Cities of Whiteness

Wendy S. Shaw
Cities of Whiteness
Antipode Book Series

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Cities of Whiteness

Wendy S. Shaw
For my parents, Mary Shaw (1927–2006) and Alexander George Shaw (1914–2004).
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Writing and completing this book has also marked the loss of both of my parents. My father died in April 2004, and in December 2006, I suffered the loss of my mother. In a small gesture to two inspirational human beings, I dedicate this book to Alexander George and Mary Shaw.
Introduction

‘This is about family!’ cried the baby-strapped member of yet another newly formed resident action group. This collection of concerned citizens had grabbed the attention of other local residents, the mass media, and politicians. They had all gathered at a balloon and pram-filled public hall in inner Sydney, Australia, in June 2005. Most in the crowd were there to vent their objections to yet another proposal by the New South Wales State government to establish a healthcare facility in Sydney’s Redfern area. Their problem was that the proposed facility would target what appeared to be an ever-escalating drug problem. The public outcry focused on the highly charged mix of illicit drugs (heroin mostly) and children (or babies), and a perception that the facility would simply exacerbate the problem by attracting more drug users, and therefore increase the danger to their children. The walls of the hall were plastered with large imposing posters that stated: ‘No Needles Next To Children’. Newspaper clippings, also of poster size, screamed the headlines ‘It’s not Mr Whippy [ice-cream van], it’s the Needle Van!’ and ‘The last thing Redfern Needs’ (Sydney Morning Herald, June 2005).

Redfern is an inner Sydney neighbourhood that is infamous because it houses a small Aboriginal community. Eveleigh Street, Aboriginal Redfern or, as it is most commonly dubbed, The Block, was once just another part of the stigmatized, undesirable and run-down inner city. This inner city is now in the grip of urban renewal – of brightening, and whitening. The advent of gentrification, the refurbishment of Victorian housing stock and the redevelopment of its former industrial sites into ‘apartments’, has heralded a new era of revanchist mobilizations against a maligned, and heavily racialized remnant of the formerly impoverished part of the city. The consequent tensions, of a poor Indigenous
settlement that suffers from a host of poverty-related social issues, set
against a relatively new cohort of mostly non-Aboriginal home-buyers
(and their offspring), who aspire to create a highly gentrified space in the
increasingly expensive city of Sydney, seem irrevocable. The extent of
the social ills of Indigenous dispossession contrasts starkly against urban
renewal, and the associated desires to ‘improve’ urban spaces, and to
ensure that they become ‘safer’ as well as more ‘habitable’. At the
aforementioned public meeting, there was no mention of who was to
blame for the area’s heroin problem but it is widely understood that The
Block holds that dubious reputation, and has done so for the last few
decades. As tensions mount over entitlement to urban space the pressure
builds, and this was surely felt by the residents of the struggling Abori-
ginal community that day in Redfern Town Hall.

This book delves into cultural forms that have emerged with the shift
away from suburban to urban living in Sydney. In many cities around the
world, formerly run-down housing areas and recently abandoned indus-
trial precincts have been rebuilt, and re-imaged as fashionable urbane
chic. Like homewares, clothing and accessories, designer living spaces –
be they newly built or upgraded heritage – have become increasingly
popular. In Australia, a catch-cry of suburbia – where a ‘man’s home is
his castle’ – is increasingly sidelined as city living becomes more attract-
ive, and palatial. Accompanying such wholesale changes to inner-urban
built environments, new forms of urbanism or ways of living in cities,
have also emerged. These new formations have engaged strategies of
exclusivity and, as I argue in the pages that follow, processes of exclu-
sionary whiteness regardless of the city’s ‘multiculturalism’. Acts of
defensiveness and aggression, and cultures of denial and indifference to
the unpleasantness of contemporary city life are characteristic of these
new urbanisms. This book is a foray into a range of racialization
processes that have manifested with the re-colonization of inner Sydney.

