Race scholar Shannon Sullivan describes this as a white privilege habit, an often-unconscious display of white superiority. It is a relationship in which the self assumes that it can and should have total mastery over its environment. In practice, this means that white people tend to act and think as if we have access to all areas. All spaces – whether geographical, psychical, linguistic, economic, spiritual, bodily or otherwise – are, or should be, available for white people to move in and out of as they wish.

This should be leading me deftly onto a certain story I would like to share of Australian racial constructions and constrictions, but I am going to deviate first to explain how I got to thinking about naming places and place names.

I will begin with a question: Could you live on Jim Crow Road?

A friend of mine, a human rights lawyer, said simply ‘I could not’. I could hear my First Nations friend scream ‘NO!’ on social media. They know …

I asked my English husband who spent four years at university in Kansas and he said yes, nonplussed. I was surprised he did not know … others were distracted and put off by the look of the neighbourhood, its sterility, its whiteness. Readers outside the United States may gaze upon this deadpan image – still and airless, with an impossibly


90 Ibid. Reflecting frankly, I can see now how I was demonstrating ontological expansiveness when I originally messaged Richard Frankland asking to meet with him. I have always assumed access all areas.
blue sky – and see no reason why not.\footnote{91} What’s wrong with a tidy neighbourhood with the luxury of lawns, maybe someone else to mow it and perhaps a lawn jockey in the rockery?\footnote{92}

This image, a suburb called Flowery Branch just outside Atlanta, Georgia, came to my attention in Rankine’s book \textit{Citizen}.\footnote{93} The picture floats on the white page in between Rankine’s invisibility at school and an ‘all black people look the same’ moment that can ‘send adrenaline to the heart, dry out the tongue, and clog the lungs ... like lightning they strike you across the larynx. Cough’.\footnote{94}

I coughed at the road sign and all it symbolises.

The road crosses behind an Elementary school, right past the playground. One wonders if the kids there are still being taught what Jim Crow means, in Hall County, which adjoins Forsyth County, known for its infamous ‘sundown town’ that existed well until the ‘80s.\footnote{95}

\footnote{91} I am referring to a photograph by Michael David Murphy depicting a neighbourhood of white houses and lawns and a street sign announcing the address as ‘Jim Crow Road’.

\footnote{92} A lawn jockey is a racially caricatured lawn ornament. It is a black-faced boy with oversize lips. The early incarnations were dressed in slaves’ clothing (and called groomsmen), but at some time in the 1800s, these figures were joined and eventually superseded by the Jocko statues wearing the garb of horse riders. David Pilgrim says there is a consensus view in African American communities that black lawn jockeys are demeaning relics of a racist past. Whatever the early sentiments, to call an African American a lawn jockey today is to insult him or her, a racial slur somewhere between darky and n*****. Lawn jockeys as adornments in gardens are seen by African Americans as markers of ‘white space’, inferring to people of colour, ‘You are not welcome here’. When used by a black person against another black person, lawn jockey is synonymous with Uncle Tom, a derogatory term that has at least two distinct meanings. In the past it referred to the black servant, especially a cook, butler or waiter, who was perceived to be weak, ignorant, too religious, and humiliatingly deferential to white people. David Pilgrim, ‘Lawn Jockeys – July 2008’, Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, July 2008, https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/question/2008/july.htm.

\footnote{93} Rankine, \textit{Citizen}.

\footnote{94} Rankine, \textit{Citizen}, 7.

\footnote{95} Michael David Murphy, ‘Jim Crow Road – 2007’, Michael David Murphy (website), 2019 http://michaeldavidmurphy.com/albums/jim-crow-nd-2007/. A ‘sundown town’ was an all-white neighbourhood in the US that enforced segregation. The term came from signs posted that ‘colored people’ had to leave town by sundown. South Africa also had similar places during apartheid, as did Germany’s discrimination and persecution of the Jewish population. Australia also has its own version, which I explore over the next few pages.
From the 1880s to the 1960s many American states and cities enforced segregation through ‘Jim Crow’ laws (so called after a black-faced character in minstrel shows), imposing legal punishments on people for consorting with members of another race. The laws were grounded in the premise that whites are superior to non-whites in every way and that ‘interbreeding’ would create a mongrel race. Business owners and public institutions were ordered to keep their black and white clientele separated. It was acceptable to use violence to keep black people in check. This is what the civil rights movement fought to dismantle.

Rankine’s inclusion of the picture prompted me to think about what signs say beyond the printed words. This image implies a crossroad and denotes that there are lines that interconnect us, while screaming of all that divides us, dichotomous roads that make up a nation. Jim Crow must be a daily reminder to those who know of a deeply entrenched racist infrastructure. In Australia, we, too, have daily reminders of our own racist infrastructure and history. Many are unaware of the origins of racist place names.

Australia also has a monument to Jim Crow. In 2016 when the Darumbal people in the Rockhampton area were awarded Native Title, it gave them the impetus to lobby the Queensland State Government to change the name of both Mount Jim Crow and Mount Wheeler. The latter mountain was named after a police officer, Frederick Wheeler, who was involved in Aboriginal massacres in the 1860s and '70s. In 2018, the Department of Natural Resources confirmed Mount Jim Crow’s name was to be legally changed to Baga, while Mount Wheeler would become Gai-i. At the time, Elder Aunty Sally Vea Vea was pleased but sombre: “The original names had been that way for 60,000 years but in the last 150 years they were changed … They speak of atrocities and there’s a lot of hurt with those old names … Generation after generation has continued to have that hurt, deep within them, because of what took place there.”

