

# Simply a Hypothesis?

RACE AND ETHNICITY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

» WARWICK ANDERSON

I can't say that it's typical of the discipline, but I do know that after I finish a research project I like to move on to something different, whether in time or place or method. On the few occasions I feel compelled to return to a historical topic, it's because some new, and often surprising, perspective or approach acts on me like a lodestone. So it was when around 2010 I proposed the research programme that came to be embedded in my application to the Australian Research Council (ARC) for a Laureate Fellowship. I felt the need to reframe and extend my earlier studies of the sciences of 'whiteness' in Australia, which had begun as long ago as the 1980s and culminated in the publication of *The Cultivation of Whiteness* in 2002.<sup>1</sup> At the time of my ARC application, my colleagues thought the grant-writing exercise probably futile, since so few humanities scholars had succeeded in adapting their proposed research to the science model supposedly favoured in that scheme. But I had trained in medicine and done a little scientific research, so believed I knew the tricks, subterfuges and disguises that might get me past any doorkeepers. Additionally, I thought I had an irresistible proposal — but then, don't we all. It meant returning to the topic of my first book — back to a subject that had acquired new aspects and fresh appeal, or so I imagined, while I had been distracted, and diverted elsewhere. Now was the moment, I

told myself, to look again at ideas about race in the southern hemisphere, this time from new angles, different standpoints.

Each published book grows up differently and follows a distinctive life course. I saw *Cultivation of Whiteness* as a novel analysis of the co-constitution of racial science and the imagined virile, white Australian nation. It was an attempt to represent Australia as a site of knowledge-making about human and environmental difference, and not just a place that received all its ideas from elsewhere, or served as a data mine for North Atlantic savants. It was a critical archaeology of the sciences of whiteness in this country; an attempt to situate scientific knowledge-making in the white nation. Accordingly, a junior historian of science in the United States complained that the monograph had failed to address 'real' race science, which, so it seemed, took place only along the North Atlantic littoral.<sup>2</sup> When a senior cultural historian at Berkeley claimed dismissively over dinner that there was never any 'positive' science of whiteness in the United States, unlike exceptional Australia, I insisted his views indicated the failure to recognise the implicit whiteness of the unmarked subjects of much biomedical research in his own country. (American biological and biomedical sciences still await a critical historical study equivalent to *Cultivation of Whiteness*, though recent

(above)

Fig. 1. Anderson conducting research for *Cultivation of Whiteness*, Palm Valley, Central Australia, 1999.

PHOTO: ROSEMARY ROBINS

signs suggest they are catching up.) Ordinary readers in Australia were more astute: they saw more clearly why the book mattered.

A leader of Australia First denounced me as a ‘race traitor’ — an old school, rinky-dink phrasing that pleased me though my infamy proved disappointingly evanescent.<sup>3</sup> The Vice-Chancellor of the University of Adelaide surprisingly offered an apology to Aboriginal people over the scientific research revealed in *Cultivation of Whiteness*. (If only ‘impact’ had counted back then!)

More pertinently, perhaps, Tim Rowse reproved me in a perceptive review for not making any comparisons with racial thought in New Zealand and the Pacific — an observation that shook me out of the national niche I had so deliberately and pragmatically occupied.<sup>4</sup> Thus, as *Cultivation of Whiteness* moved about in the world, gaining a life of its own, its reception taught me more about what sort of book I had written — and how it might be done differently.

The Laureate Fellowship research proposal crystallised suddenly in discussions following a lecture I gave in Rio de Janeiro early in 2010. I could tell you the hour, if not the minute, when it was formulated. My hosts had asked me to talk about my earlier inquiries into racial thought in Australia, so I focused on the last chapter of *Cultivation of Whiteness*, concerning the scientific rationalisation for administrative proposals in the 1930s to ‘absorb’ biologically mixed-race Aboriginal people into white Australia. Heeding Rowse’s advice, I also considered scientific arguments in interwar New Zealand for the ‘amalgamation’ of Maori and Pakeha. My audience in Rio was

