Who Counts as European? From Orientalism to Occidentalism

Sneja Gunew (University of British Columbia, Canada)
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“The concept of ‘the West’ as it is used in postcolonial theory...has no coherent or credible referent. It is an ideological category masquerading as a geographic one, just as—in the context of modern Orientalist discourse—‘Islam’ is an ideological category masquerading as a religious one” (Neil Lazarus 2002: 44)

“...the West is often identified with Europe, the United States, us, or with that enigmatic entity, the modern Self” (Fernando Coronil 1996: 52)

Patchwork Selves and Modernity
Critiquing ‘whiteness’, has assumed some density over the past few years in North America and, increasingly and differently in the settler colonies. One of the problems has been that they have to some degree consolidated, rather than disaggregated, concepts of the ‘western subject’ and of what constitutes ‘European/Western civilization’. Attempting to dislodge this seeming “universal epistemological power” (Wiegman: 150) of ‘whiteness’ the following paper comes at these issues from a somewhat different angle, analysing those terms which have traditionally been used to describe the contributions of ‘European/Western civilization’: cosmopolitanism, rationalism etc. Debates anchored by ‘cosmopolitanism’ have been re-invoked by those who are grappling with the rise of ethnic absolutism and national universalisms—thus cosmopolitanism is being revisited as a way to rethink globalization and post-national configurations. Critical cosmopolitanism is being used to rethink relationships between nationalisms and globalization and to counter the rise of various forms of fundamentalism across the world (Cheah & Robbins 1998; Gilroy 2005; Appiah 2006; Appadurai 1996, 2001; Gandhi 2005; Derrida 2002; Breckenridge et al. 2002). In the past terms such as ‘multiculturalism’ were used to indicate the need for tolerance of difference and Pheng Cheah captures this in a recent essay “Xenophobic conflicts and the tyranny of the hegemonic cultural majority can only be controlled by the construction of a multicultural civil society that respects the differences of minority cultures” (Cheah 2006). But, in general, because multiculturalism has becomes associated for too long with state management of difference, other terms are needed and cosmopolitanism is emerging as a way to set up a new utopianism to counter the bleakness usually associated with globalisation. One thinks for example of Ulrich Beck’s ‘Cosmopolitan Manifesto’.

Who, after all, would have predicted that the familiar binaries would resurface with such a vengeance and that they would seek their origins in those constitutive old myths of East and West, Islam and Christianity? Once again we have the claims made on behalf of the modern Self in terms of having a privileged access to modernity, which includes the moral high ground of being more civilized and more ethical, although no histories support this, as we know. This version of the
modern Self also includes the consolidation of ‘interiority’, that is, of having an interior life (as
distinct from a ‘pre-modern’ self which is apparently all surface).

Rather than reaching for a contemporary text I turn now to a compelling allegory of that
modern Self: Dr. Frankenstein’s nameless Creature, man-made out of recycled body parts provided
by those who were not given the opportunity to will or sell their organs for those purposes. In
the contemporary warfare of insults and counter-insults as to whether one is on the side of
postcolonialism, decolonisation, or neo-colonialism this text bears the imprimatur of Spivak’s
famous contention that it does not reproduce the axiomatics of imperialism and is not caught up in
the reproduction of (European) female individualism (Spivak: 316). We note that the Creature
acquires language by eavesdropping on that interesting refugee, Safie, the ‘sweet Arabian’ who
turns out indeed to be Turkish. The text which teaches the Creature and Safie about history and
social relations is Volney’s Ruins of Empire, a telling title catapulting us into the present moment
that includes, in the Creature’s summary, a series of racial stereotypes and culminates in “the
discovery of the American hemisphere” where both he and she wept “over the fate of its original
inhabitants” (Shelley 119). As I am arguing, this text continues to be a constructive allegory for the
modern (auto-ethnographic) self. In terms of pedagogy, it is also useful to point out that the
dominant modality is auditory and not visual—thus bearing witness against the grain of
contemporary orthodoxies that are concerned with the dominance of the visual. The Creature
acquires language more quickly than Safie (who continues to have an accent since her learning
takes root in not quite as virgin a territory as that of the Creature i.e. she already sprouts another
language). As in the case of his literary precursor Caliban, language generates within the Creature
ontological questions: what am I? And hints of its own monstrosity and anomaly, “Was I then a
monster?” (120). If James Whale’s famous film of the 1930s figured the Creature as an allegory of
the working class poor during the Depression, it is as easy to see him now in his hovel adjacent to
the De Laceys’ cottage as a third world subaltern excluded from full humanity. As for Safie, we learn
she was taught by her Christian Arabic mother to seek “independence… forbidden to the female
followers of Mahomet” (124) and escapes her stereotypically conceived orientalist despotic father
and flees to generically European territory. Meanwhile the Creature has learnt to be (or be a
simulacrum of) the human—acquiring language, and affect, but unable to parley this into reciprocity:
he feels; he weeps but no-one weeps for him. He becomes completely alienated and disaffected and
vows revenge on the species. The species can certainly be categorised as humanity but is not
necessarily exclusively European.

