

Australian Idol versus Cronulla: Whither the Postcolonising Nation?

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Introduction

This paper is an exploration of 'where Australia is at' as a postcolonising nation. This will be set up by comparing two apparently unrelated events and their implications: firstly, the popularity of the reality TV show *Australian Idol* over the last three years, particularly its popularity within the youth demographic; and secondly the Cronulla 'race riots' in December 2005. With regards to *Australian Idol*, the focus will be on the ethnic diversity of its winners and the fact that these winners were decided upon by the popular votes of the show's audience. The question here is whether this is a reflection of a generational shift in postcolonial engagement with diversity, and therefore an important moment in Australia as a postcolonising nation. This idea however is severely tested by the Cronulla riots, hence the comparison. Clearly, there is a wide variety of factors that contributed to 'Cronulla', but a significant number of the rioters (or at least the ones singled out by television cameras and journalists) were members of a young generation of Australians who also appear to fit the audience profile of *Australian Idol*. So the second question is: do the Cronulla riots represent a setback in the postcolonising process? A more general question then becomes: do mediated versions of diversity (like *Australian Idol*) accelerate the *appearance* of postcoloniality, where 'real' events (albeit highly mediated in a different sense) paint a more sobering picture?

To answer these questions this paper will test whether a framework of postcolonial theory or postcolonial studies can be usefully applied. From an Indigenous perspective, Aileen Moreton-Robinson has usefully coined the term postcolonising, rather than the more final 'postcolonial nation', 'to signify the active, the current and the continuing nature of the colonising relationship that positions us as belonging but not belonging' (2003: 38). This is attractive because 'postcoloniality' is seen here as a continuing process, in which different subjects occupy very different positions, particularly in Indigenous/white settler societies such as Australia and New Zealand. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson says of Australia, 'In Australia

the colonials did not go home and 'postcolonial' remains based on whiteness' (2003: 30; Smith 1999). The position of non-white settlers in Australia complicates this process even further, but at the same time draws attention to the dynamic nature of the postcolonising nation, for whiteness is not a static category and access to it changes over time and in different contexts. For Moreton-Robinson however, 'Indigenous people cannot forget the nature of migrancy and we position all non-Indigenous people as migrants and diasporic. (...) the inalienable nature of our relation to land, marks a radical, indeed incommensurable, difference between us and the non-Indigenous' (2003: 31; Collins-Gearing 2005).

The term 'postcolonising' then, allows for the important recognition that 'Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples are situated in relation to (post)colonisation in radically different ways- ways that cannot be made into sameness' (2003: 30), nor should they be, because resisting the impulse to create sameness (as opposed to equity) can help illuminate the powerful forces that try to do precisely that, as part of a restricting but politically dominant form of nation building. If used in Moreton-Robinson's conceptualisation, the term 'postcolonising' inherently resists unifying discourses that sometimes underlie the term 'postcolonial'. Moreover, it actually allows us to see difference as part of an ongoing, dynamic, and potentially productive field of power relations, rather than something that signifies a lack and therefore needs to be erased. However, it is at the same time open to misappropriation, in which case 'postcolonising' would be seen as part of a process *towards* a postcolonial nation that would in turn be based on an assumption of linear progression, which in itself is of course deeply embedded in colonial discourses and implicated in colonial practices. This draws attention to some of the critiques levelled at postcolonial studies and postcolonial theory in general, and I will begin by addressing some of these first.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory is only one part of a larger field which is variously described as 'postcoloniality', a 'postcolonial condition', a 'postcolonial position', and so on. It seems at once to be characterising a particular historical moment (that which comes after colonisation), a body of intellectual work, a subject position and a moral standpoint. Jane Roscoe points out that 'As with many of the other "post" terms, it has taken on the status of an accepted and unproblematic term, used widely, and frequently without explanation' (1999: 20); in other words, it has become close to being an empty signifier. As Brydon notes, 'the very breadth of postcolonialism's reach has aroused concerns that the concept may prove unduly homogenising, overly ambitious, ahistorical, and thus complicit with the

very relations of inequality that it ostensibly seeks to protest against' (2000: 7-8). For my purposes here, I want to address two of these concerns in particular: firstly the idea that the concept is homogenising; and secondly the concern about the institutionalisation of the term itself and of the field of studies.