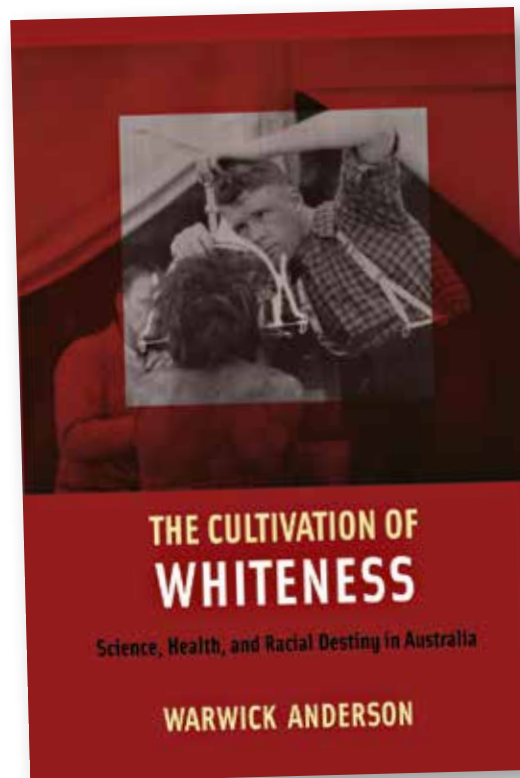
puzzled. ‘You are talking about Anglo settler societies’, someone pointed out, ‘yet these are Latin race formations’. Another interlocutor sketched the apparent similarities of racial thought and policy between Australia and Argentina, and between New Zealand and Mexico, during the same period. ‘How can this be so?’ she asked. That’s an intriguing question, I thought — strong enough, perhaps, to justify a Laureate Fellowship proposal. I spent most of the long flight back to Sydney, skirting the

South Pole, pondering racial conceptions and formations across the southern hemisphere.

It frustrated and irritated me that so much of our ‘southern’ intellectual history was based on facile diffusionist models, not unlike those prevailing in theories of ‘modernisation’ and ‘development’. The history of ideas in Australia, especially those ideas deemed scientific, still seemed to replay an aggressive cold-war Atlanticism: science often was presented as a derivative

discourse, or at most

a minor language, in the southern hemisphere. It was this abiding sense of irritation that had prompted me to reconstruct, and in a sense re-place, the history of concepts of human and environmental difference in the settler society, to situate knowledge-making about race in the national story — but I may have been too rigorous in enforcing the quarantine barrier. ‘What about south-south intellectual connections?’, I now wondered. Could one discern a general southern-hemisphere distinction in racial thought in the twentieth century, or at least regional gradations in racial sensibilities and practices? What did we really know about southern intellectual currents? As I wrote at the time:



(above)

Fig. 2. Cover of *Cultivation of Whiteness* by Warwick Anderson, (Duke University Press, 2006).



For hundreds of years, the southern hemisphere has been the scene of intensive biological and sociological investigation of the nature of human difference. Well into the twentieth century, physical anthropologists were meticulously measuring thousands of people to determine their racial character; human biologists, emerging in the 1920s, applied evolutionary and ecological theories to understand the adaptation of southern peoples to their environments; and after World War II, biological anthropologists increasingly conducted genetic surveys across the global south. These biological inquiries into what it means to be human generated scientific debate around the

world; reshaped and challenged ideas about race; and informed national policies concerning Indigenous peoples, race mixing, and selective immigration across the southern hemisphere. Yet today we know little about these scientific activities. As a result, the recent historical forces shaping human identity in the global south — and elsewhere — remain somewhat obscure.<sup>5</sup>

Throwing caution to blustery austral winds, then, I proposed a critical historical inquiry into patterns of racial thought across settler societies of the southern hemisphere, a study comparative in method and style, transnational and inter-colonial in scope. Even more unguardedly, I frequently substituted

(above)  
Fig. 3 White Australian scientist and Aboriginal man in the central desert of Australia, 1930s.

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‘global south’ for southern hemisphere in this prospectus, partly as a less clunky designation, but mostly because it drew attention to certain political and economic configurations, a particular historical composition, and avoided geographical pedantry. As it happened, this heuristic — for that is what it is — proved less controversial than I expected. Later still, we brazenly incorporated it in the shorthand name for the project: Race and Ethnicity in the Global South, or REGS.

Like a proper scientist, I began with a working hypothesis: I claimed that human biology might look quite different when viewed from southern perspectives. What did this mean? Well, it could be said that

on ‘standpoint’ or situated knowledge always delicately need to skirt essentialist speculation; and the historicising of race requires special care to avoid any sort of exonerative declension. And, after all, I was postulating a hypothesis, a stimulus to rigorous inquiry — a question, and not the definitive answer. The Laureate Fellowship might provide the ideal laboratory in which to test such a hypothesis.<sup>7</sup>

I felt I was being pulled up one of those vast Pacific swells, which Herman Melville described so evocatively. The wave of critical postcolonial scholarship pushing us to situate knowledge, provincialise Europe, think of Pacific historicity, treat Asia as method, and locate southern theory, was carrying me along.