It was important that the names of the two mountains were changed together, explains Aunty Veav Vea, as they are connected in Dreaming stories. She shares that Bargar and Gawula were star-crossed lovers that the rainbow serpent banned from

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being together because their bloodlines were too close to marry. When they refused, the rainbow serpent punished them by making them mountains just far enough apart that they could see each other but not touch. Their people knew the space was an important meeting place:

In between both mountains, there was a big corroboree ground, so this is where our people always met at Gai-i. It was a place where we had people come from our different clans to organise marriages, exchange weapons, and to just leave it to the name that it was. I think we’re moving in the right direction. Things are changing.  

Aunty Vea Vea and her fellow Darumbal Elders are now keen to galvanise other name changes: ‘I’ve never been happy with Black Gin Creek Road at Alton Downs, and I’d also like to see the Fitzroy River changed to Tunuba, which is its original name.’

Queensland has its fair share of racist place names. In January 2016, in the lead up to the increasingly contested day we call Australia Day, some anonymous wags in Brisbane doctored certain street names as a nod to the area’s dark past. Images of the modified signs began to appear on social media, causing quite a stir. Boundary Street in Brisbane’s East End began appearing as Boundless Street. It started a conversation across councils, the media and the traditional owners of the area.

In Brisbane’s early days and other communities across the country, Boundary streets and roads appeared on maps. The roads were boundaries to segregate the settler populations from the traditional owners. In Brisbane, this meant keeping the Jagera and Turrbal people out of town.

Elder Sam Watson explains that his people have always been ‘aware of the history and because of our traditions our grandparents and aunties and uncles told us the stories ... The signs go back to 1829, and through the 1940s they were exclusion zones to keep Aboriginal people separated from the European arrivals’.

At 4 pm from Monday to Saturday and all day on Sunday,

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97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
First Nations peoples were banned from coming into town. The Boundary streets were patrolled by troopers, cracking stock whips to enforce the segregation, recalls Sam Watson:

Mounted police would use bull whips to move blacks out of the area ... [they] would drive Aboriginal people to keep them away from the white exclusion zone ... As a youngster my uncles would take me walking around that area and up to Spring Hill, where the main road used to be, and then down to Petrie as that was the exclusion zone ... Aboriginal people would be treated quite brutally if they crossed that demarcation line, if they crossed it after the hours of darkness.\(^{100}\)

The Australia Day doctoring of the street names galvanised certain parts of the Brisbane community to agitate for a permanent name change. A Change.org petition was started, calling for these oppressive Boundary streets to be changed in consultation with the local First Nations people. One agitator for change deemed the road names

\(^{100}\) Ibid.
In the late 1850s, a series of letters were addressed to the editor and published in the Moreton Bay Courier (later to become the Courier Mail). The authors introduced themselves as ‘Delegates for All Blackfellows’ or ‘Delegates of the Breakfast Creek Blacks’ and their names were Dalinkua and Dalipie. Their published letters criticised the inhumanity of their ‘Anglo-Saxon Brothers’, ‘accusing them of the theft of many Aboriginal hunting and fishing grounds’. 1 In another letter, they ‘Condemn the introduction of Alcohol, Disease and the Degradation of their Language’, and in another they list ‘Aboriginal grievances against our White Brothers and Sisters’. 2

Over the years, people have questioned who wrote the letters, proposing that when so much of the white population at the time was illiterate, it was unlikely two First Nations men could write so perceptively and eloquently. It was suggested Quakers may have intervened on their behalf. 3 This is incorrect and their authorship is confirmed by both Dr Henry Reynolds and Professor Raymond Evans. 4 Dalinkua and Dalipie were trained by German Lutheran missionaries at The Zion Hill mission in the area now known as Nundah. Dalipie is said to have shown an aptitude for the literary arts and was able to speak and write in many languages, including English, Greek and Latin. (This is not unusual as most First Nations people could speak at least three to four languages prior to invasion.)

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1  ‘Aborigines to the Editor of the Moreton Bay Courier’, Moreton Bay Courier, 24 November 1858, p. 2.

2  ‘Aborigines to the Editor of the Moreton Bay Courier’, Moreton Bay Courier, 11 December 1858, p. 2; ‘Aborigines to the Editor of the Moreton Bay Courier’, Moreton Bay Courier, 29 December 1858, p. 2.


4  Ibid.

‘a colonial yoke ... the barbed wire in our city’s subconscious’.

Determined to rid the city of ‘the offensive Indigenous boundary grids that still shackle an appalling episode in Brisbane’s narrative’, the petition organisers advocated for the renaming of the Boundary street after the First Nations tribal leader Dalipie, who co-authored five long letters published in the Moreton Bay Courier in 1858 and 1859. 101

I was curious to discover who was behind the campaign to change the street names. Turns out it was a group of white individuals who decided the signs made everyone uncomfortable. Had they asked what the Elders of the traditional owners wanted? No, there had been no consultation. 102

Sam Watson is adamant

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102 Condon, ‘Street Names a Reminder of Our Racist Past’. 
that history should not be sanitised or concealed; it should be there for people to talk about. He prefers transparency: ‘That name [Boundary Street] is written into the blood of our people ... To remove that name would be washing away the blood and history of our people.’