The concerns about homogenising impulses relate to the way in which postcolonial studies tend to approach colonisation as an overall discursive project, and Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is often singled out in this respect. Stuart Hall for example has argued that, 'Australia and Canada, on the one hand, Nigeria, India and Jamaica on the other, are certainly not 'post-colonial' *in the same way*, but this does not mean that they are not 'post-colonial' *in any way*' (1996: 246). But although this complicates colonisation as different in different contexts, it does not essentially upset the binary of coloniser/ colonised, which is highly complex in settler nations like Australia and Aotearoa/ New Zealand. Sneja Gunew notes that, 'Too often in postcolonial critiques, European immigrant groups are homogenised and made synonymous with a naturalised 'whiteness', or various imperialisms' (2005: 9). Her point is that often in postcolonial studies, 'Europe' is equated with colonisation in an unproblematic way, without recognising the complexities of colonisation *within* Europe, which in turn have shaped and continue to shape migration processes. In an Australian context for example, some migrants may be both victims and beneficiaries of colonisation *at the same time*.

In addition, some of the theoretical concepts associated with postcolonial theory have been critiqued for being potentially homogenising, for example the concept of the Other, and in particular Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity. Stuart Ward for example quotes Arif Dirlik as saying: "So we are all hybrids- so what?" (2003: 48). This is not as simplistic as it sounds, because it draws attention to the need to be more specific about different degrees of hybridity. In other words, while all of us are culturally hybrid to some extent, the context in which this hybridity is played out, and particularly its relation to power, must be carefully analysed. This is particularly important at a time when the forces of homogenisation are growing in strength, as they are in the Australian context.

The second concern about postcolonial theory and postcolonial studies relates to their apparent institutionalisation in university contexts. This is primarily a concern about the institutionalisation of postcolonial studies, in that through this institutionalisation the critical edge is perceived to have been lost. In other words, the concern is that this critical edge has been incorporated into dominant structures and thereby 'domesticated', making it 'benign' and perhaps 'cutely' subversive, rather than a real threat to established discourses. This

has led to a sense that postcolonialism has run its course, and is thus not relevant anymore. However, one of the major strengths of postcolonial studies is, in my view, that the term 'postcolonial' itself is continually questioned within the field, as part of questioning established structures and practices. Also, postcolonial theory has such a wide reach across different disciplines that it is difficult to contain under an umbrella term. This provides very attractive opportunities, and I agree provisionally with Brydon when she argues that 'the strengths of postcolonialism derive from its ability to cast the familiar in a fresh light, to encourage cross-disciplinary dialogue, and to provoke the rethinking of traditionally accepted disciplinary boundaries' (2000: 7). This seems an extremely important project in the current Australian social climate, with its strong homogenising currents.

If applied with care then, postcolonial theory allows us to continually deconstruct inflexible categories such as 'nation', 'culture', 'race', 'immigrant', 'refugee', 'whiteness', 'Indigenous' and so on. This is a project that is never finished, which is an important part of its strength. Despite the frequent charge that postcolonialism is 'backward looking', I agree with Ashcroft who argues that 'in the end, the transformative energy of post-colonial societies tells us about the present because it is overwhelmingly concerned with the future' (2001: 17). To use the term 'postcolonising' rather than 'postcolonial' is thus very useful, as it foregrounds this concern with the present and future. In a recent book called *Postcolonialism meets Economics*, the editors Zein-Elabdin and Charusheela aim for what they call 'a critical approach and an attitude of continuous revision and reflection, rather than a single theory' (2004: 7). If this attitude is adopted in postcolonial studies, it will remain a field of study with a continuous relevance and the critical ability to counteract the forces of homogenisation.