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the conventional — for my purposes, North Atlantic — history of ideas about race and human difference in the twentieth century was pre-occupied with fixed racial classifications or Mendelian typologies, policies of racial separation and segregation, hard-line eugenics, and condemnation of race mixing. Of course, such concerns and enthusiasms could be found also in southern settler societies, especially in parts of northern Australia, and in South Africa after the 1930s. But I wondered if we might detect, too, greater (even if piecemeal and scattered) southern interest in racial plasticity, environmental adaptation, blurring of racial boundaries, endorsement of biological absorption of Indigenous people, and tolerance of the formation of new or blended races. In other words, should we continue to confine more dynamic and flexible ‘Latin’ views of human difference to South America? ‘Although white privilege would be maintained in the Global South’, I wrote, ‘its conceptual framework, institutional structure, and even perceptual boundary often varied’.<sup>6</sup> It struck me as a useful research question, even if I ran the risk of appearing to imply some sort of geographical or regional essentialism, or suggesting that our racism somehow was less nasty than their racism. But claims depending

My interest in such dispersive logics derived in part from discussion back in the 1990s with Greg Denning, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Patrick Wolfe (among others at the Institute for Postcolonial Studies in Melbourne), conversations that had led me to advocate, in a series of manifestos, the postcolonial study of science.<sup>8</sup> My focus in these programmatic tracts had been on Asia, but now it seemed timely to think more generally about the global south.<sup>9</sup> Thus the current drew me toward the recent work of my colleague at Sydney, Raewyn Connell, who was urging us to consider the global south as a site for theory in the social sciences.<sup>10</sup> It led me to read more carefully the South Asian subaltern histories and to look at efforts by radical Latin American scholars to destabilise geopolitical intellectual dominance.<sup>11</sup> Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake, among others, made me think again about comparative, transnational, and oceanic histories, and how one might not so much sketch the global colour line as restore the global colour palette, revealing particularly its disingenuous and meretricious tones and variations.<sup>12</sup>

During the previous decade, while in the United States, various obligations and commissions had dragooned me into reflecting on comparison-making and comparability.

Reluctantly, I began to participate in Ann Laura Stoler's bold and provocative effort to examine intimacy and sentiment in United States (US) history from postcolonial perspectives. Although I admired Stoler's deftness in combining anthropological insight and sensibility with historical method, I initially was wary of her structural or typological approach to comparison. Grumbling, I chose to compare practices of racial hygiene, reproductive regimes, and classificatory schemes at the Culion leper colony, in US-occupied Philippines, and a 'half-caste' children's home in outback Australia. Somewhat sententiously, I wrote:

Elsewhere I have argued for the tracing of genealogical ties between imperial center and colony, and between colonies, rather than resorting to the collection of apparently unrelated homologies. Comparison of different models has often proven idle and unrewarding. What does it mean if one thing happens to look like something else? What does it tell us about cause and effect, about

historical agency? Yet it now appears that a comparative study of sites as different as settler Australia and the Philippines under the American colonial regime can help us understand processes as elusive as the creation of national subjects — provided we hold constant our focus, that is, so long as we find a sensitive and specific 'sampling device'.<sup>13</sup>

I concluded my chapter in *Haunted by Empire* with the hope that I had 'demonstrated that a taxonomic gaze allows one to discern patterns and relationships that otherwise would remain obscure. Even so, such a gaze still seems to me a distancing, imperial optic — and therefore one we should use with caution.'<sup>14</sup> In the Laureate Fellowship project I was proposing mostly genealogical or historical comparison of racial thought and practice across the southern hemisphere, that is, tracing historical figures as they moved about intellectually, making comparisons and speculating on human and environmental difference. But through working with Stoler, and sometimes against her, I had

(below)

Fig. 4 Anderson with Masasa and Fore people, Okapa, Papua New Guinea, 2003.

PHOTO: THOMAS P. STRONG



also come to appreciate the value of static or modal comparisons, assays of cognate political rationalities in seemingly separate places, such as Latin America and Australasia. (The sort of ‘surprising’ comparison that Benedict Anderson engaged in, especially in *Under Three Flags* and *The Spectre of Comparisons*, also was appealing to those of us interested in Southeast Asia.<sup>15</sup>) As it turned out, further historical inquiry often showed that the apparent intellectual estrangement or separation of the southern continents was illusory, and such typological or taxonomic or serial (as Ben Anderson would put it) comparison was redundant. In any case, the proposed research would become fundamentally a reflection on different styles of comparison-making and the protocols of historical comparability.