Dr Erin Evans, president of the West End Community Association, is listening to the traditional owners: ‘One of the main things this issue has raised – and I think it’s a useful one – is that the local Indigenous community have said that they want to see the street name remain.’ She adds that there needs to be a greater awareness of the history of the street and the area and the name itself. On the suggestion that people already knew the history, Evans was dismissive: ‘That line about people knowing their history already is very tired, and it’s a very good way to duck under the fence of the problematic issues that our indigenous past and our white-indigenous relations really have been.’

Evans said the community organisation would like to see more plaques, more commemoration and recognition of the street’s history so the city can truly heal. And that healing can only come from people knowing and acknowledging their history: ‘The less progressive members of the community and anybody else who isn’t calling for this is wanting to bury the past and that is not a healthy way forward ... It’s the good old European whitewash, the “Move on, everything’s fine in the Sunshine State” comment.’ Sam Watson is similarly determined Brisbane’s history is remembered:

Mainstream Australia, unfortunately, has this tendency to just keep trying to move on from the more unsavoury aspects of their own history ... That might help everyone’s peace of mind and make them sleep a little better at night, but it doesn’t


105 Ibid.

106 Ibid.
change the fact that there are very bloody and very ugly segments of our joint history together that should not be ignored.¹⁰⁷

The name change advocates are demonstrating the ontological expansiveness I highlighted earlier. Sullivan deems it an unconscious habit of (boundless) white privilege that is manifested in white behaviours, attitudes and the conviction they have access to all spaces. The self assumes that it can and should have total mastery over its environment.¹⁰⁸ The name changers are determined to preserve their own comfort zone by implementing a new name that takes away the ugly racial construction and constriction of Boundary Road, insistent on rendering places comfy for their own habitation and peace of mind.

What is lacking in white ontological expansiveness is understanding the connection between race and space. As a privileged white person, I perceive space as racially neutral and colour-free. The way my whitely habits dominate these spaces is invisible to me and is therefore more effective. Sullivan contends that in this ‘neutral’ space, ‘the tunnel vision of white solipsism’ emerges, meaning I see ‘race as insignificant in matters of existence or experience’.¹⁰⁹

I wonder if those who named and live in Jim Crow Road in Flowery Branch failed to see that these are raced places, loaded with black history, oppression, daily spectres of white superiority. It seems those who agitate for Boundless Street in Brisbane were clearly aware of the dirty history and thought they could clean it up by painting over it, changing the name. What they failed to appreciate was how their own occupation of the space in the present was a form of silencing, particularly in trying to imagine a ‘boundless’, racially neutral space. Their white solipsism has limited their ability to treat others in a respectful way as their expansiveness shielded them from others’ interests and needs, and overwhelmed them with their own. The false neutrality of such raced

¹⁰⁸ Sullivan, Good White People, 20.
¹⁰⁹ Shannon Sullivan, Revealing Whiteness, 158.
spaces and places makes the inequalities of raced space invisible. The ‘neutrality’ makes the space complicit with racism.

Understanding my own ontological expansiveness as a habit of white privilege is changing the way I view and sense the spaces around me. As a middle-class white woman, the spaces around me are generally kind (albeit gendered and sexist but that is another conversation). I can seamlessly move from shops to offices to restaurants to theatres to university in taxis, trains and buses without incident. I am never suspiciously followed in supermarkets or shopping centres. People do not hold their bags tight as I approach. I can see I have been conditioned and socialised to accept these as the status quo, my right even. Never, ever, once did I think of the spaces around me as being raced.

Blithely, I was breathing neutral air, inhabiting ‘neutral’ spaces, sitting on ‘neutral’ seats on public transport. Melbourne is a vibrant multicultural city that most imagine as tolerant (there’s that word again; my benign white privilege hoping there), and we white folk tend to go about our daily lives enjoying the ‘colour’ of our ethnic communities, on our terms, thinking we are multicultural because we eat ‘their’ food (night noodle markets anyone?).

Part of addressing my white privilege is being aware that places and spaces are deeply raced. To combat racial oppression, white people need to be made aware of how racialised spaces and habits of lived spatiality affect the way we exist. This is in order to take responsibility and become accountable for the ways in which we live in a space as raced bodies.

Arthur’s Seat, its surrounds and, indeed, the continent of Australia, are raced places. With a little bit of knowledge and the spirit to reckon with my own white privilege, I now see this hill as Wonga on the high points where springs rise and Wango on the lower slopes. I do not know what the Boon wurrung called the area that is our family farm, but I know it remains unceded sovereign country.

Our family home, in the shadow of Wonga, is now known as Warrak Farm, a small nod of respect to the traditional owners and an invitation for conversations on raced spaces and places.
JIM CROW SIGNAGE

As this juncture, I thought it might be useful to give you a sampler of the Jim Crow laws that were hell bent on keeping black and white people apart. This racist discrimination was everywhere to be seen, especially in the signage in cities and towns. Segregation was legitimised and normalised by these signs. I found the signs so appalling that I made a collage of them, in the form of a found poem.

This is a replica of an actual sign.

‘The only good one is a dead one’ is from archival recordings of white residents of Moree, angry at First Nations people demanding access to the Moree Baths. This
incident was part of the 1965 Freedom Rides, led by Arrernte man Charles Perkins. The protest began at Sydney University, where twenty-nine students set out on a journey to raise awareness about the living standards, segregation and racism experienced by Aboriginal people in Australia.\textsuperscript{110}

I was telling someone the other day about my lovely new friend. I found myself telling them she is Chinese-Australian.

Why did I do that?

Where did that come from in me? What does that say about me?

From my culture, the dominant culture, she is an alien in her own land. This act is called a microaggression.

