

White (Greek-)Australian Cultural Memory and the Visionary Appropriation of History

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In the twentieth century, the organised Greek-Australian communities appropriated the cultural memory, and in particular the political traditions, of modern Greece in terms of two distinct trajectories. One began with the formation of the first Greek Orthodox Community (GOC) organisation in 1897. We can map in relation to it various community-constituting processes in terms of their conformity with Greek migrants' "perpetual foreigner" positioning. A second pattern of community-constituting conduct emerged from about the 1920s when, having joined the newly formed Communist Party of Australia (CPA), a section of Greek migrants began to draw upon the ideals of socialist internationalism to advance a longstanding challenge to their foreigner positioning. We have argued elsewhere that key elements of the institutional formation of these communities that have functioned as mechanisms for the collective internalisation of the 'inside-outsider' status assigned to the perpetual

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'foreigners-within'. Moreover, the historical process of actively internalising and reformulating the image of the perpetual foreigner-within implicated the GOCs, the Greek community press, the Church, the Consulate and the communities' dominant employing class in the implementation of an extensive disciplinary and self-policing network of relations. The ultimate ends of this network were both inwardly and outwardly directed. Outwardly, the community institutions that adopted the "foreigner" discourse focused on representing and promoting the communities' good image – the image of "the submissive foreigner" – to the Australian authorities and people. Inwardly, the communities directed their self-policing mechanisms towards the containment of the Greek migrants within their designated perpetual foreigner position.² Within this discursive framework, the vital appropriations of historical memory inevitably lacked what we might call a "visionary" dimension.

In contrast, through processes that challenged their perpetual foreigner position, the political programs of the Greek-Australian workers leagues gave rise to the second pattern of community-constituting activity that we mentioned at the outset. Our research into the history of these organisations shows how their political culture incorporated visionary appropriations of their Greek traditions.³ In this paper we shall argue, firstly, that one precondition for such visionary appropriations of cultural memory is engagement in the processes of becoming what we call "emerging-merging selves". Secondly, we can appreciate the implications of this analysis for Greek-Australian cultural appropriations of historical memory through a reading of the possibilities that the dominant white Australian historical memory makes possible (or fails to make possible) for the migrant minority discourses operating within its discursive and territorial boundaries.

Let us note here that the main protagonists in the cultivation of the dominant white Australian historical memory presuppose something that we tend to take for granted when thinking about white Australian history.⁴ This is the idea that, in general, we Australians cannot hope to have a future without having a past. Despite dramatically different readings of events in the last two centuries of white Australian occupation of the Indigenous peoples' territories, there is a common assumption that white

² Toula Nicolacopoulos, and George Vassilacopoulos, "The Making of Greek-Australian Citizenship: From Heteronomous to Autonomous Political Communities", *Modern Greek Studies Australia and New Zealand Journal*, vol. 11/12, (2003-2004), pp. 165-176.

³ Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos, "Becoming Australians by Choice: Greek Australian activism in 1960s Melbourne", in S. O'Hanlyn and T. Luckins (eds), *Go! Melbourne in the 60s* (Melbourne: Circa Books, 2005), pp. 245-259.

⁴ See, for example, the contributions in Manne, 2003 MacIntyre and Clark, 2003.

Australia needs to come to terms with its past as a pre-condition for moving forward in the twenty-first century. Broadly speaking, we have acknowledged our racist past as part of the process of shaping our idea of the future of the nation in the twenty-first century.

This said, the position we would like to elaborate in this paper is that the primary issue for white Australians is neither the past nor the future. Our primary concern should be the *present*, though not the present understood as 'the now'. We want to suggest, instead, that we should be concerned with the present understood as 'being present' or, in other words, with being as *presence*. So, we would like to refocus our attention on our presence in an *ontological* sense, one that addresses our being (as white Australians) as a whole. Let us outline our position before explaining it in more detail and pointing to some of its implications.

White Australians do not have a present in the abovementioned ontological sense of presence. Our view is that, at the moment, it is distinctive of white Australians that we have abandoned our potential to engage in the sort of encounter that makes presence possible for us, a form of encounter that we have elsewhere termed the "emerging-merging" of selves.⁵ This is a form of interaction that produces and helps to maintain our integrity in so far as we are products of modern western European social processes. On the analysis that we will present in the first section of our paper, white Australians cannot *emerge* ontologically. We are, if you like, the non-emerging. In the second section we will suggest that this occurs as an effect of what we have called "the onto-pathology of white Australian subjectivity".⁶ In the third section, we will argue that a certain form of *merging*, in recognition of Indigenous peoples' sovereignty rights, is the pre-condition for white Australian being as presence, for becoming historical and ultimately for creating a vision for the future. In the final section of our paper, we will outline some implications for reading the Greek-Australian cultural appropriations of historical memory in the twenty-first century.