Australian Idol

So how can this be applied to *Australian Idol*? As a specific type of Reality TV show with a strong competition element, based on a British formula, *Australian Idol* has been a major ratings success for the past three years, targeting primarily a young generation of Australians on Channel 10, the 'youth network'. In shows like this (and *Big Brother* is another one, although with more control on the producers' part), both contestants and the viewers have a direct influence over the outcome of the show: the contestants through their skills or appeal, and viewers through their mobile voting power. Given the ethnic diversity of its participants and the fact that this diversity is primarily driven by audience votes (mostly via SMS), a case could be made that this is a reflection of a new generation's engagement with diversity, and thus an important moment in the postcolonising nation. The winners of *Australian Idol*

(for example Guy Sebastian, Shannon Noll and Paulini Curuenavuli in season one; Casey Donovan and Anthony Callea in season two; and Kate DeAraugo and Emily Williams in season three) are ethnically very diverse, which may suggest that ethnic diversity is an increasingly 'natural' part of a young generation's social and cultural environment. In other words, you could argue that we may be witnessing a generational shift in terms of attitudes towards ethnic diversity. This is supported by the ways in which participants in the show can be seen to have a considerable degree of agency in terms of how they perform their identity. The longer they are in the competition, the more we (as an audience) get to learn about their lives and backgrounds. This does not just apply to their song choices, but is also reinforced by little clips that show aspects of their personal and family lives and the presence of family members in the live audience.

What has come across strongly during the last three seasons is that there appears to be very little 'silencing' or 'erasing' of ethnic, class and gender identities; instead, there seems to be a confident foregrounding of these differences. Moreover, this is an important aspect of the contestants' popularity. One example of this confidence, and an example of what we might call 'everyday hybridity', was Anthony Callea's defining moment when he performed 'The Prayer' in Italian. He had already established the importance of his Italian heritage by this time through frequent little vignettes that are pre-recorded and inserted into the show to introduce the contestants. Tompkins argues that 'second-generation subjects are burdened by cultural baggage from the fatherland, baggage that they did not pack, but for which they are nevertheless responsible' (2001: 349). However, Callea's performance of his identity is not so much characterised by a 'burden', but rather by a productive energy which draws strength from cultural heritage, and can therefore be seen as part of a continuous 'contestation of what it means to be Australian' (Ahluwalia 2005: 500). To see this as a 'burden' privileges the white Anglo-settler subject and restricts the possibility of a hybrid Australian subject, by keeping it on the margins. Furthermore, it keeps the binary between 'immigrants' and the 'Australian way of life' firmly in place. Similarly, and part of the same impulse, is the idea that migrants necessarily have a 'longing for the homeland'. Although this certainly applies to many migrants, it should be seen as a matter of degree, rather than a defining characteristic, because it essentialises and restricts the possibilities for migrant subjectivities. Thus, this impulse should be resisted as part of what Rey Chow calls 'the battle against the ideology embedded in the rhetoric of universals' (2005: 591). Identity should not be prescriptive, and cannot be. Drawing on the culture of the 'homeland', whether real or imagined, is a hybrid complex practice, and highly glocalised.

Like Callea, Emily Williams, during 2005's season of *Australian Idol*, confidently and proudly foregrounded her Pacific and migratory background with family connections in Otago. She is a young mother living in the Brisbane suburb of Inala, which has a similar reputation to Otago in Auckland. But this background was never 'silenced' or 'erased': rather, it was appropriated as a symbol of pride and an important aspect of her identity performance. As with Callea, this is not an essentialised identity, but a complexly hybrid and glocalised one which combines elements of place with elements of family and global cultural influences. A prime example of the latter can be seen in her song choices and her appropriated use of African American slang: her most personal choice of a song was Lauryn Hill's 'To Zion', which reflects both personal and socio-cultural issues that have clear links to Williams' life. Ashcroft argues that 'while globalisation is often understood in terms of large-scale phenomena, its homogenising tendencies are effected in a heterogeneous array of local situations. (...) Globalisation obtains its energy from its very diffusion, global culture making itself at home in motion rather than in a place, quite unlike the energy of imperial control' (2001: 213). This appropriation of culture in motion, rather than place, can be clearly seen in the examples of Callea's and William's identity performances, in that they both draw on an eclectic mix of cultural influences, which necessarily includes 'place'. But perhaps 'it is when place is least spatial, that it becomes most identifying' (2001: 125).