A psychiatrist called Dr Chester M. Pierce is the fellow who first put the term ‘racial microaggressions’ into the zeitgeist. In the 1970s he called them ‘subtle, stunning, often
automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are put downs’.\textsuperscript{111} Since then, psychologists have developed the concept and the resident expert now is Columbia University psychologist Dr Derald Wing Sue.

Microaggressions are a reflection and a manifestation of our worldviews on inclusion and exclusion, superiority and inferiority, normality and abnormality and desirability and undesirability. They are examples of an oppressive worldview that creates, fosters and enforces marginalisation. Microaggressions amplify feelings of alienation.

Dr Sue and his research team are on a mission to help us understand the type and range of these incidents and the impact they have. Their research explores microaggressions among specific groups, documenting how everyday insults, indignities and demeaning messages sent to people of colour by well-intentioned but unwitting white people impact on mental health and wellbeing. We are socialised to see people as stereotypes, which leads to racial profiling, then bias and prejudice both conscious and unconscious, at school or work or in social occasions.

Microaggressions are everyday experiences for First Nations peoples in Australia. A key study in Victoria in 2010–11 documented extremely high levels of racism experienced by Aboriginal Victorians. The report\textsuperscript{112} surveyed 755 Aboriginal Victorians about their experiences of racism in the previous 12 months:

- 97% experienced racism and more than 70% experienced eight or more such incidents
- 92% experienced racist names, teasing, jokes or comments stereotyping Aboriginal people
- 85% were ignored, treated with suspicion or treated rudely because of their race
- 84% were sworn at, verbally abused or subjected to offensive gestures because of their race

\textsuperscript{111} Chester M. Pierce, Jean V. Carew, Diane Pierce-Gonzalez and Deborah Willis, ‘An Experiment in Racism: TV Commercials, in \textit{Television and Education}, ed. Chester Pierce (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1978), 66.

\textsuperscript{112} Angela Ferdinand, Yin Paradies and Margaret Kelaher, \textit{Mental Health Impacts of Racial Discrimination in Victorian Aboriginal Communities. Experiences of Racism Survey: A Summary} (Carlton South: VicHealth, 2012).
• 81% were told they were less intelligent or inferior than people from other races
• 79% were left out or avoided because of their race
• 67% were spat at, hit or threatened because of their race
• 66% were told that they did not belong because of their race
• 54% had their property vandalised because of race.¹¹³

For each and every First Nations person, exposure to racism is associated with psychological distress, depression, poor quality of life and substance misuse, all of which contribute significantly to the overall ill-health experienced by First Nations people. Prolonged experience of stress makes people sick.

‘It’s a monumental task to get white people to realise that they are delivering microaggressions, because it’s scary to them’, explains Dr Sue. ‘It assails their self-image of being good, moral, decent human beings to realize that maybe at an unconscious level they have biased thoughts, attitudes and feelings that harm people of colour.’¹¹⁴

Sue and his team find that most interracial encounters are prone to microaggressions and they are detrimental to people of colour as they sap the psychic and spiritual energy of recipients by creating inequities.¹¹⁵ It’s like death by a thousand cuts. One cut may not hurt, but each additional cut amplifies


the damage.\textsuperscript{116} They identify three forms of racial microaggression: microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidations.\textsuperscript{117}

\textbf{Cowardly Racism}

The hallmark of a microassault is its intention to hurt. A microassault is a conscious and intentional, verbal or nonverbal, action or slur, that is an explicit racial derogation. It can be in the form of name-calling; using racial epithets; displaying motifs such as swastikas; and deliberate discrimination or avoidant behaviour. This is what you might imagine as old-fashioned racism, before you 'knew' better. The attacks are 'micro' as they tend to be enacted in a cowardly fashion in private or in a group, thereby giving the perpetrator anonymity. They tend to be people who keep their racism private and will allow it to show when they lose control or feel safe to engage, such as a mob watching a footy game ...

This is a true story, one that still shames me to tell as I know some of the aggressors and love the victim dearly.

It’s a winter’s Saturday in a leafy Melbourne suburb, a Firsts footy match between two ‘establishment’ teams: a university and a school. The sledging posse behind the goals is a mob of rabid machismo, greasy and whiffy from their earlier efforts in the Reserves. They bond and play under the flag of their alma mater, but are no longer bound by the stringent rules and boundaries of their school years.\textsuperscript{118} Today, they follow their own moral compass. The ‘banter’ from this posse is brutal and personal.

Their target is a ‘pussy! Nobody gives a fuck whatcha say on Facebook. Ya posts are shit’. His last posts were tributes to a black school friend murdered.

\textsuperscript{116} If you recall in the previous story, Claudia Rankine spoke of the painful effects of accumulating microaggressions, of being ‘full up’.

\textsuperscript{117} Sue et al., ‘Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life’, 274.

\textsuperscript{118} Alma Mater originates in the seventeenth century and means ‘someone or something providing nourishment’. In Latin, it literally means ‘generous mother’.
‘Ya tattoos are shit’. His tattoos are paintings of pride: allegiances to his mixed parentage, affirmations of his Aboriginality.

Their defence would be that ‘anything goes’ on the footy field. It’s just banter. It’s not personal. You’re too sensitive.

But the people setting and enforcing these rules are white, middle-class males, bastions of the dominant culture. When you are the one throwing stones, you can’t know how it feels when they hit.