One of the main tasks of this book is to challenge and enhance existing
conceptualizations of urban change, racialization, and cosmopolitan
urbanism, and I mount this challenge by arguing for a more thorough
untangling of the powers of urban whiteness. Cities of Whiteness therefore
uses its critique of responses to the presence of a particularly ‘othered’, and
specifically racialized group – who happen also to reside at the centre of
Australia’s oldest and largest city – to build a case for rethinking, for
de-essentializing and opening out the concept of ‘whiteness’.

In the chapters that follow, I journey to the inner urban context
of Sydney to demonstrate one of the main attributes of whiteness:
its capacity to utilize opportunities as they arise, and to mobilize
simultaneously from within a range of subject positions, as required. I use the capture of specific moments in the negotiation of urban spaces and places to unveil this capacity, particularly where negotiations occur at the expense of entitlement for the residents of The Block to live in a place designated as Aboriginal, and to carry out the tasks of daily living. The unearthing of such moments, that highlight the capacities of whiteness as they have occurred, point to new ways of untangling the processes of racialized empowerment that inhabit the evolving city.

Fields of Whiteness in Inner Sydney

Non-Aboriginal understandings about the settlement of The Block in the city of Sydney have found nourishment in the racist and racially blind historiographies of Australia. Imperialist understandings of a world of ‘races’, that were thought of as being either ‘advanced’ or ‘backward’, or somewhere in between, found root in the newly founded colony at Sydney Cove. From the time of contact between Indigenous peoples and the colonizers in the late eighteenth century, such conceptions have ‘legitimated the exercise of power through these differences’ (Jacobs 1996, 17). Although contested in many ways, understandings of ‘race’ in Australia (and elsewhere) still draw on these kinds of constructs. The discourses that circulate about the Aboriginal community of The Block often default to the notion of racial inferiority that arrived with the English ‘First Fleet’, in 1788. Continually portrayed as incapable in the modern world, Aboriginal people are often cast as uncivilized (Thomas 1994), as ‘wild’ and ‘riotous’, as unable to hold their ‘grog’ (that is, they get drunk easily) and around Redfern, they are often feared to be ‘drug crazed’ and violent.

The existence of an Aboriginal settlement at the heart of Sydney is a paradox for many non-Indigenous people. The Block does not fit the stereotype of Aboriginal Australians sitting around peacefully in nature, in the ‘outback’ – as is so often televized from some faraway desert place. Nor is The Block from a former time when, reiterating the words of Australia’s current conservative Prime Minister John Howard, ‘mistakes were made’ (referring to the ‘stolen generations’). Its existence was formalized in the 1970s. In other words, The Block is omnipresent – it is here and now. And its high media profile, in Australia and abroad, brings the poverty and dispossession suffered by many Aboriginal people into sharp focus. In so many ways, The Block is a highly visible ‘shame job’ for the rest of Australian society.
In Cities of Whiteness, I have placed a research lens on the discourses of the extended, predominantly non-Aboriginal community of the mass media, of government, and the neighbours of The Block, to tell the stories of urban whiteness. I have gathered details from various events that occurred (mostly) in the late 1990s, to build the tales of urban process that follow. Such discourses have sensationalized and demonized The Block. At the same time, these discourses are somewhat dwarfed by the extent of the redevelopment, and associated place (property) marketing, that has also occurred. Within the context of gentrification, an even more dominant but quietly embedded politics of whiteness has emerged and provided the foundation – a stage – for other performances. Acts of rampant and exclusionary enclave consciousness, by the new incumbents of gentrifying space, exemplify such performances.

Theoretical Trajectories

Cities of Whiteness has two main theoretical trajectories. First, it seeks to problematize some of the dominant thinking about ‘whiteness’. The study of whiteness is now well established as a transdisciplinary scholarly field but US-based ‘whiteness studies’ (or ‘white studies’) tend to dominate, geographically and epistemologically. This book contributes to a somewhat broader-ranging engagement with whiteness that has begun to emerge within the scholarly discipline of Geography. Cities of Whiteness is concerned with detailing the unique intricacies of localized whiteness – as multiply expressed amalgams or relations of racialized empowerment – and its implications. To demonstrate this, I bring into contact the ways of whiteness and its impacts on (a group of) Indigenous peoples, who have tended to remain largely external to the ambit of current whiteness studies regardless of the colonial–settler context within which such studies have been, thus far, overwhelmingly generated.

