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Criminal being as the compass of racist knowings: Reflections on a time for minimalist thinking

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We are grateful to the journal editors for this opportunity to reflect on the question posed against the background of an analysis that we read as an act in solidarity, re-energising much-needed collective spaces of the kind we (TN, GV) first encountered at the ACRAWSA inaugural meeting. Pursuing opportunities for disrupting the racial hierarchies and norms within an increasingly corporatised academy poses particular challenges for those of us located in philosophy departments. In our view the present moment calls for a minimalist thinking, one that understands decolonising as the work of deactivating the criminal being that underpins racist knowledge regimes.

On the global scale resistance to corporatisation of higher education has been linked to the multidimensional work of decolonising westernised universities. Irrespective of their different locations, such institutions are often “local instantiations of a dominant academic model based on a Eurocentric epistemic canon” (Mbembe, 2016, p. 32). In Australia they may also be inhabited by intellectual workers operating within a “structural division of intellectual labour between periphery and metropole,” which prioritises the latter’s knowledge production at the expense of the former rendered as mere data source (Connell, 2018, p. 400). Critique of this Eurocentrism and global North-South division are indispensable, and while an “anti-Eurocentric impulse” may even be found in the work of European (Europe-located) philosophers,¹ increased corporatisation of Australian universities and, indeed, “zombification” of their workforce (Randell-Moon et al., 2013), have arguably entrenched conceptualisations of the discipline of philosophy as a “monologue coming from the European West, the white West” (Mills, 2015, p. 5). In these spaces we “marginal Europeans,” in Walter Mignolo’s (2000) sense of the geographically distant bearers of European imperial languages, memories and practices, are deeply and problematically implicated.

Observing the “unreconstructed nature of the discipline” of philosophy as practiced by both the dominant Anglo-Analytic and the Anglophone Continental traditions, Charles

¹ This is not to say that these philosophers succeed in disrupting the racial hierarchies and frames they have relatively recently begun to acknowledge. As Dafydd Huw Rees (2017) demonstrates, J. Habermas’ ‘post-secular project’ is a case in point.

Mills identifies the “philosophy color-line” operating in mainstream texts: the standard political philosophy anthologies continue to exclude, not just oppositional texts produced within the global North by the subjects of British and French colonial empires, but also non-white philosophies more generally (Mills, 2015, pp. 2-7). Australian philosophy departments’ curricula are largely shaped by the availability of such texts, though recent years have seen some race theory (especially debating biological understandings of race) creep into curricula along with non-European philosophical traditions (under the headings “world philosophies” and “comparative philosophies”). Some race critical texts appear in reading lists (for example, Bernasconi, 2001; Ward & Lott, 2002; Valls, 2005; Zack, 2005), particularly at the margins of philosophy studies, while philosophy majors are being pushed toward greater inclusiveness via interdisciplinarity requirements (for example, crediting Diversity or Aboriginal Studies subjects as part of a philosophy major).

Nonetheless, colonial experiences continue to inform the boundary policing of Australian philosophy departments. Philosophers working in these departments practice the very same “extraversion” (being oriented to the global North) that Raewyn Connell (2018, p. 401) attributes to sociologists working in the global South: aspiring to travel, academic appointments, citing theorists or publishing in the global North. However, unlike their counterparts in sociology whom Connell describes as having begun to sculpt a decolonising agenda as “a collective undertaking” (Connell 2018, p. 400), Australia’s philosophers have yet to collectively register this need. Characteristically, a recent multi-authored ARC funded volume celebrating the achievements of Australasian philosophy references “Aboriginal perspectives” only as part of the story of Australia’s environmental philosophy (Mathews, 2014, pp. 581-83), while “race” gets a mention as the “blind spot” of Australian feminist philosophers (Mackenzie, 2014, pp. 628-630). This *History of Philosophy in Australia and New Zealand* (2014, p. 2) explains the absence of Indigenous philosophies from its pages by uncritically acknowledging that “the pursuit of academic philosophy in Australasia has primarily – indeed, perhaps almost exclusively – adopted and explored Anglo-American and Western European traditions.” In a self-congratulatory narrative betraying the colonial legacy of what we might call the ‘currency lads syndrome’² afflicting white Australian philosophers’ collective consciousness, philosophy’s supposed “non-regional nature” is invoked to explain the “incontestable” fact that “around the globe [read Anglosphere] philosophers are widely persuaded that philosophy is done well in Australia” (2014, p.13). In diligently enacting their gatekeeping practices, oblivious to the coloniality of their thinking/doing, the guardians of Australian philosophy departments continue to deny their Australian “occupier” being (Nicolacopoulos & Vassilacopoulos, 2014, p. 14).³

