

ACRAWSA – where did we come from?

As founding ACRAWSA member Fiona Nicoll remarks, *"Histories are so key to identity and ACRAWSA has become an important space in Australia for debate and critique so it's good to reflect on how it started."*

If, like me, you are relatively new to the ACRAWSA network you may not know about its beginnings. The following is based on information provided from founding members Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Fiona Nicoll.

The beginnings

The organisation of ACRAWSA came out of a symposium in 2002 that was convened by Dr Aileen Moreton-Robinson with funding secured from ATSIIC. With the title, ***Critical Contexts and Crucial Conversations: Whiteness and Race*** the symposium was held from 3-5 April 2002 at the Calypso Plaza Suites, 87-105 Griffith Street, Coolangatta on the Gold Coast in Queensland. The purpose of the symposium was *to explore the connections between whiteness and race in intellectual and cultural contexts*. The symposium brief continued,

"Is whiteness a useful concept? Can it ask new questions of the past and present? How does Australian culture create such a wide range of different people who understand themselves as white? Scholars of race in Australia have acknowledged that racial categories are socially constructed and contextually defined. Their work has challenged popular acceptance of biological and naturalistic understandings of race. However, queries about the meanings of whiteness in this racialised intellectual landscape have not been prevalent. The aim of this symposium is to begin a conversation about the relationship between whiteness and race infused by class, gender, sexuality and culture to enable a dialogue to progress. The symposium will provide an opportunity for scholars from different disciplines interested in this relationship to engage with each others work and explore new meanings for the reconstruction of race in the Australian context."

There had been a couple of symposiums held at Flinders University prior to this and there was an rising awareness of whiteness amongst some academics but it was the initiative of Dr Moreton-Robinson to put the need for an association to the group at the Gold Coast symposium that led to the establishing of ACRAWSA.

Professor Moreton- Robinson recalls that her vision in suggesting such a group was *“to bring together scholars who shared an interest in the study of whiteness and race in order to develop an association whereby our work could be showcased and presented as there was and remains no formal race and whiteness field of study within Australian Universities.”*

What came out of the symposium

At the Gold Coast symposium a group of people were elected to form the Interim Board. They were *Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Fiona Nicoll, Jane Haggis, Susanne Schech, Ben Wadham, Tracey Bunda and Ingrid Tufvesson*. It was this group of founding members who established the beginnings of ACRAWSA. The founding President was Aileen Moreton-Robinson and the founding Vice-President was Fiona Nicoll.

The idea from the symposium was to establish a website and an ejournal in order to publish work that was being done by established and early career researchers. As you now know, both the [website](#) and [ejournal](#) are well established. After the symposium Dr Moreton-Robinson secured funding for establishing the ACRAWSA website from the Department of Education and training in Queensland under their Reconciliation Initiatives Fund.

The next symposium, after the 2002 gathering on the Gold Coast, was at Flinders University in 2004. Following this, the first major conference was held back in Brisbane in 2005.

The First Major conference – 2005

Titled ***Whiteness and the Horizons of Race***, the conference was held from December 7 to December 9, 2005 at Rydges Hotel, Southbank, Brisbane.

The [programme](#) was full and brought together critical thinkers on whiteness from across disciplines and states of Australia. Some familiar names appear on the programme such as *Tracey Bunda, Fiona Nicoll,*

Jane Haggis, Damien Riggs, Barbara Baird, Holly Randell-Moon and Peter Gale. Titles of the parallel sessions reflected the breadth and multi-disciplinarity of whiteness and the conference theme and could still be themes at a critical whiteness conference in 2013. They included

- *A Possessive Investment in White Terror*
- *National Genealogies of Whiteness*
- *Whiteness and Race in Policy and Practice*
- *Queering borders of Whiteness and Race*
- *The Racialised Ethics of Legal Responsibility*
- *The Hegemony of Whiteness*

This conference did not only attract people from universities all over Australia. Presenters and speakers travelled from overseas and the University of Barcelona, Doshisha University, University of Ibadan. The opening keynote was provided by Professor David Roediger, University of Illinois.

First edition of the ejournal

2005 also saw the publishing of the first *Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies ejournal* with Fiona Nicoll editing that edition. The journal boasted an impressive list of editorial advisors. From Australia there was *Margaret Allen, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Jonathan Stratton, Barbara Baird, Jane Haggis, Marilyn Lake, Suvendrini Perera, Joseph Pugliese, Susanne Schech, Irene Watson, Jane Carey, Bronwyn Fredericks, Ian Goodwin-Smith, Toulia Nicolacopoulos, Fiona Nicoll, Goldie Osuri, Katrina Schlunke and George Vassilacopoulos.* International advisors were *Sara Ahmed, David Theo Goldberg, David Roediger, Karen Brodtkin, Cheryl Harris and Matt Wray.*

First contributors were *Alastair Bonnet, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Suvendrini Perera, Jon Stratton, Sara Ahmed and Claire Bradford* with book reviews from *Anna Szorenyi, Marian Redmond, Damien Riggs and Maryrose Casey.*

Holly Randell-Moon has remained as journal editor with Elaine Kelly as reviews editor. Many of the original advisory panel members remain. The journal has been published regularly since 2005 and in 2011 was renamed *Critical Race and Whiteness Studies.*

Some suggested readings from early critical whiteness in Australia

Unpacking the racial politics of native title was central for ACRAWSA's origins. Key to this was the following publication

Moreton-Robinson, A 2004, 'The Possessive Logic of Patriarchal White Sovereignty: the High Court and the Yorta Yorta Decision, borderlands ejournal, Vol3. No 2 np
http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol3no2_2004/moreton_possessive.htm

Fiona Nicoll refers us to the following as capturing her thinking about whiteness in the days preceding the formation of ACRAWSA. It was written after she had first met Aileen Moreton-Robinson.

Nicoll, F 2000 'Indigenous Sovereignty and the Violence of Perspective: A White Woman's Coming Out Story', Australian Feminist Studies, Vol 15. Issue 33. pp. 369-385
(This edition of Australian Feminist Studies had a them of whiteness. It is available electronically from [Taylor & Francis Online](#)).

Acknowledgements

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And a huge thanks to Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Dr Fiona Nicoll for their generosity in recalling those early days.

Have some stories to add?

If you were a founding member of ACRAWSA and have something to add to these recollections please forward your thoughts and memories of the early days to Rose at rosecarnes@bigpond.com