Presence as the emerging-merging of beings and the non-emerging white Australia

We suggested above that, as white Australians, we might best be described as "the non-emerging", that is, as beings who lack presence. What do we

⁵ Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos, "Inquiry Into Hope", *Critical and Creative Thinking: The Australasian Journal of Philosophy in Schools*, vol. 11, no.2 (2003), pp. 1-7.

⁶ Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos, "Racism, Foreigner Communities and the Onto-Pathology of White Australian Subjectivity", in Aileen Moreton-Robinson (ed.), *Whitening Race: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004).

mean by this? Let us begin by noting that presence, in the ontological sense we are elaborating, is not some kind of natural given for us. It is achieved through a certain form of social interaction, namely by presenting oneself to someone else. It is *in* such presenting that one emerges *as* presenting.

Moreover, the context is all-important here. Note that such an emerging is at once inescapably a *merging*. This is because the context must be one in which the other self is also an emerging being. So, *being present* essentially involves a meeting of beings who encounter one another's presentation as the very pre-condition of their own possibility. That is, the encounter is what gives rise to the possibility of presence. The encounter between subjects who emerge by presenting themselves to each other constitutes an affirmative act of mutual recognition.

In this affirmative act we need not interact with another bodily presence here and now. Presence, in the above sense of merging-emerging beings, might just as well take place through the experience of another's absence. It might, for example, be the case that the interaction in question takes place trans-nationally or through the imaginative experience of calling forth selective traditions, whether literary or part of everyday life. What is important for our analysis is that, in so far as we engage with modern western European social processes, our integrity, in the sense of our being *as a whole* in the world, depends upon our participation in such acts of mutual recognition. Such acts of mutual recognition affirm our merging being and hence are fundamental to our emergence in the world.

If the above analysis is sound, then in so far as white Australians fail to engage in this fundamental form of mutual recognition, we cannot emerge ontologically. Indeed, we are non-emerging beings precisely because we have failed to live up to the demands of our ontological integrity in our encounter with the Indigenous Other. Irrespective of how we choose to read it, our racist history confirms the fact that we do not recognise the Indigenous peoples in the reciprocal and affirmative terms of emerging-merging beings that we have outlined above. This is particularly damaging for white Australia because being as presence does not permit us to be selective about our encounters. Try as we may, we cannot gain and retain our ontological integrity in the face of our encounter with the Indigenous peoples, because the very structure of the form of recognition we depend upon does not allow for its enactment through conditional practices such as race-based exclusions. We will go on next to explain why what we have characterised as white Australians' non-presence is an effect of our collective historical constitution as a nation.

The social institution of white Australia's non-presence

White Australian national identity has been founded on the dispossession of Indigenous peoples. This dispossession denies to Indigenous peoples the very identity on which the collective being of white Australians has been socially instituted. How might we characterise this identity? Summing up the argument of another paper,⁷ we note that the primary aspect of our constitution as modern Western subjects is our *private property-owning identity*. Precisely because it informs every aspect of our being as social actors, our property-owning identity is also at the heart of what it means to be a member of white/Australian society. That is, because we live in a society whose primary institutions are ordered along the lines of modern Western liberal ideals, our ability to function effectively depends on this identity. Here, we do not mean simply that one class of Australians owns property to the exclusion of another in the juridical sense. Instead the point is that the very operations of white Australian institutions, whether legal, political or economic, encourage us to relate to everything in the world as property-owning subjects in the sense of realising our potential to treat anything around us as what Hegel calls "a thing" or object that lacks a will of its own and in which we might embody our own individual or collective will.⁸ That is, we are in a position to treat every aspect of our world as a will-less object and, hence, as a potential property item, quite apart from its own nature. For modern Western subjectivity, nothing is inherently immune to this power of embodiment of a will in a thing, and so, in a liberal social order, effective agency is inevitably linked to this form of subjectivity.