In light of our own positioning and biography, the question ‘how best to contribute to decolonising work in Australian philosophy departments?’ proves problematic. Unfortunately, as Linda Martin Alcoff (as cited in Yancy, 2017, p. 210) observes in relation to the US context, conducting “good philosophical work” that exposes racism while assuming “its merits will shine through,” is an ineffective strategy. As we will try to suggest here, this may have less to do with problematic quality metrics and more to

² The term ‘currency lads’ was used in the 1820s in reference to first generation Australian-born youth of British and Irish origins. In being identified with locally printed money, the Australian-born were measured against the more highly valued British Sterling (Doyle, 2003).

³ See also Bryan Mukandi, ‘Australian Continental Philosophy’, ACRAWA, January 22, 2018, <https://acrawsa.org.au/2018/01/22/1237/>.

do with what we describe below as white Australia's deeply entrenched ontology of criminal being.

First, we suggest that present times call for *minimalist thinking*. Today the struggles of intellectual workers aspiring to break the hold of colonised imaginaries (Andreotti, 2016) may be sustained by re-activating simple truths that are nonetheless deep enough to be shared and broad enough to accommodate and inspire complex diversity. These are truths of being that, while generally framing and informing thinking, are prompted in our situation by our paradoxical position as white (non-Indigenous) Australians: being called upon to give a frank account of ourselves, by those who already know us infinitely more intensely than we may know ourselves. For white Australians, the agent of this call is the sovereign being of the land we occupy (Moreton-Robinson, 2007). To be as (self-)knowing through and in response to Indigenous sovereignties is to receive the imperative 'think with your being as fully exposed to our being'. It is fundamentally to face the question, 'You are the bearers of criminal being. Who are you?' In other words, developing such an ontologically informed epistemology and political practice in response to the call of Indigenous sovereign being(s) presupposes acceptance that our ontological truth is minimally that of *criminal being*.

Criminality of being claims the ability to be, exclusively; its inherent principle is the violence of *willing itself into being through processes that will the (human and non-human) other out of their sovereign being*. Of course, there are countless illustrations of this failed practice at work in the history and contemporary reality of modern western European imperialism. Nonetheless, rather than *emerging from within and among being(s)*, as is diversely conceived/lived the world over, this type of willing in relation to being/becoming is the historical novelty of modern Europe. Having identified the universal subject with a conceptualisation of proprietary being as a person-thing relation (Nicolacopoulos & Vassilacopoulos, 2014, pp. 35-40), instead of enacting this being through recognitive/affirmative relations with other persons/things, the Eurocentric colonising imaginary ('whiteness') has effected a splitting of this dual orientation toward its world of persons/things. Understood in terms of this practice of splitting, western European colonising subjectivity structures its world and sculpts practices in the interests of states and capital.⁴ This is achieved either through the orientation of personhood, which erases Indigenous sovereignties in light of their irreducibility to white personhood, or through the orientation of beings as things, which erases Indigenous peoples' and nations' irreducible connections to land, Country, and Law (Watson, 2011). Taking place on the sovereign being of the other, the splitting and reconstituting of proprietary being locates white subjectivity as the exclusive producer, distributor, manager, defender, guardian and educator of universal being. The practice of criminally willing sovereign being(s) out of being, and the corresponding exclusive claiming of universal being, is the founding act of Eurocentric whiteness.

This *simple (minimal) truth* of criminal being is often hidden beneath the daily operations of whiteness, the complex power structures and processes that, as many have observed, (re)produce racial hierarchies and multiply white race privilege. For white subjectivity it is the practice of *willing* one's being into being through consciously or unconsciously, successfully or unsuccessfully, willing the other out of being, a

⁴ Such structuring and sculpting may be direct as well as indirect. For example, Sharon Stein (2017) has recently demonstrated the direct dependence of US public higher education on capital accumulation through Indigenous dispossession.

practice epitomised by the globally rising neo-fascist white supremacy, underpins the structural and institutional management of racial hierarchies. European expansion and colonisation are co-extensive with spilling blood and spreading physical and spiritual death the world over, just in order to “heal the victims’ wounds,” stitching up their scars with (racist) concepts designed to draw them into a “civilising/civilised” humanity. Here, the criminality of colonial being serves as the hidden compass of racist knowing, while the hiddenness of the minimal truth of colonial being constitutes a *collective* criminal willing.