Part of what all this is meant to illustrate is that ‘Europe’ remains a metaphor (Coronil citing
Chomsky) in this text. Indeed it takes some searching to figure out where the events are meant to be
taking place or in which language—the De Laceys speak French for example so this is the language
the Creature learns but it is interchangeable with English as the frame text of Capt. Walton writing to
his sister in England makes clear. The difference in this instance is predominantly one of class in
that the class inhabited by the author, Mary Shelley, was one where facility in French, German,
Italian (and undoubtedly Latin) was assumed. In other words, the modern self of that period,
aspired to the condition of a cosmopolitan elite defined by its relatively effortless mobility. Arabs as
a generic term, that can include the Turks, was also a rather fuzzy category. Safie’s father is
described as being imprisoned in Paris because “his religion and wealth, rather than the crime
alleged against him, had been the cause of his condemnation” (122). The reader is also told that
“all Paris was indignant” at this sentence. None the less, the state pursues him and ruins the De
Lacey for helping him escape. So today’s ferociously escalating opposition coded as Christianity/Islam is not necessarily recognisable.

I am citing this early 19th C text to reveal the instability of the terms invoked in relation to the modern Self and to point out that this concept has never been consistently rooted in a particular nation or language and rested in no stable understanding of what constituted Europeanness. Provisional stability in the 19th C resided in class positioning and this was accessible to ‘Arabs’ also, as exemplified by Safie’s wealthy father. The modern self that prevails at present involves incursions into what constitutes (non-) Europeanness (or (non) whiteness) and the ethical and historical legacies any of these entail. The argument in the rest of the paper is that attempts to frame cultural difference have proceeded through a variety of terms ranging from multiculturalism to transculturalism and increasingly cosmopolitanism in conjunction with Orientalism/Occidentalism. All are underpinned by a thematics of contamination. It is a contamination that also functions to destabilise all those categories mentioned, something that may be more clearly discerned when analysed in those settler colonies that comprise the heart of former empire, the ineptly named new world where ‘hapa’ and mixed race multiple allegiances guide the auto-ethnographies even of indigenous subjects. One of my recent contentions, for example, has been that the field of whiteness studies is radically reorganized when indigeneity is placed as the central signifying difference rather than the black-white relations constituted by African Americans. Like Safie and the Creature, the hapless original inhabitants of the Americas (Native Americans) return much more robustly to these discussions than as mere haunting presences.

Let me now explain more fully my argument that terms such as ‘European’ or ‘Western’ acquire their meanings within specific histories of colonial settlement. And I will return here to earlier terms: multiculturalism and transculturalism.

**Destabilizing ‘European’ in the Settler Colonies**

The central argument in my recent book *Haunted Nations* (Gunew 2004) is that ‘multiculturalism’ is a term that acquires very different meanings depending on the local and national contexts and histories within which it circulates. Convening a recent interdisciplinary, three-year project, ‘Transculturalisms,’ involved a focus on multiculturalisms encountering globalization and, once again, clarified the very different ways in which key terms travelled and acquired meaning. As someone who spent several decades working on and in ‘critical multiculturalism’ in Australia, the past fourteen years in Canada created opportunities for comparative work in this area that was able to include as well comparisons with the USA and the UK (to some degree).

In Australia, the immediate postwar migration was overwhelmingly European, though it included many who originated from the outer reaches of Eastern and Southern Europe rather than what was deemed to be the more desirable northern Europe. Indeed Europe-in-diaspora was far from being the homogeneous entity so complacently cited in the ideology I encountered as I grew up, mediated in later years by a Leavisite English Department where one was told that the correct sensibility for being able to appreciate the great tradition could only come from a thorough immersion in Anglophone, preferably English, texts. As I argued in *Haunted Nations* the ‘Europeans’ comprising my parents and others like them were displaced by a version of ‘Europe’ which I was able to identify as Englishness only many decades later, or, more accurately, as Anglo-Celticism because of a particular colonial history (include a class history) of migration to Australia. It resulted
precisely in excluding what is usually designated as ‘Europe’ with its proliferation of languages other than English.

In the 1970s with the advent of what came to be termed a state policy of multiculturalism there appeared suddenly to be room for these other histories and languages, other cultures that comprise a settler colony. Interestingly, at this juncture we also have the rise in Australia of an attention to indigeneity, not before time of course. But the version of this indigeneity often amounted to a struggle over ‘ownership,’ a kind of referencing of the authority of autochthonous primordialism that functioned to shore up an entitlement to a particular version of nationalism. As Benedict Anderson reminds us nationalism has no origins and in these settler nations ethnicities who rendered their ethnicity invisible dominated over those designated ‘ethnics’.

But what set apart the multiculturalism of Australia and Canada, the settler-nations, was that in varying degrees, at least for a time, they incorporated multiculturalism in the descriptions and definitions of the nation. This to some degree persuaded outsiders whose perception of this multiculturalism did not see the embedding of its localized meanings. The examples I singled out (perhaps unfairly) were Robert Stam and Elizabeth Povinelli whose work, I hasten to add I admire greatly. It was simply the fact that in Robert Stam’s case there was an assumption in his work that multiculturalism was always glossed as non-European. In Povinelli’s case, her understanding was that the mention of multiculturalism in Australian state documents meant that there was an adherence to and implementation of cultural difference that threatened to occlude the specific difference represented by indigeneity. I pointed out in my book that there is often a huge abyss between state documents and their enactment. Indeed, the rhetoric functions, one might be forgiven for thinking, as precisely a way of not having to change things. Outsiders who read the nation through its documents saw a very different entity from those who experienced these terms as a way of managing (in the sense of controlling) their claims to cultural difference and an attendant cultural franchise which threatened a certain version of nationalism. But let me recapitulate some of the details of the argument I advanced in Haunted Nations.