A major aim of this book is to challenge the fix on ‘white’ ethnicity, which is so common in whiteness studies. I agree with the highly acclaimed thinker, and novelist, Toni Morrison, who has remarked on the ethnocentricity of this preoccupation, particularly the commonly declared task to ‘make whiteness visible’. I have found whiteness to be much more than an ethnicity, and its association with ‘Anglo’ ethnicity (Bonnett 2000). Whiteness is a slippery character, a fickle entity with a capacity to expand and contract its membership, as required. I therefore provide detailed accounts of the shiftiness of whiteness, its promiscuous
embrace, and its particularities that, although sometimes difficult to pin down, do give whiteness part of its strength.

The second theoretical trajectory of Cities of Whiteness is to identify how urban transformation and the rise of new ways of living, within these emergent landscapes, have become imbued with whiteness and its processes. Within the context of rapid urban transformation, identities, and associated urbanisms, evolve. In the city of Sydney, some of the newer ways of living have reproduced colonial formations as part of the process of re-imaging the city. For example, this book considers a range of heritage impulses driven by desires to protect certain kinds of architecture. In the case of inner Sydney, the desirable architectures are remnants of the British colonial past. But rather than simply wanting to retain these very decorative Victorian architectures, their escalated desirability has driven a whole new set of preservationist impulses that seek to restore more than pretty features. Inner Sydney is now stamped as a landscape marked with a very specific ‘heritage’ script that is symbolic of British settlement and its history. Preservation impulses have also emerged in newfound desires to valorize (remnants of) former industrial areas, which are swiftly transforming into Sydney’s own version of that arty and exclusive Manhattan neighbourhood of SoHo, and its ‘lofts’. These re-imaged inner city landscapes, with their (British) Victorian pasts and (North American) Manhattan futures, sit in stark contrast to an increasingly impoverished and out-of-place urban Aboriginal community. Subsequently, strategies have emerged that are designed to defend and consolidate the spaces and privileges of whiteness in the increasingly global, and cosmopolitan, city.

Methodological Trajectories

This book tells a story about formations of power and demonstrates, at the same time, that such formations are not bound to one colonial or ex-colonial domain. In the tradition of ‘new locality studies’ in Geography (see Box 1.1, page 15), that moved the humble case study to new depths, the examples provided here show how the powers of whiteness that manifest locally have wider implications. I have drawn on ‘realist perspectives’ that combine intensive and extensive methodologies to highlight the link between broader structures and processes in local settings (Sayer 1989, Jacobs 1993). My hope is that Cities of Whiteness contributes to the kind of locality study that remains alert to the broadness of issues of social inequality (such as the political economies of
gentrification), while benefiting also from the richness enabled by post-

structural and postmodern approaches, and an openness to the full range

of methodological capacities. As I demonstrate in the following pages, the

intricate strategies of whiteness that operate locally do not occur in

isolation. Processes of gentrification, for example, are well understood

for their capacities to marginalize and exclude along lines of difference

(such as class, ‘race’ and gender). By turning the lens on processes that

privilege, rather than focusing on exemplars of disadvantage, Cities of

Whiteness broadens the analysis of urban change to reveal a myriad of

cultural processes at work that construct and structure contemporary

urban landscapes – materially and symbolically. In sum, it is the kinds

of processes of whiteness that are detailed within these pages. These sorts

of processes can be found in any contemporary urban landscape with

different groups sharing, and contesting, city spaces. As Alastair Bonnett

(2000, 4) identified, ‘although integral to modernity…[the] form and

importance [of whiteness is]…historically and geographically conting-

tent’. Finally, and coming back to the local setting of this book, I must

add that this is – in many ways – a very personal account of whiteness.

Most of the events detailed here have occurred in a particular corner of

the city that I call home.

