

BOOK REVIEW

LARA PALOMBO

Petrilli, Susan (2007). White Matters: Il Bianco in Questione, Roma: Meltemi Editore.

The bi-lingual collection of essays from "White Matters" or "Il Bianco in Questione" places whiteness "at the centre of the question: do white matters matter?" Through various modalities of analysis this centering calls into question the privileged and/or dominant position of whiteness. Susan Petrilli introduces 'whiteness' as a "rational, ideological, philosophical, historical, cultural, political, juridical construction" that poses ethical concerns. Critical Whiteness Studies is introduced here as a wide range of approaches to whiteness and "its characteristics, privileges, historical processes that have sustained and favoured its development, its metamorphoses, its crises, its relations with black and non-white identities and the different gradations of black and white". As an active member of the Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association (ACRAWSA) and a feminist diasporic subject located within the historical complexities of the North and South divide of Italy and its ramification in the ongoing racialised heteropatriarchal hierarchies of Australia, this bi-lingual project is an important start and one that I have been waiting for.

This volume has resulted in the production of a collection of essays from a broad range of authors, 29 to be exact who are from various (inter) disciplinary, geographical and cultural locations. Some of these authors are already connected by the field of enquiry of "Whiteness Studies" or "Critical Whiteness Studies" that has

developed over the last twenty years especially in the US, UK and Australia that within its variants focuses on 'whiteness' as an object of inquiry. Yet, a number of papers from Italy are also involved in this bi-lingual initiative.

The first of the six sections in the book is dedicated to theoretical and ideological questions. This section includes articles on the conceptual limitations of whiteness, reconceptualisations of race matter, relations between patriarchy, capitalism and racism, the "fuore genere" or outside gender, typification, species, and roles. This includes the article by Wangui Wa Goro who poses the question "Why Whiteness again and why not?" and problematizes 'whiteness' as a single gaze locus of analysis. This article rejects whiteness as a conceptual model as it is perceived unable to respond to the needs of translation theories and practices or to consider multiple positionings and simultaneous responses. This author proposes instead the use of "Ethical Hectorosexism", as mode of theorising "power relations in inequality in/and their varied intersections".(p.53) I am not too clear here however, how Goro sees "Critical and Whiteness Studies" reproducing various forms of 'supremacy' or even threatening the call for "equality". And although I am in agreement with the author that a single locus gaze is a problematic issue, including an ethical one, to me critical whiteness as a tool of analysis dismantles the racialised 'hegemonic' naturalisation and privileging of (supreme) locations of 'white' or black' and their positioning within a binary framework that this article rejects.

The article by Arun Saldanha "Phenotype: Matters of Race" is also an important paper. In this article, the author seeks to defend materialist ontology of race. The author indeed wants to re-define the materiality of 'race' and to seriously consider "its biological dimensions". So race should not be eliminated, because it potentially shows the openness of the body. It should instead be harnessed through a cosmopolitan ethics.

The author is critical of linguistic, ideological, discursive theories of race that treat it as a cultural construct and do not consider the physical body. The recognition that phenomenology, corporeal feminism, anthropological approaches, biological and even Deluzian models have been linked to racialised practices, is transformed here into a desire not for reproducing racial oppression but producing a 'corporeal race'. So 'race' or phenotype of race, although it is recognised as culturally embodied through violent racialised regimes and practices, is not rejected but re-imagined as a corporeal heterogeneous presence ready for these forms of 'knowledge' to empirically appreciate or liberate. These theoretical models and conceptual tools or historical technologies of power are also re-imagined as something that can be distanced or partly distanced (if not entirely then through spatio-temporal elements) from the 'ugly' and 'violent' physical/corporeal embodiments of race. But to me this becomes a rational and disembodied desire for race that is more concerned with actualising the aims of anthropologists, feminists, biologists, philosophers etc...than actually engaging with the dismantling of race. To me more effort needs to be placed on undoing 'race' and not on 're-imagining race'. Who is deciding here that 'race' is useful and should be

saved? My question is how is whiteness operating here through forms of knowledge that claims to want 'race' and how do we know its potentialities in light of all the evidence of its violent effects?

