BRITISHNESS & OTHERNESS

TOWARD A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF WHITE IDENTITIES IN THE EMPIRE

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This issue of *Humanities Research* presents a selection of papers offered to the 'Britishness & Otherness: Locating Marginal White Identities in the Empire' symposium, convened at the Humanities Research Centre at The Australian National University in July 2004. The symposium was designed to provoke a more sustained and nuanced contemplation of the mechanisms by which a plethora of British identities circulated within the Empire. Moreover, participants were encouraged to question the assumption that 'Britishness' was a static cultural identity accessed easily and equally by all phenotypically similar (i.e. white skinned) subjects of the British Empire.

In the main, the academic consideration of Otherness in the Imperial context has focused on the dynamics of the colonial 'encounter' — the profound cultural, economic and psychic dislocation produced by territorial expansion and racial violence. Whereas a significant proportion of this work has been motivated by literal and *definitive* differences predicated on skin colour, the papers in this collection explore marginal, nominally British identities rendered outside of the absolute collision of the 'white presence' with the 'black semblance'.¹ In pursuing the

emergence of differing constructions of white Britishness, it has not been our purpose to collate a series of 'cardboard caricatures of British omnipotence and Imperial wickedness'.² Nor do we intend to invoke a scale of competing oppressions, a proof positive of white victimisation that would somehow assuage or *balance* the accumulating testimony to non-white dispossession. Rather, the writers represented in this collection reflect on the peculiar and Gordian complexities of white British becoming and white British belonging at the zenith of Imperial power. These identities arose not only in the negation of a stereotypically limited and inexorably objectified Other, but as a function of a system of power/knowledge in which white subjects had never possessed equal access to narratives of hegemonic Britishness.

It is simplistic to assert that white experience within the Empire can be collapsed under the homogenising signifier 'British'. Such a conclusion, arrived at consciously or not, reiterates the ultimately reductive presumption that the history of Imperial Britain is writ only and inevitably in the vast and global opposition of a mythic conquistadorial 'whiteness' and an equally mythic subaltern

'blackness'. Ruminating on the involute quality of white histories, Alistair Bonnett observes that race work focusing on the United Kingdom has 'remained imprisoned within a dualistic vision of White agency and Black resistance'.³ The effect of this has been to minimise the 'inconsistencies and contradictions'⁴ that subtend divergent experiences of white Britishness. Bonnett locates his analysis in two registers: firstly, and primarily amongst the 'fluctuating boundaries' of white ethnic difference internal to Britain as a geographic entity; and secondly between a collective white order who could be described as Britons and those putatively non-white subjects who are either denied, or refuse to be reconciled to, this interpellation. Bonnett's contention that any interrogation of white Britishness must adjudicate both intra- and inter-racial contingencies forms the point of departure for the considerations of marginal white identities presented here. The essays that follow seek to complicate this framework via two specific interventions: (i) by tracing those same intra- and inter-racial differences at the colonial periphery to consider the (re)creation of Britishness in settler societies; and (ii) by disturbing the easy assumption that all members *within* Britain's four significant white ethnic groups experienced whiteness equally.

The papers in this collection represent a sample of those delivered in the workshop and explore 'white' or 'British' identities both within the Imperial centre and in the colonised settler outposts of the Empire. Taken together, the papers offer a variety of responses to the symposium's three broad themes of Ethnicity, Diaspora and Metropole.

Robyn Westcott reads Linda Colley's historical speculations of Britishness and Otherness through the lens of Cultural Studies and Whiteness Studies. By engaging with the critical strategies and theoretical frameworks advanced in these disciplines, Westcott argues for the disruption of the binary implicit in the dichotomy of 'Britishness' and 'Otherness' and for the need for a more subtle and nuanced mode of analysis of national belonging.

Alex Tyrrell explores Scottish nationalism at both the centre and periphery of the British world through a consideration of the hitherto unrecognised role of conservatives in the invention of 'Scottishness'. In the process, he offers an insight into Scottish national identity as it was understood both in the homeland and by Scottish emigrants to the Australian colonies during the nineteenth century.

The re(creation) of national identity far from the metropole also forms the focus of Malcolm Campbell's paper which questions the canonical accounts of New Zealand historiography with its homogenisation of nineteenth century newcomers from the United Kingdom. Campbell discusses the complex position of Irish immigrants in New Zealand and argues for recognition of national distinctiveness in New Zealand historical writing.

Two other papers in the collection also explore the British diaspora at the colonial periphery. Sarah Carter acknowledges that Canadian historiography has resisted the presentation of a singular narrative of white experience in Western Canada, but argues that little attention has been paid to issues of gender, and in particular to the history of women. Her paper explores the distinctions cultivated within the British and British-Ontarian fragment of

Western Canada through a comparison of the celebrated 'Pilgrim Mothers' of the West, and of white women on the margins.

The wide variety of meanings of 'Britishness' in the South African context is illustrated by Christopher Saunders, who considers how white South Africans, both of British descent and non-British nationalities, identified with the Empire both before and after independence was granted to the white minority. Saunders traces the complexity of the relationship between the difference races, classes and identities of South Africa, particularly the competing 'white identities' of English and Afrikaners.

Christina Parolin's paper looks to the 'centre' of the British world in the early nineteenth century. Far from the collision with an 'alien other', Parolin's paper explores the othering of white 'home grown' British subjects on the basis of gender, politics and class. In the face of political and religious persecution, the radical language of historical and natural rights informed an internal struggle over what it meant to be British.

Our collective purpose in both the workshop and in this volume is to give voice to those narratives of white Britishness occluded in the inference that a 'lack of fixed boundaries [and] clear racial markers'⁵ within a phenotypically similar national majority guaranteed a shared understanding and experience of colonial exceptionalism. As Julian Wolfreys declares, 'narratives of identity have to be read for contradiction, and with respect for difference'.⁶ In looking to the *interstices* — the gaps, breaks and boundaries *within sameness* — we hope to contribute a series of subtle and carefully situated readings to the ongoing understanding of

Britishness as a narrative of both inclusion and exclusion.

A final word of gratitude must go to Dr Paul A. Pickering of the Humanities Research Centre at The Australian National University for his patience and dedication during the planning process and his skillful and good-humoured chairing of the symposium itself. His afterword in this volume stands as a testament to his considerable skills as a transnational historian and to his insight into the complexity of the networks which existed, and continue to resonate, throughout the British world.

ENDNOTES

¹ Bhabha, Homi, 1994, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London, p. 7

² Cannadine, David, 2001, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire*, Oxford University Press, New York, p. xvii

³ Bonnett., Alastair, 1996, "'White Studies': The Problems & Projects of a New Research Agenda", *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 13, no. 2, p. 152

⁴ Bonnett, 1996, "'White Studies' p. 152

⁵ Gibbons, Luke, 2000, 'Race Against Time: Racial Discourse and Irish History' in Hall, C., 2000 (ed.) *Cultures of Empire: Colonisers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: A Reader*, Routledge, New York, p. 208

⁶ Wolfreys, Julian, 1994, *Being English: Narratives, Idioms and Performances of National Identity from Coleridge to Trollope*, State University of New York Press, Albany, p. 3