Embedded in the man-child sweaty chorus is the water-boy, whose chin rests on the boundary fence. He’s eleven. He is fizzing amongst all this testosterone and mischief. He laughs along with their jibes and slurs, which are normalised as these are the ‘Old Boys’. What he doesn’t know is that the target of their vitriol or banter, depending on your viewpoint, is also an Old Boy. He went to school with all these men, played school footy alongside these men. Emboldened, infected, the water-boy joins the chorus with his own interjection

The three-letter word flies with the wind towards its intended target. Its effect is like that of an emotional cluster bomb.

Let’s follow the word and watch it land.

The word whistles past the ears of other young men on the oval, they know it is not meant for them. The target is caught completely unawares, as his whole focus is the red football bouncing just metres away. The word lands and fragments into two centuries of razor-sharp shrapnel.

The Old Boys howl and hoot with delight and in that moment, the bomb’s footprint is enlarged and the water-boy becomes collateral damage too. The target begins to shake.

Later in the changing rooms, shattered, humiliated, the tears flow. He thought he was welcome. His loyal teammates are collateral damage too, furious, impotent witnesses.

There are unexploded bomblets everywhere. This footprint has the potential to go on for generations.

I have tried to explain to friends who dismiss such behaviour as banter or sledging that these words sit differently on First Nations peoples’ shoulders. These cowardly microassaults inflict wounds, death by a thousand cuts. First Nations peoples carry cultural loads fed by intergenerational trauma, a violent history and cultural loss
(I discuss what was lost through colonisation in my story ‘Ancestral Twine’, in *Can Anyone Tell Me What Is Missing?*). They carry parts of themselves that white society is dismissive of, parts that white society asks them to deny and forget. Claudia Rankine’s words reveal the legacy of such treatment.

That time and that time and that time the outside blistered the inside of you, words outmanoeuvred years, had you in a chokehold, every part roughed up, the eyes dripping ... yes, and because the words hang in the air like pollen, the throat closes. You hack away.\(^{119}\)

First Nations peoples encounter microaggressions and discrimination multiple times a day, but it is impossible for you as a white person to genuinely appreciate what that feels like. The diverse team at Toronto’s Fusion Comedy, who produce writing, improv, stand-up and sketch material from a culturally diverse, LGBTQ+ perspective, offer a physical way of understanding the feeling of multiple microaggressions. They have produced a clever animation that imagines each microaggression as a mosquito bite.\(^{120}\) An attack of bites can drive you crazy with itching and irritation, which can seem an overreaction to another who was bitten only once. A further layer is that some mosquitoes carry threatening diseases that can make you sick and kill you.

**WHY BLACKFACE IS RACIST**

A microinsult is subtler than a microassault. It comprises verbal and nonverbal communications that deliver rudeness and insensitivity, demeaning a person’s racial heritage or identity, defining their ‘blackness’ for them, telling him how they should live that blackness.

An example is saying, ‘You’re not like them, you’re one of us, you’re one of the good Aboriginals’ to a First Nations person. Another example of a microinsult is blackface and

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\(^{119}\) Rankine, *Citizen*, 156.

I will share one of Australia’s more infamous blackface moments.

In 2009, Australia seemed delighted that the loony television show *Hey Hey It’s Saturday* (1971–1999) was being reprised for two reunion episodes in 2009. A favourite segment of the show was a bad talent show called Red Faces. In one of the episodes, the host Daryl Somers welcomed to the stage an act that had won the Red Faces segment twenty years previously: the Jackson Jive. From the wings boogied five middle aged men in blackface and afro wigs, polly-waffle purple shirts and white suits. As they jived, they were joined by another fellow who was clearly meant to be Michael Jackson, white-faced. They were truly awful in every sense and were quickly gonged off, to the audience’s disappointment. One of the three judges was Harry Connick Jnr and he was deeply offended, denouncing the act with a zero. He said if the skit appeared on television in the US, the show’s broadcast would have been terminated, labelling it the ‘Hey Hey No Show’.

Somers shrugged off the comment and went on to interview the six.

‘So, when were you last on the show?’ 1989.

‘Twenty years ago, these boys were doing the same routine on this show, have a look at this …’

They show footage from twenty years ago to much laughter and applause from the audience. The six were slimmer and smoother, all in blackface, including ‘Michael’.

‘Twenty years ago, you were all medical students! What are you doing now?’

‘Michael’ answers first: ‘Well, ironically, I am a plastic surgeon.’

Somers asks the others:

‘A radiologist.’

‘A urologist.’

‘An anaesthetist.’

‘A cardiologist.’

‘A psychiatrist.’

‘Isn’t that amazing!’ exclaims Somers. ‘A lot of colour on this show!’

After the break, Somers apologises to Harry Connick Jnr on air. ‘It didn’t occur to me till afterwards, I think we may have offended you with that act ... I know that to your countrymen, that’s an insult to have a blackface routine like that on the show, so I do apologise.’
Connick Jr responded, saying he would not have participated if he knew beforehand about the ‘Jackson Jive’ skit.

‘I know it was done humorously, but we’ve spent so much time trying to not make black people look like buffoons that when we see something like that we take it really to heart.’\(^{121}\) Not once did anyone involved in the show demonstrate any awareness that it is wrong on these shores too, revealing a complete lack of racial literacy.

**But I Don’t See Race or Colour**

If you say something to exclude, negate or nullify the thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of a person of colour, it is referred to as a microinvalidation. This is the modern face of racism, as a declaration of ‘I don’t see colour’ or ‘we are all the human race’ or ‘we are all one big melting pot now’.