In setting up a ‘laboratory’ it’s important to allocate work carefully, or at least to look as though one knows how to assign tasks. I proposed to recruit a number of postdoctoral research associates (PDRAs) who would identify and, in effect, translate the various imperial and postcolonial paper trails across the southern hemisphere in the twentieth century, encompassing Spanish, Portuguese, and German archives — while I concentrated on Anglophone and Francophone materials. Eventually, so I thought, we would come together to compare and connect such vernaculars of human biology and dialects of difference. Thus the project might also serve to overcome some of the linguistic limitations of much Australian historical writing. Thinking like a scientist, I regarded the Laureate fellowship principally as a means of expanding our scholarly repertoire, or building research capacity — that is, as a way to develop a productive laboratory in which we could train new researchers to discover previously obscure historical patterns. Therefore it was necessary to structure the project around the cultivation of fresh fields of scholarly endeavour and the mentoring of early-career researchers — without heaping further laurels on the chief investigator’s over-laden brow.

Like books, Laureate Fellowships take on a life of their own once they are hatched. From the moment I received my laureate lapel pin in Melbourne (which a colleague unkindly

remarked made me look like a Rotarian), the research programme started to shift shape and take on unanticipated incidentals and appurtenances. So much depended on the recruitment of PDRAs and other affiliates. As it happened, expertise on Australasia, Latin America, the Pacific, and Southeast Asia abounded, whereas we received few applications from historians versed in Indian Ocean, South Asian, and African circuits of knowledge. Perversely, perhaps, most applicants came from North America and Europe. We went with the flow, as it were. During the past three years or so, we’ve held conferences and workshops on racial thought and Pacific futures; comparative racialisations in Southeast Asia; south-south connections, especially between Latin America and Australia; and Lusophone racial conceptions across the global south. We are planning further symposia on the genetic exploration of Australasia and the Pacific, on race mixing, and German racial thought in the Pacific. We’ve hosted visiting scholars, arranged public lectures, and set up a first-book workshop. Fortunately, two efficient and engaged administrative assistants made sure stuff happened: Rod Taveira, now a lecturer in the US Studies Centre at the University of Sydney; and for most of this period, James Dunk, who recently submitted his PhD thesis in history. Our intellectual activities have given rise to a score of articles and five or more book manuscripts (including my long-delayed ‘global’ historical study of the scientific investigation of mixed-race populations in the twentieth century). Additionally, we are still busy turning the conference proceedings into special issues of journals and essay collections.

Since we have eighteen months to go, it’s premature to evaluate the whole fellowship programme. There’s talk, for instance, of funding a postdoctoral fellow for a year to begin to repair our neglect of the Indian Ocean and southern Africa. There’s time for another conference, another colloquium, another subsidiary project, and certainly more integrative, informal discussions. Necessarily, our coverage has been unsystematic and partial, perhaps even fragmentary, revealing what we don’t yet know as much as explaining what we do know — we keep lighting out

into new territories before settling old ones. As in most team efforts, recurrent problems of coordination and alignment can challenge coherence — though maybe a sort of contrapuntal narrative, or a mosaic of knowledge as William James put it, is more faithful to our sources.<sup>16</sup> In any case, we keep managing to generate new research careers and propel people into pioneering scholarly trajectories — almost too successfully, as it's been hard to retain PDRAs for more than a couple of years. Miranda Johnson now teaches comparative Indigenous histories at Sydney; Ricardo Roque has a tenured position in Lisbon; Christine Winter earned an ARC Future Fellowship, leading to a professorial research fellowship at Flinders University; and Sebastián Gil-Riaño will soon be an assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania. I could go on, but evidently the Laureate Fellowship has begun, though multiple intellectual itineraries and diverging routes, to transform research in the history of science and racial thought, lending it southern inflections, sometimes an Australian accent. It seems, at least, a good beginning.<sup>17</sup>

Some fifteen years ago, the local reception of *Cultivation of Whiteness*, with its absorption into contemporary debates about Australian racism, both surprised and intrigued me. Unexpectedly, I became involved in a minor skirmish on the margins of the history wars, and I felt exposed and poorly equipped.<sup>18</sup> But like many veterans, I now recall those battles with a frisson of nostalgia and a pervading sense of regret for lost youth and clarity and drive. I suspect such moments of public engagement have passed for most of my generation, as accumulated laurels immobilise us, or as we meander toward retirement — even if the struggle continues. Racism abides in our communities, but its manifestations can be subtle and specific and disconcerting. It seemed to me from the beginning that this Laureate Fellowship research programme should function as a kind of historical sampling device or search engine, locating and examining the various ingenious and slippery forms of racial thought and practice in southern settler societies and their environs. We need to understand our particular racisms, especially

the enigmatic ones, so we know what to look for and guard against. And we need to train new generations of humanities scholars to betray racial codes, artfully. ¶