This applies to 2004 winner, 16 year old Casey Donovan, to some extent as well, albeit more problematically so. Unlike other contestants like Callea, Williams, Kate DeAraugo and Shannon Noll, she neither emphasised where she was from (beyond the four walls of her bedroom in her parental home) nor her Indigenous background, but focused instead on her musical subcultural influences. Again though, her Indigenous background was never 'silenced' and she appeared to have considerable agency in terms of the performance of her identity. Her main influences were American punk rock bands like Nirvana and Incubus, and this informed her dress style as well. This fits comfortably with the appeal of these bands to teenage angst and rebellion. We could leave it at that, and see it as an example of what Hartley and McKee (2000) suggest in relation to the Indigenous public sphere: that Indigenous people are not underrepresented in the media, but rather too narrowly represented, which has a constraining effect on the potential subject positions open to them. Following their argument, Donovan's identity performance can be seen to subvert these narrow boundaries to some extent, as she confidently steers clear of limited but hegemonic expectations of Indigeneity. However, when applying a 'traditional' postcolonial framework, Donovan's lack of appeal to place in her identity performance is inevitably linked to colonial dispossession. As Moreton-Robinson argues, 'Indigenous people's sense of

home and place are configured differently to that of migrants. There is no other homeland that provides a point of origin, or place for multiple identities' (2003: 37). This is the basis for her argument about the incommensurability between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Australia, and it renders Indigenous people effectively 'homeless', if only in a legal sense. She explains that 'The legal regime of the nation state places Indigenous people in a state of homelessness because our ontological relationship to the land, which is the way we hold title, is incommensurable with its own exclusive claims of sovereignty' (2003: 37). Interestingly, it was only after being crowned *Australian Idol* that Donovan began to align herself more closely with her Indigenous identity through the media. This was perhaps in reaction to the 'make-over' she underwent during the show's season. She went from baggy trousers and dreadlocks to highly stylised makeup and ball gowns, and it clearly made her uncomfortable. This illustrates that while *Australian Idol* affords its contestants a certain amount of agency, there are definite limits to this which run along an axis of race and ethnicity, as well as gender and class, and are ultimately influenced by perceptions of what the 'mainstream' audience wants.

The examples of identity performance outlined above do not happen on the margins of society (in the form of so-called 'ethnic theatre' for example, or specifically marked as 'ethnic' on SBS), but they appear on prime time, mainstream commercial television. This is significant because 'ethnic theatre' addresses a middle class educated audience, and thus can be seen as having a 'preaching to the converted' element to it. Similarly, SBS targets specific ethnic groups in its programming strategies, as well as the educated middle classes, who like to 'sample' diversity as part of their 'cosmopolitan identity'. But these instances of engagement with diversity do not essentially upset the status quo; they are played out on the relative margins of society and do not shift the balance of power. *Australian Idol* on the other hand occupies a firmly centred position, and has been a huge ratings success for Channel 10. The final of the first series of *Australian Idol* was the most popular program broadcast in Australia during 2003, and the second most popular non-sporting broadcast in Australian television history (wikipedia.org). So does this combination of popularity and ethnic diversity in the mainstream public sphere reflect a generationally different 'postcolonial' engagement with diversity and therefore an important moment in Australia as a postcolonising nation? The answer is perhaps, but only if we accompany that assertion with a series of disclaimers.

Australian Idol has a competition element (which makes it comparable to sports), and a popular music/ entertainment aspect. These are the two arenas in which ethnic and racial