The second section of the book "The Style of Dominion" critiques discussions of national borders to introduce "transnational perspectives", postnational post-colonies and discussions of European colonisation. In this section is Arjun Appadurai's republished essay on the need to extend the discourses of the post-colony to include analysis of the US, that is, "into the heart of whiteness". This is where current formations of non-territorial, transnational and post-national forms of allegiances are incubated. In this same section, Melanie E. L. Bush also sets up a discussion on the intersection between nationalism and race in the US for people of European descent.

For me, this article follows some of the points also introduced in Susan Petrilli's discussion of Australian migrants, which although it also includes non-European subjects, still argues that today these are being recognised "as white" for political, social and economic and cultural reasons. From my location within an Australian context, I too am concerned with an historical "investment" in whiteness and the social/political benefits associated with it, especially in relation to participating in the dispossession of Indigenous land and in the ongoing denial of Indigenous Sovereignty. But having worked on the historical positioning of women of Italian origins and their internment during World War 2, I also find it problematic to claim that European migrants have now become "white". This supposition not only denies the historical conditions or relations of power that enforced initial and continuing investments in

hegemonic whiteness but also the un-ruling relations that affect European subjects and that occur in a white (anglocentric) diasporic post-colonial society like Australia. Being granted the status of 'white' to me does not provide stability but rather the "recognition" that this can always be taken away by hegemonic 'whiteness'.

The Third Section "Persistences and Diffusions" includes work on In-between and Imprecise Cultures in Latina America, Beauty and Skin Colour, the Stockholm Syndrome in African Americans, and Post-Apartheid South Africa. This includes the work of Maria Solimini on post-apartheid South Africa that argues that the power of a white minority (i.e. Afrikaaner and English) that was dominant during the apartheid period is reconstituted through relations of global capitalism. The development of South African capitalism intersects with the development of a form of western capitalism that produces a "global apartheid" that concentrates on the proletarianisation and pauperization of South African black population. This creates a contradiction between a post-Apartheid South African state committed to the welfare of its citizens and the diffusion of poverty, malnutrition and diseases like AIDS.

The fourth section dedicated to "Writing, Figuration, Performance" presents critical work on Indigenous theatre performance, on the British musician Stephen Patrick Morrissey, Peter Gabriel, White Colour in Art and Writing and more. It includes the work of David Buchbinder examining the performative role of 'racial passing'. This article moves away from a focus on skin colour and provides ways to rethink what the author calls Whiteness Central as performative rather than a natural essence.

The section "White Australia and Fear of the Other" includes critical studies of indigenous and white relations, the Law and colonial ruling, young Australians and whiteness, moral panic and media responses, White Australia and its paranoias, refugees and national responses, white terror and white ideology. It is opened with a work by Aileen Moreton Robinson who meticulously critiques the "epistemic violence" that produces or invents the 'racialised other' within the distinctive "socio discursive regimes" of modern legal and academic institutions. These institutions "possessively" categorise or produce members of the Stolen Generation and Indigenous histories as unreliable sources of the 'truth' and assert their own neutrality and objectivity. Whiteness in this article is then summoned to be denaturalised from its dominancy or supremacy. It is treated as an epistemological *a priori* within knowledge production that becomes privileged contextually, or within "the borderlands where indigenous and white relations prevail. The book ends with a final section on paradigms and exclusions that engages with metaphors of whiteness, racial passing, Indigenous conceptions of whiteness, binary divisions and language.

The selection of these broad ranging papers placed me on a continual critical mode that questioned my own critical knowledge and understanding of this inter-disciplinary field. But it also brought forward my own criticism of the effects of such an open anthology. This is a well established field of inquiry and the volume seems to limit its own scope by the decision to publish such a wide range of essays, including some that clearly claimed to understand whiteness but did not engage with 'whiteness'. Nor did I see any attempts at linking Italian writing with its historical but also

ongoing legacies of whiteness through local, national and transnational intersecting relations. The book ends with a call for linking whiteness to rigorous processes of letting go all 'distortions' or forms of identification so to be outside all genders, types, species and roles. But how can one let go 'whiteness' if its power has not been acknowledged yet?

Author Note

Lara Palombo is affiliated with Macquarie University, and is a Ph D Candidate.

Endnotes

¹ See Goro discussion of the mythical figure "Hector", p.53