As a collectively constituted *being*, colonial criminality is not reducible to collective responsibility for criminal *acts* – theft of lands, genocidal murder of people, planetary destruction. While these latter may be publicly admitted from time to time, the hiddenness of the collective criminality of colonial *being* (as distinct from acts) remains secure even when the criminal acts are admitted and even by those calling for “a cultural pedagogy that turns [... the non-indigenous constituents of settler colonial societies] into agents for decolonization” (Veracini, 2017, p. 3). To illustrate, when Lorenzo Veracini proposes “an Indigenous-led type of settler Indigenization,” whereby *becoming* Indigenised metaphorically “kills the settler,” something that in turn allows them to “see themselves as guests” “on Indigenous ground,” it is certainly possible, as Veracini argues, to imagine land being returned in some measure and treaties being formed in some terms (Veracini, 2017, pp. 10-11). Yet such processes need not say or do anything that gestures toward confronting the colonial being of criminality, which, rather than predesignating the reconstitution of settlers as guests, would require an *unconditional* surrender to the authority of Indigenous sovereignties (Nicolacopoulos & Vassilacopoulos, 2014). Indeed, on Veracini’s analysis, settler *being* is not even capable of being conceptualised since the Indigenous-settler relationship fundamentally contrasts an Indigenous (fixed) “*being*” and a settler (transformational) “*becoming*” (Veracini, 2017, p. 12). In this binary, the being of colonial criminality, whiteness as collective criminal willing, remains in its hiddenness as it shapes the re-imagining of “Indigenous-settler relations.”

Against our understanding of the ontology of whiteness, the now corporatised university appears as an updated apparatus continuing in the service of the hidden collective criminal willing that underpins the racial hegemony. If this is correct, while offering a reason for the limited effectiveness of social critique, our analysis also points to certain priorities for decolonising work in the spaces we inhabit. Key amongst these is the practice of naming the minimal truth of colonial being.

What are the implications of our minimalist thinking for decolonising work in philosophy departments? Mills (2015, p. 8) proposes “expand[ing] the current vocabulary of Western political philosophy to admit colonial and imperial domination.” From this perspective, curriculum and research agendas should focus on: (1) Indigenous and non-Anglo/European philosophies; and (2) greater understanding of the ways that worldly self-knowing and even re-imagining continue to be racially informed. To implement such measures would be for Philosophy departments to begin to catch up to other disciplines, as they should and, like other disciplines, they would need to embark on a genuine diversification of their workforce composition (Connell, 2018, p. 405). We on the other hand, take our cue from Iranian thinker Hamid Dabashi (2015) who writes from the standpoint of his “liberation geography”: since “the world at large is actively engaged in reimagining itself” European philosophers could “join the rest of humanity in their common quest for a level remapping of the world” instead of persisting with “what they already know: how to

rule, how to own, how to possess and how to map the world in defiance of its inhabitants' will, wishes and resistance against their will to know" (Dabashi, 2015, pp. 27-29). The kind of radical re-orientation that follows from agreement with Dabashi would require the marginal Europeans working in the philosophy departments of Australian universities to extensively overhaul our practices and proprietary investments in the reproduction of the knowledge regimes to which our universities' quality metrics are tied. Specifically, linking our minimalist thinking to a broader response to the corporatisation of higher education would require embedding in our academic research spaces "peer-to-peer" political principles of "diagonality," which encourage open access contributions to building knowledge capital for the commons, as genuine drivers of social change (Ramos et al., 2016). An openness to such (re)thinking remains especially limited among professional philosophers in Australia. Within philosophy departments, our task must therefore be to keep insisting on awareness of fundamentals: of living at the expense of Indigenous sovereignties. Sadly, white Australian philosophers appreciate neither "the ground of Indigenous sovereignty as the place where all Australians come into relationship" (Nicoll, 2002) nor the ethical-ontological implications of their "migrancy," of "the positioning of all non-Indigenous people as migrants and diasporic" (Moreton-Robinson, 2003, p. 23). If this is correct, then decolonising philosophical work – the work controlled by marginal Europeans – is likely to only ever take place at the margins of philosophy departments and perhaps only when aided by leadership from a suitably oriented interdisciplinary professional association, like ACRAWA.

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