In the second chapter I posed a cautionary note regarding Robert Stam’s tendency to project a particular US resonance for terms such as ‘multiculturalism’ and to infer that these meanings have a wider (universal?) application than may indeed be the case. Included in a compilation of postcolonial essays, Robert Stam’s piece ‘Multiculturalism and the Neoconservatives’ (Stam 1997) usefully delivers a summary of what contemporary multiculturalism means within the USA. In brief, he defines it as being primarily concerned with anti-Eurocentrism, in other words, as questioning the universalism of European norms. The problem with his approach is the assumption that Eurocentrism, and even European, have a fixed meaning instead of being, floating signifiers whose meaning changes radically in specific contexts. Indeed, the war over who may claim ‘European’ values continues to be at the heart of Australian and Canadian multiculturalism. My analysis also highlights the fact that racialization is always an arbitrary process and that charged terms belonging to the rhetoric of nationalism are always part of a discursive chain of difference (Hall 1996) rather than being rooted in any ‘natural’ referential system.

As various nations around the world compete to assign themselves the status of post-coloniality there is the increasing recognition that migratory diasporas have cut across many nation-state boundaries and that multicultural societies are an empirical reality in most parts of the world. But while post-colonialism as concept has a certain cachet in academic circles, multiculturalism is viewed with some suspicion as tarnished with a history of coming into being as a state apparatus
invariably designed to manage varied demographics. My second chapter explores some of the
issues associated with the complex dynamics between postcolonialism and multiculturalism in
Australia and Canada and shows them to be at odds with generalizations contained in contemporary
analyses emanating from the USA. Broadly speaking, this is intimately tied to the different colonial
histories of these settler colonies from that of the USA.

Political theorist Alistair Davidson argues that Australian citizenship comprises a deliberate
attempt, behind the facade of multiculturalism, to exclude any deviation from the British
Westminster model of citizenship which authorizes elected representatives rather than referring to
the sovereignty of the people themselves. While the US model is akin to the European one in that
authority is invested in the people, Lisa Lowe’s analysis of American citizenship, for example, reveals
comparable hidden limitations when she points out that in a constitutive sense the abstract notion
of citizenship cannot inherently deal with diversity: ‘In being represented as citizen within the
political sphere... the subject is “split off” from the unrepresentable histories of situated
embodiment that contradict the abstract form of citizenship’ (Lowe 1996: 2). She argues that
citizenship in the USA has been defined precisely against the border threat of the ‘Asian’ in various
guises as a way of defining itself. It cannot include a difference against which it defines itself. The
logic she mobilizes echoes Homi Bhabha’s more abstract and influential essay on the pedagogical
and performative nation where he suggests that pedagogical inclusiveness cannot deal with the
everyday iterative performances of difference (Bhabha 1994: 145). Davidson reveals that it is the
legitimation of the British Westminster system that is being invoked in Australia rather than any
attempt to find the best model for the repository of sovereign authority. In comparable terms Helen
Irving traces a history of Australian federalism in which she identifies ‘the function played by the
Chinese of identifying a community by what it is not. The white populations of Australia
metaphorically became British together’ (Irving 1997: 114).

One is reminded of the often-quoted statement by Slavoj Zizek that what you think you are
seeing is the opposite of what you are getting, ‘the problematic of multiculturalism--the hybrid
coeexistence of diverse cultural life-worlds ... is the form of appearance of its opposite, of the massive
presence of capitalism as universal world system: it bears witness to the unprecedented
homogenization of the contemporary world’ (Zizek 1997: 46). While Zizek’s argument pertains to the
machinations of multinationals one could, cautiously, suggest that a similar process occurs with
this particular version of Australian nationalism, that the fervent invocation of multiculturalism cited
by Elizabeth Povinelli (among others) as evidence, actually functions to mask its very absence from
national practices. But let me examine her position in greater detail since it is organized around the
question of the difference indigeneity makes in a national culture.

Multiculturalism and Indigeneity

Vijay Mishra’s and Bob Hodge’s distinction between what they term complicit and oppositional
postcolonialisms arises out of debates around whether or not settler colonies such as Australia, New
Zealand, and Canada are entitled to call themselves postcolonial. Mishra and Hodge would prefer to
reserve the term postcolonial for the struggles of the indigenous peoples in such countries who
continue internal battles against the descendants of settler colonizers. In the current debates
around citizenship and whether or not Australia will become a republic severing itself from the
British Monarchy, the grounds on which these debates are conducted are charged with old histories
referring back to a specific history of colonization. The ‘unfinished business’ with the Australian
Aborigines continues to surface in the wake of the Mabo and Wik High Court decisions recognizing native title (Perrin 1998; Bartlett 1993) and following a report on the ‘stolen generations’ (Aboriginal children removed from their families). What has not perhaps been observed as readily is that Australian multiculturalism itself can be productively analyzed as an idiosyncratic manifestation of (rather than a departure from) this colonial history. vi

These various elements come together in American anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli’s book where she argues that indigenous citizenship is undermined by multiculturalism, in other words, that the kind of principled adherence to postcolonialism as being reserved in settler colonies for indigenous struggles are being eaten away by a state rhetoric of multiculturalism. My own contention is that the effectiveness of Povinelli’s subtle argument in relation to postcolonial ethics is limited because her interpretation of multiculturalism is based on some questionable assumptions. Povinelli formulates her central argument in the following manner:

... the state and public leans on a multicultural imaginary to defer the problems that capital, (post)-colonialism, and human diasporas pose to national identity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. How do these state, public, and capital multicultural discourses, apparatuses, and imaginaries defuse struggles for liberation waged against the modern liberal state and recuperate these struggles as moments in which the future of the nation and its core institutions and values are ensured rather than shaken... (Povinelli 2002: 29).