This is a major form of microinvalidation because ‘it denies the racial and experiential reality of people of colour and provides an excuse to white people to claim that they are not prejudiced’.\(^{122}\)

Microinsults and microinvalidations are less obvious than the microassault, explains Sue, and this puts people of colour in a psychological bind as they feel insulted but are not sure why and the perpetrator does not acknowledge that anything has happened because they are not aware that

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121  ‘Hey Hey It’s Saturday Harry Connick Jr Offended over the Jackson Act’, YouTube, 10 October 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qEtjaZ8ZuNU.

122  Sue et al., ‘Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life’, 278.
they have been offensive. The racism is so normalised that it is not called out when it happens. It is an impossible situation because if the offended person confronts the perpetrator, they will just deny it.

I have experienced this when I have said someone’s comments are racist. I am sure you, as a white Australian, like to think of yourself as a good, moral, decent human being who believes in equality and democracy. You will resist any suggestion you might harbour biased racial attitudes or engage in behaviours that are discriminatory.

Dr Sue and his team have identified nine categories of microaggressions: attribution of foreignness, ascription of intelligence, claims to colour-blindness, assumptions about criminal status, denial of individual racism, defence of meritocracy, pathologisation of cultural values and communication styles, assignation of second-class status, and environmental invalidation.

WHERE ARE YOU REALLY FROM?

Does your taxi driver sigh deeply before he answers you? The other evening in an Uber, I had to stop myself from asking my usual question: Where are you from? I always felt I was asking with respectful, honest and curious intentions, but to a racial minority’s pair of ears it could just as likely be a microaggression. Sue and team call this category ‘the alien in one’s own land’, as questions such as ‘where were you born?’ and ‘where are you really from?’ contribute to making the person feel like a perpetual foreigner and that they are not welcome.

Have you ever done this?

She did not invite you to guess her ancestry but you keep asking, like it is a game. She says: I’m sorry, but who the fuck invited you to play ‘Guess the ethnicity from my features’ with me? Prizes don’t fall out of my arse for guessing where I’m ‘really’ from.

123 Ibid., 274.
Being surprised at how articulate a person of colour is or asking an Asian person to help with a maths problem or even volunteering that a person is ‘a credit to their race’ are microaggressions classified as ascription of intelligence. If you infer all Asian peoples are good at maths, you are assigning intelligence or skill to a person based on their race. Commenting on a person of colour being articulate and eloquent infers they are not as clever as whites and you are surprised to find someone of their race so intelligent.

A person in your law class says: ‘You don’t look Aboriginal’.
She asks: Are you sure you are part-Aboriginal, ‘cos you’re not like other Aboriginals.
She says: You must be an anomaly.
You tell her you are not an anomaly, that your mother and your sister are both alumni of this university.

A person in your law class says: ‘You don’t look Aboriginal’.
She asks: Are you sure you are part-Aboriginal, ‘cos you’re not like other Aboriginals.
She says: You must be an anomaly.
You tell her you are not an anomaly, that your mother and your sister are both alumni of this university.

‘I don’t see colour’, someone said to me, the other day, when talking about race.
Their intended message to me was their colour-blindness signifies them as one of the ‘good people’, as Ta-Nehisi Coates calls them, the liberal, educated, progressive-minded. The reverse is true, as being colour-blind denies the black experience. Dr Sue includes such attitudes in his taxonomy of microaggressions because by refusing to acknowledge race, the white person is denying a person of colour’s racial and ethnic experiences, denying them as a racial and cultural being. The message being sent here is that they must be assimilated and acculturated to the dominant (white) culture.

Coates suggests that in modern America (and my feeling is I can apply this to Australia), the feeling is that racism is ‘the property of the uniquely villainous and morally deformed, the ideology of trolls, gorgons and orcs’, even when we are being racist. “The idea that racism lives in the heart of particularly evil individuals, as opposed
to the heart of a democratic society, is reinforcing to anyone who might, from time to
time, find their tongue sprinting ahead of their discretion’.¹²⁴

Denial of the black experience can also be detected in the ‘liberal’ assertion that
our society is ‘a melting pot’ or ‘there is only one race, the human race’.

Another form of colour-blindness is asserting our society is ‘post-racial’. This infers
that we have moved beyond racial preference, prejudice and discrimination to a place
where everyone is treated equally and no individual is judged by the colour of their skin,
thereby assuming that every person has access to the same opportunities.

‘Post’ discourses infer that racism or colonialism is over, finished. They tend to
homogenise and generalise the past. It’s as if history is a ladder of advancement and
progression, each rung an improvement, and ‘post’ infers that racism has been left
behind. The ‘post-race’ discourse erases the histories that persist in the present day:
To say that there is no such thing as race or racism anymore is to decontextualise the
racialised histories – of invasion, assimilation and Stolen Generations – that have
shaped the lives and experiences of First Nations people living today. To say that we are
‘post-race’ is to isolate racism as exceptional or anomalous, when it is, on the contrary,
a historical fact that is at the core of the current social structure, which was established
through European settler colonialism.

The late Australian poet Bobbi Sykes wrote a poem ‘In Memory of the Post-
Colonial Fictions Conference, Perth, 1992’, and I share the first and last verses:

com/2013/03/07/opinion/coates-the-good-racist-people.html.
Post-colonial – fiction?
‘Post-colonial’ IS fiction.
Have I missed something?
... have they gone?

FICTION!!!