diversity has long been 'palatable' and 'non-threatening', as it is to a large extent based on performance and not seen as posing a structural change to power relations. If it should do so, it tends to be relatively quickly incorporated, as the example of Casey Donovan shows. In addition, I believe there is an important distinction between what I would call the 'consumption of difference' on the one hand, and an engagement with difference in everyday contexts (or the 'real world'). Mediation has a distancing effect which creates 'comfort' and 'safety' on the one hand, but at the same time intensifies a desire for Otherness that can be consumed. To make it consumable however, and this is the paradox, Otherness needs to be diluted and its threatening potential removed. Writing about romance novels, Teo argues that 'desire for dark Otherness is often tamed and trained into desire for suntanned sameness' (2003: 289). So while contestants on *Australian Idol* are encouraged to foreground their individual 'Otherness', they are ultimately being moulded into consumable commodities, to be fitted into the hegemonic power structure of the music industry in this case. It is interesting to note in this context that while the diversity outlined above appeared to be very successful in the moment and for a period after the show aired (both Guy Sebastian and Anthony Callea broke sales records), the most enduring *Idol* of all is Shannon Noll. Noll is the prototype of the 'white male Anglo Aussie battler' if ever there was one, which affords some perspective to my claim that *Australian Idol* could be seen as reflective of a new generation's 'postcolonial' engagement with diversity. Furthermore, it is worth noting in the current social climate, that none of the *Australian Idol* winners were Lebanese Australians nor indeed anyone with an Islamic background, perhaps indicating certain limits to 'acceptable otherness' in the mainstream Australian imagination.

Overall then, the move from consuming difference in a mediated sense, to changing one's attitude towards the multi-ethnic neighbours down the road, is not necessarily 'seamless' and the two may not go hand in hand. Similarly, 'diversity as mediated entertainment' is something quite distinct from 'diversity in the workplace'. And this is where the comparison to the events at Cronulla comes in.

Cronulla

As noted earlier a wide variety of factors contributed to 'Cronulla' and its aftermath. But while acknowledging that, a significant number of the rioters were members of a young generation of Australians who also appear to fit the audience profile of *Australian Idol*: they were highly 'SMS-literate' for a start (Goggin 2006). This raises a number of questions: firstly, do the Cronulla riots represent a setback in the postcolonising process? This would only be

the case, I would argue, if we see this process as a linear one, which is problematic because it assumes that this is a project that can be finished and finalised. It is more useful then to see the postcolonising nation as a process, characterised by contradictions which must be seen in their specific contexts. While I earlier critiqued Tompkins' idea of cultural baggage as a 'burden' as being implicated in keeping binaries firmly in place, it could quite easily be applied to the Cronulla riots (although I would call it 'racial baggage' in that context). In the specific context of that Sunday afternoon on Cronulla beach, this 'racial baggage' became crystallised as the prime factor 'involving almost farcical yet deadly earnest efforts to identify, respectively, people of "Middle Eastern" appearance (often specifically "Lebanese") and to threaten or bash them' (Goggin 2006: 1). The 'Lebanese' response over the next few days followed the same pattern in relation to people of 'Anglo' appearance.

The reactions to the Cronulla events in the mainstream media were both interesting and disconcerting, because they exemplify narrow and homogenising definitions of what it means to be Australian. Mark Goodwin (NSW Assistant Police Commissioner) for instance was quoted in *The Sydney Morning Herald* as saying: 'this is ludicrous behaviour; it is *unAustralian*. We all share this wonderful country' (Goggin 2006: 1, my emphasis). There was a proliferation of terms like 'unAustralian', 'mateship' (always represented as a 'typically Australian value'), and the 'Australian way of life' in the mainstream media, primarily via political spokespeople and a sizeable section of journalists and talkback radio hosts. This in itself is of course nothing new; these terms have been a central ingredient of both the Howard government's and the opposition Labour party's political rhetoric for a long time, and they get reinforced on every possible occasion, most recently in relation to the Tasmanian mining accident in 2006. Ahluwalia traces the widespread use of the 'Australian way of life' back to the 1950s, and notes that 'although there was no precise definition of the 'Australian way of life', it nevertheless was characterised by assimilation [for both migrants and Aboriginal people] and the view that homogeneity was vital for Australia's future success as a society (2005: 503). He goes on to argue that 'it was precisely this lack of definition of the 'Australian way of life' which was vital to maintaining the power and hegemony of the white Anglo-settler population which remained committed to maintaining Australia's connection with Britain' (503). Although this is phrased in the past tense, these forces of homogenisation have recently returned with a vengeance, particularly since 9/11 and various boat people 'invasion scares'. Ironically, it is precisely the exclusionary properties of these homogenising terms and their associated discourses that create the social climate which ultimately leads to 'Cronulla'. 'Calm' has since been reinstated, 'or rather perhaps the habitual, much less visible, expression of whiteness as usual' (Goggin 2006: 5).