While I agree with much of what Povinelli is arguing here I would wish to suggest further that the Australian state in fact fails its ‘multicultural’ subjects as much as it does its indigenous ones.

Using the familiar example of clitoridectomy as marking the limits of multicultural tolerance in the USA and elsewhere, Povinelli describes the affect of ‘national nausea’ which structures a battle about the moral high ground: who owns modernity, humanism, and democracy? While clitoridectomy is one such instance (often invoked in such debates), I would argue that these limits in the Australian context are played out also with respect to non-Anglo-Celtic subjectivity in general, for example, in the much-commented upon case of Helen Demidenko/Darville. Demidenko/Darville’s depiction in her novel, The Hand That Signed the Paper, of Ukrainian complicity in the Holocaust and its further life within the Ukrainian diaspora certainly functioned to induce the affect of ‘national nausea’. In the Australian context it reinforced the prevailing belief that the ethnic ghettos harbour unspeakable atavistic pathologies, outside modernity. vi

It is in her interpretation of Australian multiculturalism that Povinelli places too much emphasis on a limited textual rhetoric. As she puts it:

The Australian juridical, state, and public commitment to multiculturalism provides an especially interesting example of the role a multicultural discourse and fantasy play in cohering national identities and allegiances and in defusing and diverting liberation struggles in late modern liberal democracies ... Australian nationalism came to mean something other than descent from the convict, ruling, or immigrant classes who arrived from Britain and western Europe... Multiculturalism is represented as the externalised political testament both to the nation’s aversion to its past misdeeds, and to its recovered good intentions. (Povinelli 2002: 17-18)
On the contrary, recent events in relation to asylum-seekers have shown the fissures in this rhetoric and indeed there never was any widespread or substantive commitment, even under the previous Labour administration, to this rhetoric as set out by Povinelli. One also needs to point out that immigrants from Britain and those from ‘western Europe’ cannot be linked in an unproblematically naturalized sequence as Povinelli claims. While those distinctions are not made in the USA perhaps, they are most emphatically, and have always been, present in Australia.

Indeed the rhetorical logic is undone even by the time we get to the last sentence cited. The nation invoked here is clearly and exclusively the Anglo-Celtic one and elsewhere in the book Povinelli does recognize this (Povinelli 2002: 19ff.). The shame and sense of history are felt by and are addressed exclusively to those initial Anglo-Celtic colonizers. The failure to address or include those multicultural others in whose name the multicultural rhetoric supposedly speaks is partially measurable in the shifting register of the ‘European’. Povinelli rightly argues that: ‘The court’s use of the shamed Anglo-Celtic Australian fixed the ideal image of the nation as a white, First World, global player in the national imaginary’ (Povinelli 2002: 182-3). The ways in which ‘European’ is invoked hearkens back as much to the US register (a white supremacist discourse marshalled against an African-American history of slavery, as argued in Gordon and Newfield (1996a: 86ff.) as to the more recent ‘Australia as a part of Asia’ which had been introduced by the former Labour government. Povinelli’s very fine account of the tensions between Indigenous Australians and Anglo-Celtic Australian liberalism and their crucial metaphysical as well as direct political implications needed to be troubled by a much more nuanced and differentiated account of those Australian multicultural others to whom she refers in somewhat essentialist ways. In these Australian discourses, ‘European’ remains a shifting register and often means British. To reinforce my point I refer, once again, to Helen Irving’s riveting history of the Australian Constitution where she states: ‘It might be thought that to be British was to be white. This was ... much more literally true for Australians than it was for Britons. There were shades of ‘whiteness’ for the British with the English themselves being as ‘white’ as possible’ (Irving 1997: 73). As well, Alistair Davidson has shown that much has been invested in keeping a continental European distinct from the British political legacy because adherence needs to be maintained to Westminster’s democratic constitutional practices rather than to the very different form they took on the European continent.

Povinelli makes the further mistake of assuming that state documents capture the reality of state policy as it is implemented. For a very different viewpoint one might recommend the archive of documents produced by the many who were involved in trying to implement such multicultural cultural (and other) policies who ran up against their limitations very quickly (Gunew and Rizvi 1994). Those who attempted to use these policy documents as leverage for introducing a greater variety in state funding for the full range of artists from many backgrounds became very aware of how the rhetoric served to camouflage a very different hegemony in this particular arena. It is also in the territory of culture that one is likely to find the most vehement statements by ‘old Australians’ of their refusal to redefine themselves in the ‘multicultural’ ways suggested by Povinelli (Gunew 1993; Hage 1998).

Who counts as European?

Eclipsed in these Australian accounts of citizenship and the nation are the structurally aligned ‘others’, those multicultural and indigenous others, who also have an unacknowledged mutual history. Whereas the imbrications of ‘whiteness’ and ‘Aboriginality’ or the issue of ‘white
Aboriginality’ (McLean 1998) have been traced in some of their complexities, the history of Aborigines and non-Anglo-Celtic settlers has yet to be systematically collected. There appears to be an interesting battle here around who may lay claim to ‘our Natives’ where debates are conducted in terms of ‘who gets it right’, that is, who ‘owns’ or is able to legislate upon the representations of the ‘Native’ (Brown 2003).