Post-colonial fiction /
The post-colonial fiction faction /
Post-colonial as fiction /
Fiction faction /
The fact is fiction /
A contradiction /
Post-colonial fiction
Another colonial fact.¹²⁵

**SPACE ON A TRAIN**

If there is only one seat left on a bus or train and it happens to be next to a black person, is there something in you that makes you hesitate or even prevents you from sitting there? Have you even held onto your possessions just that little bit tighter as there is a black person nearby? Have you avoided riding in a lift with a person of colour because of fear? Have you been suspicious of black people in shops (who are used to being followed around by security staff and having their bags checked more often than white people)? The messages communicated to non-white people in these instances are you are criminal or deviant due to your race; you are dangerous, thieving, poor; you do not belong.

We were talking about footballer Adam Goodes being booed off the Aussie Rules oval, physically and metaphorically. A friend was vehemently arguing Goodes brought the racial bullying on himself. I refer here to the furore that erupted in 2015, when First Nations AFL player Goodes celebrated a goal by performing a cultural war dance, in which he mimed throwing a boomerang (but everyone thought it was a spear) in the direction of the rival team’s cheer squad. Goodes had already endured booing and racist slurs from football supporters in previous years, but this incident crystallised the hostility among football fans and inflamed debate in the public sphere, ending with Goodes being ‘virtually booed into retirement’.126

One argument was that the booing and heckling was not about race because the crowd had not reacted in the same way to First Nations footballer Cyril Rioli, who was well liked. This argument held that it was Goodes’s style of play, and not the colour of his skin that so aroused the ire of football fans. My friend was unconvinced that these words land differently on First Nations bodies, which, I pointed out, are already cut and scarred from getting through each day and every incident of racialised microaggressions. My friend stood tall, indignant and asked, ‘Are you calling me a racist? I love Cyril!’

In his letter ‘Dear White America’ (2015),127 African-American Professor George Yancy confronts racism and whiteness, asking you not to deny or shelter yourself from your own racism.128 He implores you to forget your protests, as being neither a good white person nor a liberal white person will get you off the proverbial hook. You must let go of your ‘white innocence’ and hold his letter up 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


128 His premise in the letter is that if you are male you are sexist, no matter how well-intentioned you are; ergo, if you are white you are racist. I respond to Yancy’s letter in my story ‘Dear George’ (Skin in the Game).
so that you don’t feel the weight of responsibility for those who live under the yoke of whiteness, your whiteness.’

Yancy knows this is painful, but it is not about feeling bad for yourself, or wallowing in guilt. ‘That is too easy’. He asks you to ‘tarry, linger’ with the ways you perpetuate a white racist society, in the ways you are racist. He dares you to face a white racist history, enter a battle with your white self, open yourself up, speak to, admit to the racist poison that is inside of you. Yancy is ready for the microaggressions that are the usual denials of individual racism: ‘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.130 Don’t tell me that you don’t see colour.’

‘To utter these excuses is to hide again’, claims Yancy. Just because you have black friends, does not make you immune to racism. None of these protestations absolve you from the fact that you somewhere harbour racism and you benefit from it. You are part of the system. You perpetuate the system. These protestations are a sign that you are failing to listen: ‘Don’t change the conversation.’

You may have never used the N-word in your life, you may hate the KKK, 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.132

129 Yancy, ‘Dear White America’.

130 This refers to the idea of ‘reverse racism’, in which white people invoke prejudice against them. The claim of ‘reverse racism’ is itself one of white racism’s most egregious expressions. See ‘The n-word’ earlier in this chapbook.

131 Yancy, ‘Dear White America’.

132 Yancy, ‘Dear White America’.
Another way of denying one’s personal racism is to liken it to gender oppression with a statement such as: ‘As a woman, I know what you are going through as a racial minority.’ The message here is, I cannot be a racist as we are like each other.

**YOU JUST NEED TO WORK HARD**

The sixth category of microaggressions insists race does not play a role in life’s success as everyone can succeed in society if they work hard enough. Comments suggesting racial minorities enjoy special benefits because of their race or inferring they are lazy or incompetent and therefore need to work harder are microaggressions around the *myth of meritocracy* that insists life has a level playing field.

**DON’T BE SO SENSITIVE**

The seventh category privileges the values and communication styles of the dominant white culture. It tells people to leave their cultural baggage behind, to not be so sensitive. An example would be:

You smile apologetically and say: Your name is too ethnic for me to even pronounce.
She says to you: My name is not that complicated, you ignorant fuck.

**I DIDN’T SEE YOU**

The eighth category is when racial minorities are treated as second-class citizens. This is where white folk confuse people of colour as staff, or servants, or ignore them in stores and queues. Rankine speaks to this lack of visibility:

In line at the drugstore it’s finally your turn, and then it’s not as he walks in front of you and puts his things on the counter. The cashier says, Sir, she was next. When he turns to you he is truly surprised.
Oh my God, I didn’t see you.
You must be in a hurry, you offer. No, no, no, I really didn’t see you. 133

**SPACE IS NEUTRAL**

The final category of macroaggressions encompasses environmental microaggressions that race places and spaces. Earlier in this chapbook, I discussed the false racial neutrality of our spaces and places, allowing us to not see racial inequalities and insults. The example in the meander ‘Raced Places’ introduced you to Brisbane’s Boundary Street as an example of environmental microaggressions, as are the spaces and places named after William McMillian, a perpetrator of massacres of First Nations people in Gippsland.