The continuous reinforcement of homogenising discourses in the mainstream public sphere has the effect of solidifying rigid binary oppositions of race and ethnicity. The resulting highly charged social climate leads to a kind of identity performance which is very different from the one outlined in the context of *Australian Idol*. In this context, the attack by a couple of individuals of Lebanese descent on perhaps the ultimate icon of the 'Australian way of life', the volunteer life saver on the beach, became the catalyst for the riots that pushed the binaries to their rigid limits. At this point it is useful to refer back to postcolonial frameworks of analysis, and in particular the concept of agency, because the concept of agency tends to be appropriated to 'recover' the colonised on a theoretical level in the colonial relationship of coloniser/ colonised. Ashcroft for example argues that 'colonised cultures have often been so resilient and transformative that they have changed the character of imperial culture itself. This 'transcultural' effect has not been seamless or unvaried, but it forces us to reassess the stereotyped view of colonised peoples' victimage and lack of agency' (2001: 2). This agency is seen as empowering and therefore automatically 'positive', because it subverts hegemonic power structures. This works very well when applied to *Australian Idol*, as in my analysis above where agency is seen as empowering, because it confidently subverts narrow definitions of what it means to be Australian. However, 'Cronulla' and its aftermath show that agency is a slippery concept which is always linked to power, but not necessarily in predictable and 'positive' ways. The youths who took to the streets in the days after Cronulla, to smash cars and 'terrorise quiet neighbourhoods' were clearly acting with considerable agency, but not the kind of agency that is usually celebrated in postcolonial studies. In other words, this is not the kind of benign and quietly subversive agency we like to 'recover' from history in literary texts, nor the kind of agency that is analysed above in relation to the popular entertainment of *Australian Idol*, but it is rather a kind of agency that is confronting, unsettling and in your face right now, with unpredictable consequences for the future. In addition, it is a kind of agency directly related to a position in society that is characterised by an intersection of race, ethnicity, gender and class, to varying but interconnecting degrees. It is thus a kind of agency that is firmly part of a postcolonising nation in motion, rather than a postcolonial nation.

Conclusion

This leads me to an overall concluding question: do *Australian Idol* and 'Cronulla' represent opposite sides of the same postcolonising coin? The answer in my view is a provisional yes, because postcolonisation is a complex and often contradictory process, as the analyses of

Australian Idol and 'Cronulla' show. It is therefore also a frequently uncomfortable process and one that is never finished, because it goes to the heart of relations of power, which are both context specific and forever subject to change. It is a process which is subject to changing circumstances on both a local and global level, and as such it is also subject to sudden twists and turns, reinforced by continuous media coverage in a variety of genres. Homogenising impulses are part of recurring attempts to 'manage' this apparent unpredictability, and it is therefore not surprising that the impulse towards homogenisation is deeply embedded in 'imperial and colonial habits of mind' (Brydon 1995: 11-12). The importance of postcolonial studies in this context is that it aims to 'circumvent imperial and colonial habits of mind' (11-12), and the notion of 'resistance' (to homogenisation) lies at the heart of postcolonial debate. The Cronulla riots show that this battle is far from won, and for all the talk about 'blurred boundaries', 'border crossings' and 'hybridised third spaces', there are certain types of borders that are as strong as they ever were; the political and administrative borders around nation-states in particular, but also the more intangible discursive boundaries. Charusheela puts it this way: 'How does postcolonial theorising avoid the terrain of liberalist multicultural celebration and cultural relativism that seem to undo any potential critical edge on behalf of the subjects for whom such theorising was first put forward?' (2004: 50). In response I would suggest a two step strategy: firstly by continuing to interrogate and critique its own terms of reference (like Moreton-Robinson does for example), and secondly by moving its critiques beyond the comforting walls of academia. In short, postcolonial studies should ask itself: what is the most effective form of resistance in the face of homogenising forces that are gathering in strength? Continuing to look for answers to this question will provide postcolonial studies with the tools to make valuable strategic interventions in the future directions of postcolonising nations like Australia and Aotearoa/ New Zealand.

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