The further aspect which needs to be emphasized here is that there is nothing natural about processes of racialization: Avtar Brah points out that different groups are differently racialized (Brah 1996: 228) and Roxana Ng in the Canadian context argues that: ‘While racism today is seen in discriminatory practices directed mainly at coloured people (the Black, South Asian, Native people, for example), skin colour and overt physical differences were not always the criteria for determining racial differences. The racism directed toward the Acadians by the Scots and Irish is no less abhorrent as that encountered by Native people and today’s ethnic and racial minorities’ (Ng 1993: 207). In Canada there has also been a history of seeing Ukrainians, for example, as ‘black’ in the sense that they were not perceived to be part of the English-French European axis.

In Australia there is a comparable history of seeing Southern and Eastern Europeans as ‘black’ (Gunew 1994) whereas Western (particularly Northern) Europeans were relatively quickly accepted. More recently some of these other histories are being represented, ranging from the work of David Malouf whose Lebanese antecedents appear in his autobiographical collection 12 Edmonstone Street, to the more recent controversial work of the Greek Australian writer Christos Tsiolkas whose first novel (Loaded) deals as much with discrimination against Greek Australians as against gays and lesbians. What constitutes ‘white’ or ‘Europe’ or the ‘West’ in Australia is a whole other dilemma, as I’ve indicated. Too often in postcolonial critiques, European immigrant groups are homogenized and made synonymous with a naturalized ‘whiteness’ or with various imperialisms. But at the same time different nations or groups within Europe had very different histories relating to colonialism and imperialism. In the Anglophone world of postcolonial theory, European and Western in fact often slide directly into English or British and no distinctions are made amongst these categories. For example, there is an interesting moment in the Vasta and Castles collection The Teeth Are Smiling: The Persistence of Racism in Multicultural Australia, when Kalpana Ram, an immigrant South Asian academic suggests the following in her analysis of the term NESB: ‘On the one hand, we have English and English literature celebrated as the language of British and, increasingly, of Western identity. On the other hand, post-colonial immigrants are fashioned in opposition to knowledge of English...’ (Ram 1996: 140. My emphasis). For post-colonial immigrants like Ram who bear the legacy of British education this constitutes one kind of anomaly. For those immigrants who locate their ancestry in European cultures and languages other than the British, another kind of absurdity is set up in that notions of the European, made synonymous with Englishness, exclude continental Europe. Thus non-English becomes non-European and non-Western. Echoes of this occur in Canada also as may be seen in Francesco Loriggio’s introduction to a relatively recent collection where he states of Southern European immigrants: ‘Theirs was an
“imperialism of the powerless”, “of the poor” ... which had survival as its aim, not the carrying of the White Man’s Burden. The idea of Europe was probably more of an abstraction to them than the idea of America’ (Loriggio 1996: 13). And yet, one needs also to bear in mind Canadian writer and critic Dionne Brand's contention that ‘whiteness’ as a category does have a certain elasticity over time, but only for some: ‘One can enter not only if one belongs to the so-called founding nations – the English and the French-- but also other European nationalities like the Germans or Ukrainians. Its flexibility and its strength allow it to contain inter-ethnic squabbles... without rending the basic fabric of white entitlement’ (Brand 1994: 174).

From a different perspective located in European Union politics, Stephen Castles speaks of a ‘growing cultural diversity [which] ... feeds into a moral panic which portrays “Fortress Europe” as under threat by unpredictable influxes from the East and the South, evoking the “Mongol hordes” of a distant past’ (Castles 1996: 36). The Hungarian political scientist László Kürti's study of the contemporary tensions between ‘western’, ‘central’ and ‘eastern’ Europe reveal it to be a highly ideological project:

... the making of Central Europe and the discrediting of an Eastern Europe has been a curious blend of historical revision, fiction and intellectual contestation between national identities ... This sort of scholarly reconstruction of a new Europe solidifies the primacy of Western European capitalism and, to some, it stands for western European democracy of the liberalist kind. For many, Europe continues to be what it once was: a developed north and west in opposition to the underdeveloped south. Sandwiched between the two are the undemocratic, unruly, and backward states of eastern Europe (Kürti 1997: 31).

In other words, within Europe itself cultural and political analysts would not be quite so quick to homogenize ‘European’, much less see it as British. But in English-identified settler colonies there appears to be a clear tendency (imperialist in itself) to assume a totalizing move where the border is between the English (and even British) and the rest, not between Europeans (or the West) and the rest. The project of tracing a white supremacist discourse and history in Australia reinforces the recognition that ‘whiteness’ and ‘Europeanness’ are not givens and that the specific historical and colonial dimensions (the differences within) of the term need to be uncovered. Within Canada the continuing split between English and French Canadians clarifies this further. Given the presence of the French tradition, it is more difficult to slide from European to English or British equivalence in Canada or, more accurately, one needs to bear in mind that ‘European’ also has a very specific colonial history in Canada, as Himani Bannerji (2000), amongst others has shown.