Another way of race-ing place is to deny its history, to insist that a place is *terra nullius* (Latin for ‘nobody’s land’). The implausibility of insisting on a short history over peoples who have been here for millennia is beautifully evoked by the award-winning Wiradjuri writer, Jeanine Leane.

At her school in Gundagai in New South Wales, a town with the ‘longest wooden bridge in the world’, Leane recalls the nuns teaching her their short Australian history in her poem ‘Bridge Over the River Memory’. 134

The Irish nuns told me this on a good
day under the gothic arches in the convent
on the hill where I learnt about Australian history.
'This continent, Australia, is a young country,'
they told us. 'The history of this place is very
short – shortest in the world!'
They’d seen the world – the nuns.
Maps were pinned on the wall to show

133 Rankine, Citizen, 77.
how far they'd travelled to spread the word.
I'd only seen my Country.
The longest bridge and the shortest history –
that's what I learnt.

Young Jeanine had another teacher whose memory was longer than the nuns':

My Grandmother said this place is old.
She said my teachers don't know the stories. I listened.
On a bad day you could be beaten
for asking the wrong questions about
the short history and the long bridge.
At school I learnt to hold my tongue.

And when Leane returns to Gundagai as an adult:

On the other side I look back across
the flood plains. The old stone convent on
the hill is empty.
I come back after seeing the world.
I hear my Grandmother again.
The bridge is short now.
But this history of place is still
deep and long.

TO BE SILENT IS TO BE COMPLICIT

I would like to conclude this meander through casual racism and microaggressions
with some thoughts on the complicity of silence and my feeling that to be complacent is
complicit. The insidious subtlety of microaggressions often means they wound without
being called out. The more this happens the more this racism is seen as casual, thereby
normalised. If it is normal behaviour, then those who do call it out are accused of being
too sensitive, or too politically correct.
In ‘Bridge Over the River Memory’, Leane reflects that her younger self ‘learnt how to hold my tongue’ and not challenge the dominant culture, revealing the colonised mind or internalised racism in action. One of the symptoms of internalised racism is to consider what is palatable to white people. In *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Rankine deftly switches pronouns and pivots perspectives, disorienting the reader by drawing us into a sense of participation that foregrounds the black body and the black lived experience.

You are part of those times when she has held her tongue.
You are also part of the time when you have borne witness to racism and held your tongue, not spoken out, not stood by a friend, not defended them.
You say nothing.
Your silence says you are not them.
But we are them. Just as The Songman predicted, I am finding my humanity among the dehumanised. My speaking up says I am them.
In that unique style of Australian racism, she called them human lamingtons.

It was a racial clanger dropped during the television coverage for the 2018 Commonwealth Games beach volleyball on Queensland’s Gold Coast.

The commentator, the beach volleyball gold medal-winner from the Sydney 2000 Olympics, thought the two Caribbean athletes from St Kitts and Nevis resembled human lamingtons as they glistened with sweat and sand. Social media went ballistic – ‘GET THAT WOMAN OFF THE AIR’ was one tweet – and she apologised unreservedly.\(^{135}\)

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\(^{135}\) The same commercial channel slipped up a few months earlier when one of the ski commentators at the 2018 Winter Olympics said it was difficult to tell Chinese aerial skiers apart because ‘they all look the same’.
It made me think about the use of food as a racist slur. I have heard black people call other black people ‘coconuts’ to insult them, black on the outside, white on the inside, inferring they are assimilated and acting white. ABC Television’s *Black Comedy*\(^\text{136}\) has an amusing set of sketches featuring Blakforce, a ‘secret police’ who hunt out coconuts: that is, First Nations people who listen to Delta Goodrem and eat quinoa. Another moniker for such behaviour is Bounty Bar, according to Wikipedia’s comprehensive list of ethnic slurs. The ‘Asian’ version of this is ‘banana’.

A few years ago, I was lucky enough to be in a small poetry workshop with the award-winning Ellen van Neerven, a writer of Mununjali, Yugambeh and Dutch heritage. She set us the task of writing a poem about a lamington.

I’m sure that Ellen was not thinking of racist slurs when she set the task, but I found myself toying with the idea of using its recipe as a metaphor for racism. As I began to research the lamington, I came across many fascinating and humorous anecdotes which beckoned a collage. In a way, it is representative of my practice, which I am exploring through this collection – poetic layers woven together to create new ways of knowing and thinking.

In the end, I came up with this found poem:

**A TALE ABOUT A LAMINGTON**

According to Hansard 1998, Australian Constitutional Convention ‘Queenslanders for a Republic’:

‘... what have the governors of the states, the aristocratic toffs to rule over the working class, ever really achieved?

... one single, solitary, positive achievement

the single most important issue

of any governor since the First Fleet arrived in 1788’.

\(^{136}\) *Black Comedy*, television program (Ultimo: ABC, 2014–present).
The only thing which
Charles Wallace Alexander Napier Cochrane Baillie
Lord of Lamington
will ever be remembered for ...
(instead of the horrifying faux pas
of shooting a sleeping koala
while on a trip sponsored by conservationists).

Forever, his legacy
a humble emblematic culinary icon
world famous, world renowned taste sensation.
Created by accident,
a maid-servant’s error,
proclaimed a magnificent success by all!

In 1901, the Queensland Governor’s favourite sponge,
dropped into melted chocolate,
dipped in coconut to avoid messy fingers.
Lord Lamington was fine with the taste
but disliked their fame
associated with baked goods forever more:
‘... those bloody poofy woolly biscuits’.
The koala’s ‘dying cries were terrible ...
They haunted me for years’.

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