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1. Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002), reprinted in the United States by Basic Books (2003) and Duke University Press (2006). See also Warwick Anderson, 'Traveling White', in *Reorienting Whiteness*, ed. by Leigh Boucher, Katherine Ellinghaus and Jane Carey (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 65–72.
2. Elizabeth Green Musselman, 'Review of Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health, and Racial Destiny in Australia*', *Isis*, 95 (2004), 497–98.

3. Warwick Anderson, 'Confessions of a Race Traitor', *Arena Magazine*, 30 (August 1997), 35–36.
4. Tim Rowse, 'Review of Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health, and Racial Destiny in Australia*', *Australian Book Review*, 241 (2002), 15. Another prompt was *Foreign Bodies: Oceania and the Science of Race, 1750–1940*, ed. by Bronwen Douglas and Chris Ballard (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2008).
5. Warwick Anderson, 'Racial Conceptions in the Global South', *Isis*, 105 (2014), 782–92 (p. 782).
6. Anderson, 'Racial Conceptions', p. 783.
7. This framing of the proposal proved useful in responding to an assessor who disagreed passionately with many of my premises, which he took to be conclusions: I could write in the rejoinder that his fervour clearly indicated the importance of the topic, and confirmed the need to *test the hypothesis*. (I say 'he' because the assessor was readily identified.)
8. See Greg Denning, *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas, 1774–1880* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1980); Greg Denning, *Beach Crossings: Voyaging Across Times, Cultures, and Self* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Patrick Wolfe, 'Land, Labor, and Difference: Elementary Structures of Race', *American Historical Review*, 106 (2001), 866–905.
9. Essays in this vein include Warwick Anderson and Vincanne Adams, 'Pramoedya's Chickens: Postcolonial Studies of Technoscience', in *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*, 3rd edn, ed. by Edward J. Hackett, Olga Amsterdamska, Michael Lynch and Judy Wajcman (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007), pp. 181–204; and Warwick Anderson, 'From Subjugated Knowledge to Conjugated Subjects: Science and Globalisation, or Postcolonial Studies of Science?', *Postcolonial Studies*, 12 (2009), 389–400, 'Asia as Method in Science and Technology Studies', *East Asian Science, Technology and Society Journal*, 6 (2012), 445–51, and 'Postcolonial Science Studies', in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd edn, ed. by James D. Wright (Oxford: Elsevier, 2015), pp. 652–57.
10. Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in the Social Sciences* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2007).
11. In particular, Fernando Coronil, 'Beyond Occidentalism: Toward Nonimperial Geohistorical Categories', *Cultural Anthropology*, 11 (1996), 51–87; and Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
12. *Connected Worlds: History in Trans-National Perspective*, ed. by Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2006); and Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
13. Warwick Anderson, 'States of Hygiene: Race "Improvement" and Biomedical Citizenship in Australia and the Colonial Philippines', in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. by Ann Laura Stoler (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 94–115 (p. 111).
14. Anderson, 'States of Hygiene', pp. 111–12.
15. Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (London: Verso, 2005), and *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* (London: Verso, 1998). As Benedict Anderson put it, 'the most instructive comparisons are those that surprise' ('Frameworks of Comparison', *London Review of Books*, 38 [21 January 2016], 15–18, p. 18). See also Warwick Anderson and Hans Pols, 'Scientific Patriotism: Medical Science and National Self-Fashioning in Southeast Asia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 54 (2012), 93–113.
16. 'Life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected' (William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* [New York: Longman, Green and Co., 1911], p. 87). See also Warwick Anderson, 'Edge Effects in Science and Medicine', *Western Humanities Review*, 69 (2015), 373–84.
17. Many postgraduate students and research affiliates have also contributed to the success of our research programmes, too many to list here.
18. On the Australian history wars, see Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003); and Bain Attwood, *Telling the Truth About Aboriginal History* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2005). For my views on the related international 'science wars', see Warwick Anderson, 'Waiting for Newton? From Hydraulic Societies to the Hydraulics of Globalization', in *Force, Movement, Intensity: The Newtonian Imagination and the Humanities and Social Sciences*, ed. by Ghassan Hage and Emma Kowal (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2011), pp. 128–35.