One is reminded of Dipesh Chakrabarty's much-quoted ‘postcolonial' injunction to 'provincialise Europe,' that is, to deconstruct the universalist claims of European modernity. It is not a matter of turning our backs on modernity or the Enlightenment, he argues, but of making visible within this history European modernity’s ‘own repressive strategies and practices, the part it plays in the collusions with the narratives of citizenship in assimilating to the projects of the modern state all other possibilities of human solidarity’ (Chakrabarty 2000: 45). The meanings of ‘Europe’ and its supposed counter-term ‘Asia’ or adjacent pairs such as globalization/Americanization are productive ways of instigating this process. In the specific context of the settler colony of Australia I have been arguing that, following Stuart Hall, the legacies of British colonialism structure contemporary Australian debates around the nation, citizenship and multiculturalism so that who owns modernity
(and inherits European civilization) instigates a process of racialization in which the descendants of European postwar immigrants continue to be aligned with Indigenous and ‘Asian’ settlers. I have also posed a cautionary note regarding a particular US resonance for terms such as ‘multiculturalism’ and imply that these meanings have a wider, even universal, application than may indeed be the case. To equate the ‘multicultural project’ with anti-Eurocentrism is undone, as has been argued, by the Australian example that reveals the historical fissures within that term. But to some degree these discussions of cultural difference in terms of multiculturalism have been overtaken or superseded by debates concerning Cosmopolitanism/Occidentalism.

**Cosmopolitanism/Occidentalism**

So let me now turn to a more specific summary of the debates in Occidentalism and how they intersect with Cosmopolitanism. Before these debates changed in the wake of 9/11, there had been an increasing tendency in postcolonial discussions (Chakrabarty, Mohanty etc) to invoke ‘European’ or the ‘West’ as terms that were aligned with the old imperialisms, outside their own histories and internal divisions. It is therefore refreshing to encounter Neil Lazarus’s description of ‘Europe’ and the ‘West’ as an ideological category masquerading as a geographical one. He suggests that it is increasingly put in a binary opposition not so much with Orientalism as with Islam which he also describes as an ideological category masquerading as a religious one. The stakes, as we might expect, are those of claiming ‘modernity’ (45). Lazarus also asks what analytical work terms such as ‘white’ or ‘west’ or ‘European’ do, for example, in the writings of postcolonial critics. His answer is that these terms are often culturalist in such studies and function as fetish to cover over the material histories of specific capitalisms. By operating in this reified culturalist way they are monumentalised as inescapable frame or system that contaminates ‘reason’, modernity etc. The effect, ironically, is to leave little or no room for agency on the part of the ‘non-West’.

Fernando Coronil’s essay “Beyond Occidentalism” helps to illuminate further the meanings of that particular term. He contends that “Occidentalism...is thus not the reverse of Orientalism but its condition of possibility” (53). He suggests the following definitions:

Challenging Orientalism...requires that Occidentalism be unsettled as a style of representation that produces polarized and hierarchical conceptions of the West and its Others and makes them central figures in accounts of global and local histories. ...by ‘Occidentalism’ I refer to the ensemble of representational practices that participate in the productions of the world, which (1) separate the world’s components into bounded units; (2) disaggregate their relational histories; (3) turn difference into hierarchy; (4) naturalize these representations; and thus (5) intervene, however unwittingly, in the reproduction of existing asymmetrical power relations. (Coronil: 57)

Coronil concludes, “If Occidentalism is an imperial malady, one of its major symptoms is the ongoing representation of a colonial Self-Other polarity that mystifies the present as much as the past and obscures its potential for transformation” (76). Rather than seeing Occidentalism as incorporating modernity in contrast to Orientalism, Coronil raises the important point that “the West’s preoccupation with alterity can be seen as constitutive of modernity itself” (78).

Speaking to my own increasing frustrations8, Alistair Bonnett’s very useful overview of the “idea of the West” is partially in response to the way the term is uncritically referred to as self-
explanatory in postcolonial criticism in general. Tracing the term historically he, like Coronil, sees Western and non-Western forms of modernity as mutually constitutive (7). Bonnett examines the links to the highly racialised ‘white crisis’ debates and suggests that “Whilst whiteness can only be mimicked... ‘Westerness’ can be borrowed and adopted” (27). He also points out that while the term ‘West’ to some degree removes overt references to forms of racialisation these remain encoded in it (34). He concludes that “The logic of neo-liberal globalisation reduces political choice to a hollow performance” (165) and that:

Over the past thirty years, the neo-liberal appropriation of the idea of the West has introduced an intellectual narrowness to the concept. It has become a very particular model, associated with specific economic practices (such as privatisation, and labour and capital market flexibility) that are globally and militarily enforced. (139)

Is Critical Cosmopolitanism an Antidote?

It is against such a bleak account of globalisation that Kwame Anthony Appiah situates his plea for a cosmopolitanism that embraces contamination and fallibility i.e. precisely the opposite of instituting the earlier truth-claims associated with European, Western etc. But how further do these two discursive formations: Occidentalism and cosmopolitanism intersect?

Taking up the trope of contamination is a way of responding to this question and the literary genealogy that comes to mind is not much Frankenstein’s Creature as that of Dracula and the vampiric revenge of the subaltern margins of Europe, a figurative system that instantly acquires meaning through the contemporary proximity of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In these fictional manifestations, Dracula’s past as fearless conqueror of the Turks is displaced by his voracious incursions into the heartland of Europe—as though the very fact that he emigrates to England functions oddly to demonstrate the validity of England’s ambitions to be considered part of the European heartland. Recall that in Bram Stoker’s rendition, the mediator who knows Dracula’s provenance and vulnerability is the Dutchman Van Helsing, a curious mixture of scientific rationalism and folkloric superstition. My exemplary text here is Australian writer Christos Tsiolkas’s recent novel Dead Europe (again the title is a telling one and to some degrees works as injunction—the wish for ‘Europe’ to be dead as haunting presence and history). In this disturbing text the narrator, a young Greek-Australian, takes the familiar rite-of-passage journey back to the old culture—Europe in general, and discovers there a defining anti-semitism that he realizes has served to profoundly shape his formation in Australia as a ‘queer ethnic male’. While on the one hand he understands anti-semitism’s corrosive effects he also finds that he cannot free himself of its continuing legacy, as exemplified in the following extract:

In my time in Venice I did not watch the sunset from Harry’s Bar, I did not visit the Guggenheim, I did not have tea at a palazzo or take a ferry to the Lido. I did not feed the pigeons in San Marco’s Square, nor did I travel on a gondola. I did not eat seafood in a restaurant overlooking the Grand Canal, I did not step inside any basilicas or cathedrals. I saw no great paintings by Titian and Tiepolo. Instead, I visited the ghetto and I drank coffee at the Café Beirut. I saw swastikas washed by the rain. And I looked into the wretched face of a despairing man, and saw the ceaseless misery in his eyes, and yes, an eternal exhausting vengeance. The hatred in his eyes was fierce and passionate. They demanded
something of me and they promised no forgiveness. I wanted to forget those eyes, to never look into such eyes again. For one deranged, terrified moment—I promise, only a moment; it passed, I willed it away immediately—I wished that not one Jew had ever walked on the face of this earth (Tsiolkas 158).

The narrator metamorphoses into a vampiric figure of vengeance and the suggestion is that he is a figure of retribution preying on European imperial and colonial guilt but there is increasingly no redeeming quality to his murderous onslaughts except that their excesses exemplify the irrational excesses of the originating European legacy of anti-semitism. The text is also further complicated by the fact that the narrator is queer and there is an unsettling element of homoeroticism that characterizes the violence throughout. But then, this is also an element in Bram Stoker’s text particularly in the curious figure of Renfield. On one level Tsiolkas’s story could be seen as a deeply moral allegory and indeed such motives have also been traced by cultural critics analyzing the vampire motif in general (Gelder) but on another level the text also exemplifies the horrifying dystopian possibilities that occur when cultural guilt is generationally transmitted and fertilized by the new atrocities that characterized the colonization of the so-called new world. Tsiolkas’s novel (and his other work) draws clear links between the treatment of Indigenous peoples and the dark histories the settler colonizers imported with them. Nor does he exonerate the later immigrants, for all that they are able to point to their own oppressions and histories of racisms in the new settler colony.

This too is a form of the new critical cosmopolitanism (rewritten from the margins) in which contamination is not necessarily a benign process leading to greater tolerance. Tsiolkas’s vampiric legacy forms a stark contrast to the kind of benevolent contamination model set up by Appiah in his recent celebration of Cosmopolitanism, a celebration that is somewhat reminiscent of the elitist Cosmopolitanism of Mary Shelley’s text. But the dead Europe portrayed in Tsiolkas’s novel is also one where the revenge of the East is exacted in the West or the heartland of Europe in ways that recall Bram Stoker’s novel. Count Dracula buying up real estate and infecting the flower of English womanhood with his poison/cure bloodline (offering eternal life so long as you become a member of his tribe) is of course easily converted into numerous allegories (for example, ethnic absolutism). The argument has been made that Irishman Bram Stoker was belatedly indicting Britain’s colonial history where Ireland might be said to figure as Britain’s first colony. Oddly as well, that text invokes a deep-seated religiosity, as does Tsiolkas’s text—even though, theoretically, both reference an oppositional domain: the anti-Christ, damnation etc. Dead Europe ends with the protagonist’s mother weeping outside the church that had previously been her comfort, in ways that ‘ethnic’ churches have long offered comfort to diasporic communities. Her excommunication occurs because of her acknowledgement of the guilt of the old country (the prejudices and racisms she had imported to the ‘new’) and meant that she was now amongst the damned. The Manichean model is a familiar one and familiar as the persuasive basis of a religious field, particularly in Eastern Europe (e.g. the Bogomil heresy which sees Satan and God as equal forces dividing creation between them).

Religious difference may or may not be an ideology masquerading as religious (in Lazarus’s terms). What we do know is that religious cosmopolitanism was part of the models functioning at the turn of last century where the cosmopolitanism of Islam was celebrated (e.g. via the Ottoman empire or the Mughals in India) and in turn fed movements of a pan-religious nature such as Theosophy (Vertovec & Cohen 15). For those of us schooled in an aggressive secularism it is particularly
terrifying to witness such religious realignments and we reach rather desperately for reminders that these can co-exist with notions of cosmopolitan tolerance (as well as their opposites because we also need to remember that fundamentalisms too have their cosmopolitan dimensions).

What is at stake in these Cosmopolitan debates? In the words of Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen, “a non-communitarian, post-identity politics of overlapping interests and heterogeneous or hybrid publics in order to challenge conventional notions of belonging, identity and citizenship” (1). Vertovec and Cohen offer various categories of meaning for cosmopolitanism: “(a) a socio-cultural condition; (b) a kind of philosophy or world-view; (c) a political project towards building transnational institutions; (d) a political project for recognizing multiple identities; (e) an attitudinal or dispositional orientation; and/or (f) a mode of practice or competence” (Vertovec and Cohen 2000: 9). Their suggestion is that “The theory and practice of cosmopolitanism have at least the potential to abolish the razor-wired camps, national flags and walls of silence that separate us from our fellow human beings” (22). However we need to remember that part of the critique of cosmopolitanism includes the fear that “it is a discourse of the universal that is inherently local” (Brennan 81). And claiming universalism is of course always a suspect move. We do well to heed Ernesto Laclau’s suggestion:

If democracy is possible, it is because the universal has no necessary body and no necessary contents; different groups, instead, compete between themselves to temporarily give to their particularisms a function of universal representations (Laclau, 2003: 367. My emphasis).