For the purposes of our present discussion, the important thing to note is not just that the denial of Indigenous peoples' property-owning subjectivity has effectively rendered the Indigenous peoples as *non-Australian* but that this denial has profoundly impacted upon the possibilities for *white Australian* ways of being, including, of course, those of the migrant minorities, such as the Greek-Australian. The reason for this has to do with the role that institutionally reinforced processes of inter-subjective recognition play in structuring modern Western social relations. Let us explain this briefly. We know that the Indigenous peoples' continued dispossession makes possible the claim of white Australia to ownership of the country, as if Australian territory had not already belonged to other

sovereign peoples.⁹ But this question of rightful ownership is not just a question about the legal or moral right of the white Australian nation-state to occupy and control the territory. It creates a deep tension at the ontological level of our constitution as a nation. This is because the modern European ideals of property and subjectivity that inform white Australian society call upon property-owning subjects to enact certain processes of mutual recognition. In particular, to exercise orderly possession and control of *our* property we need to be *recognised* as rightful owners by subjects who are equally positioned to give us this recognition. The Indigenous peoples who remain dispossessed are not in a position to supply white Australians with this indispensable form of recognition.

Moreover, our collective failure to give and receive this basic form of recognition gives rise to an "ontological disturbance" in the sense of a disturbance of the very conditions of our being as agents in the world and as self-determining subjects. But this failure also represents an *onto-pathology*, in that we perpetuate our condition willfully. In our earlier paper¹⁰ we have argued that white Australian being essentially takes the form of a collective criminal will: we willfully deny the violence that is constitutive of our relationship to Indigenous peoples. This violence refers both to the ongoing nature of our role in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and to the effects on our way of being as white Australians. Significantly, without the mutual recognition that we have outlined above, the coherence of our own being as white Australian is disturbed and we compromise our property-owning identity.

Consequently, if property-owning subjectivity is part of the inescapable framing of our being as white Australian, it affects our chances for any presence, our chances of *being present* as white Australians. For the white Australian, the movement of emerging-merging being that we mentioned at the outset is linked to the relationship between property-owning subjects. Indeed, in the case of modern Western property-owning subjectivity, the condition of emerging coincides with that of merging *with another property-owning subject*. Even though this defines the structure of emerging-merging selves of the modern West, the white Australian onto-pathology denies us the opportunity to engage in such processes effectively. This is how the condition of our continuing non-presence has taken hold.

⁷ Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, "Racism, Foreigner Communities and the Onto-Pathology of White Australian Subjectivity"

⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 40-46

⁹ Henry Reynolds, *Aboriginal Sovereignty* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1996).

¹⁰ Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, "Racism, Foreigner Communities and the Onto-Pathology of White Australian Subjectivity".

The imperative of the Indigenous-white Australian encounter

There is one solution to this predicament. In order to realise our potential to become emerging-merging selves we need to redress the self-imposed compromised nature of our property-owning subjectivity. This calls for a double act of erasing and embracing. We need at once to erase our claim to rightful ownership of Australian territory and to embrace Indigenous peoples' sovereignty rights and to recognise them as the genuine property owners.

This recognition of Indigenous peoples as property-owning subjects in their own right is the only form of recognition available to us. Our onto-pathology requires a radical reversal of the forms of engagement of property-owning subjects with their external world. That is, it demands, not that we retain possession of our material world, but that we detach from it in order, ultimately, to regain the lost integrity of our subjectivity. The circumstances of the onto-pathology of white Australian being call for this sort of radical response in order for the white Australian to announce its being, to take responsibility for it and through this process to gain presence. Consequently, our recognition of Indigenous people's sovereignty rights is indispensable to the creation of the conditions of being present, of presence, for white Australians.

This double act of erasing-embracing is also the pre-condition for creating a vision and, in a related way, for becoming historical. The creation of a vision of the future within the terms we have been describing makes possible our return to our past with an opportunity for establishing a reflective relationship to it. Today, the Indigenous-white Australian encounter holds out the possibility of a movement for white Australians from the present as presence to the future as vision and from the future as vision to the past as living memory rather than as the graveyard of facts. Here we note that the primary issue for historiography should not be whether a statement of facts is true or false but whether we are inspired by living memory. Only within such memories do facts acquire their genuine truth-bearing force. Our onto-pathology denies us the opportunity to live out our being as visionary bearers of living memory. Consequently, our insular debates centre on maintaining what we might call fact-worshipping practices.¹¹

Today, white Australians are entirely dependent upon the presence of Indigenous peoples for some semblance of an association with living memory. Here we are referring not to our own romanticised idealisations of

¹¹ The terms of engagement that Keith Windschuttle's claims encourage are a case in point. See Manne, 2003.