Claiming universalism in the name of a particular culture or group is always an ideological power grab. In Canada there is a direction now in ‘whiteness studies’ that mobilises blame around what are often termed ‘white women who constitute second-wave feminism’ (cf. the earlier feminist ‘generational’ debates in US). It is another version of the spectre of the West identified by Lazarus and others as occluding difference (and therefore agency). It reiterates white colonialism and guilt and folds it back into a certain streamlined history of oppression and colonialism that leaves no chink for alternative agency. In response I would suggest that it may be useful to break down the global reach of Cosmopolitanism so that it signals its historical contingencies, internal differences and discrepant modernities.

**Vernacular Cosmopolitanism**

Tim Brennan warns that “if we wish to capture the essence of cosmopolitanism in a single formula, it would be this. It is a discourse of the universal that is inherently local—a locality that’s always surreptitiously imperial. Its covert appeal is most powerful when, in a double displacement, its political sense is expressed in cultural forms. Typically, cosmopolitanism constructs political utopias in aesthetic or ethical guise, so that they may more effectively play what often proves, on inspection, to be ultimately an economic role” (Brennan 81). But what if we disaggregate Cosmopolitanism? The concept of Vernacular Cosmopolitanism acknowledges global contexts and responsibilities at the same time that it recognizes that these are always rooted in and permeated by local concerns (Mignolo 2002). The paradox of the phrase reflects the double movement of these debates. In Homi Bhabha’s coinage of the term, the vernacular ‘native’ or ‘domestic’ is always in a dialogic relation with the global-cosmopolitan “action at a distance” (Bhabha 1996). Discrepant modernities are the
general contexts and vernacular cosmopolitanism (Hall and Bhabha) is the direction of this model—which includes the wretched of the earth. If we recall Coronil’s reminder that modernity is necessarily defined through its preoccupations with alterity then there may be ways to harness the complexities of cosmopolitanism to, for instance, south-south networking or the collaborations of indigenous groups, who are quite aware that they are caught up within modernity. Let me close with Stuart Hall’s plea for an “agnostic democratic process”:

We witness the situation of communities that are not simply isolated, atomistic individuals, nor are they well-bounded, singular, separated communities. We are in that open space that requires a kind of vernacular cosmopolitanism, that is to say a cosmopolitanism that is aware of the limitations of any one culture or any one identity and that is radically aware of its insufficiency in governing a wider society, but which nevertheless is not prepared to rescind its claims to the traces of difference, which makes its life important (30).

Works Cited


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i See the forthcoming special issue of *Feminist Theory*, 8.2 on ‘Rethinking Whiteness.’
ii For a further discussion of the implications of this logic see Chow 2002.
iii As Arjun Appadurai puts it, ‘the use of these words by political actors and their audiences may
be subject to very different sets of contextual conventions that mediate their translation into
public politics’ (Appadurai 1996: 36).
iv I would nonetheless maintain that there would historically have been a hierarchy of acceptable
‘whiteness’ in relation to different ethnic groups. For the workings of this dynamic in the USA
see Roedinger (2002).
v In an issue of *Critical Inquiry* (where Povinelli’s essay, now the introduction to her book, first
appeared) John Frow and Meaghan Morris take her to task for ‘two aspects of her critique...The
first is the instrumentalism that she ascribes to multicultural policy ’ and the second ‘to the state,
understood as a singular, unified, and intelligent agent’ (Frow & Morris 1999: 627). In contrast to
my own analysis, their concern is with the second rather than the first. I would however endorse
their statement that: ‘Policies are the hybrid products of diverse political activities by many social
agents... open to contestation, sudden abandonment, and unpredictable change’ (Frow & Morris
1999: 629). Povinelli’s response emphasized that she was dealing with the psychic limits and
implications of national affects but there is no recognition in her statement that different citizens
have different kinds of access to the public sphere where these anxieties concerning (in)tolerance
are aired and addressed.
vi This is also very much the line taken by Himani Bannerji in her critique of Canadian
multiculturalism which she sees as a direct legacy of the colonial struggle between the English
and French (Bannerji 2000).
vii The construction of ethnic communities as abject spaces is related to Ann McClintock's (1995)
analysus of such sites in *Imperial Leather*. I refer as well to a revealing exchange amongst a
group of cultural critics Helen Garner, Rosi Braidotti and Beatrice Faust (Gunew 2004: 35-37).
viii In the Canadian case ‘English’ would include the Scots, though not the Irish, at least initially.
See Driedger 1987.
ix These speculations permeate as well her account of travelling through Eastern Europe in the
eighties before the fall of the Soviet Empire. Note in particular the section ‘Where does Europe
end?’ (Kostash 1993: 72ff).
x The term NESB (non-English-background-speaking) is peculiar to the Australian context and
appears in many policy documents.
xii I am referring here to my argument in *Haunted Nations* where I contend that ‘European’ and
‘white’ acquire meanings within specific histories of colonial settlement.
xiii This history is also a dominant motif in Elizabeth Kostova’s wonderful rewriting of the
Dracula story in *The Historian*.
xiv Note in this respect Robert Manne’s review of the book.