Indigenous cultures but to Indigenous peoples' presence before us as bearers of political struggles.¹² This encounter, our exposure to the being of Indigenous peoples' political struggles against their dispossession, confirms our loss of living memory. That is, the presence of Indigenous peoples generates the imperative for white Australians to become historical. On this analysis, in becoming historical it is not enough for us to remember and admit that to be white Australian is to be implicated in the violent dispossession of Indigenous peoples. It is not even enough for us to remember or admit to past injustices whose effects are still being suffered today.¹³ We need to make a deeper, more reflective turn to our non-presence. Reflection without attentiveness to its ontology is busy recruiting facts and arguing over their authenticity.

In the absence of this reflective relationship, there continues what we call "the betrayal of thought". This refers to the unwillingness of white Australians to reflect upon the ontological conditions of our being that we mentioned at the outset – the willful denial of our violent relationship to Indigenous dispossession that constitutes the collective criminal will of white Australia. To reflect upon our past does not just call for recognition that historical injustices warrant remedies, whether symbolic or calling for the return of lands, compensation for losses and other forms of redistribution of wealth; in the circumstances it requires an unconditional surrender.

The onto-pathology of white Australia and Greek-Australian historical memory

For white Australians who are also members of the Greek-Australian communities, such an unconditional surrender translates into two further imperatives. The first calls for the development of an approach to historiography that enables us to understand the precise nature of the Greek-Australian communities' role in the history of white Australia's dispossession of the Indigenous peoples. In our recently published extensive analysis of the twentieth century history of Greek-Australian activism, we argue that this role has centered on the constitution and activation of the Greek-Australian communities as "perpetual foreigner communities", communities whose inside-outsider status positions them

¹² Cf. Langton, Marcia: "The Getting of Power", *Australian Feminist Studies*, no. 6 (1988), pp. 1-5 and Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism* (St Lucia, QLD.: University of Queensland Press, 2000).

¹³ Cf. Janna Thompson, "Historical Obligations", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol 78, no 3 (September 2000), pp. 334-345. See also the articles in the "Special Issue on Indigenous Rights" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (2001) 78-3

appropriately to act out the role of the legitimators of white Australian authority.¹⁴ Here, we would like to add that our research into the history of twentieth century Greek-Australian activism reinforces the criticism of white Australian historiography that historians such as Ann Curthoys have raised, namely that the traditional tripartite separation of the study of the histories of the dominant white Australian nation, the Indigenous peoples and the migrant minorities of Australia is indefensible.¹⁵ For such divisions inevitably facilitate the (re)production of historical memory in the fact-worshipping mode that we mentioned above.

The second important imperative calls upon us to understand the many ways in which the progressive elements within the communities have fostered resistance to their position as perpetual foreigners and have created the opportunities for the development of a conception of Greek-Australian citizenship that permits us to take responsibility and to become accountable for our role in the history-making process. The struggles of Greek-Australian migrants to remake Australian society into a genuinely just and equal society for all constitute an all-important part of the imperative for self-knowledge. Our larger research project provides the historical evidence that shows that the political practice of the Greek-Australian activists of the twentieth century embodied the very precondition for creating a vision and becoming historical in the abovementioned sense. That is, we are able to read many of the campaigns and interventions of the Greek-Australian activists as significant manifestations of the double act of erasing-embracing that we discussed in the previous section.

Conclusion

We have yet to write the history of white Australia, including the history of its migrant minorities, as historical beings. This requires coming to terms with the white Australian onto-pathology. We do not mean this as a criticism of historians, but pose it as a challenge to those of us who would relate to their history reflectively. We would like to end with a metaphor that might help to convey a sense of the scale of the self-transformation that the condition of white Australian being requires in order to make possible

¹⁴ Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos (in Greek), *From Foreigner to Citizen: Greek Migrants and Social Change in White Australia (1897-2000)* (Melbourne and Pireas: Eothion Publications, 2004).

¹⁵ Ann Curthoys, "An Uneasy Conversation: The Multicultural and the Indigenous", in J. Docker and G. Fischer (eds), *Race Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2000) and "Immigration and Colonisation: New Histories", *UTS Review*, vol. 7, no. 1 (May 2001), pp. 170-179.

an adequate theorisation of Australian whiteness. In his *Cantos*, Ezra Pound writes:

I brought you this crystal ball.
Who can lift it?¹⁶

If we imagine for a moment that the white-Australian-Indigenous encounter poses a challenge of this magnitude, then it becomes apparent that, for the white Australian who accepts the challenge, a mere change in our understanding of the facts will not do when a radical transformation of our whole being is warranted. In order to have any hope at all of lifting the crystal ball we would need to take on its shape. This is our supreme challenge, a challenge that drives us in the direction of our ontology and so unavoidably in the direction of becoming philosophical.

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¹⁶ Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 795.