A Personal Account of a Field of Whiteness

I moved into a house in Darlington just around the corner from The

Block, in 1995. I had co-owned and then sold a small terrace house in

another inner city area (Surry Hills) for a high price. Regardless of its

poor state, the value of the Surry Hills property had benefited from

Smith’s ‘rent gap’ (Smith 1982). Of course, to owner-occupiers this

was of little consequence until it was time to sell. The march of gentrifi-
cation in our little street had suddenly gained momentum with a proposal
to convert a warehouse into luxury apartments. This building backed
onto our house, and the decision to convert it would change our lives.

At that time, Darlington was largely a pre-gentrified neighbourhood.

Having spent most of my adult life in areas that eventually gentrified,

I confess to carrying a degree of pre-gentrification snobbery. I find some

of the trappings of gentrification acceptable – the cafés and shops – but

I have remained (somewhat hypocritically, I know) wary of the homogen-

izing effects of encroaching middle-classness. In Surry Hills, this

had manifested in a range of resident activisms. Incoming residents

(‘gentrifiers’) began to collectivize to drive out certain facilities and
uses of urban space. These groups began to agitate against the existence of welfare services, the burning of joss sticks in an old Chinese temple, offensive migrant house’ colours (such as ‘Portuguese Pink’ or ‘Mediterranean Blue’). Darlington, I hoped, would be different. Looking back, I was (somewhat cynically) convinced that the stigmatizing presence of The Block would keep middle-classness at bay. The Block’s permanency (it is designated ‘Aboriginal Land’), the drug and crime issues associated with the area – though no different from the rest of inner Sydney in reality – pointed to the possibility that it would retain its diversity, which included a range of age groups, ethnicities, sexualities and classes. The presence of The Block was also interesting, politically. It served to remind non-Indigenous Australia about Indigenous suffering which, in this case, was right under our noses and not out there, in the forgettable ‘outback’.

Then, by the late 1990s, the unthinkable began. The presence of the Aboriginal community had stalled gentrification – as I had predicted – and buyers avoided the Darlington/Redfern area for as long as possible. Then, as gentrification cycles matured in other parts of inner Sydney (Engels 1999), and investment capital started to seek new territory, even the racialized drug and crime problems of Darlington/Redfern were not enough to deter buyers. After all, ‘first stage’ gentrifiers (like me) had already moved in and this vanguard included those who were amenable to the presence of The Block, or at least ambivalent to it. But this group also included those who would begin to agitate, and mobilize turf protection activities. It seemed that some were just waiting for enough ‘like minded’ people to move into the area; they needed a critical mass. When the media reported on an existing belief that Darlington/Redfern was about to ‘take off’ as a gentrification frontier, some residents were ready to fight the final impediment to gentrification, and maximize their capital gain at the same time. As it happened, we ‘gentrifiers’ were (and are) all part of the process that legitimated Darlington/Redfern as a gentrification frontier whether we accepted the Aboriginal presence or not. In the meantime, as the area continues to change, strategies are variously deployed to ‘protect’ people and property from the possibility of drug and/or crime incursions.

When I moved into Darlington, the level of visible home security was striking. Be they renovated or not, houses and shops were clad in security grilles. Some houses had visible alarm systems and fences capped with barbed or razor wire. Private space was aggressively segregated from public space (Caldeira 1996). There was a general impression, and reputation, that the area was indeed a ‘war zone’.
When signing the contracts to buy the Darlington house, The Block seemed to be in a poorer state than ever, and the police presence seemed to be more overt than I realized. I remember hoping that we had not made a mistake – after all, we could choose to go elsewhere, somewhere ‘safer’.

Since moving into Darlington just over a decade ago, I am yet to witness any ‘warfare’ but I have certainly observed a series of well-planned offensives against the Aboriginal community. The history of the area includes a monumental fight against the formation of The Block (in the 1970s), and local non-Block residents continue on this trajectory. In the late 1990s, residential activism was distracted momentarily by the advent of unwanted apartment development but as the character of the area began to change with gentrification, mobilizations focused again on The Block, which continues to be targeted to this day.

As a non-Aboriginal homeowner, and gentrifier (of sorts), I am embedded within the concerns raised in this book. The benefits to which I seem to be entitled include, amongst others, those that come with gentrification (for gentrifiers): claims to colonial heritage (I live in a Victorian house) and its protection; the capacity to join in any group (activity) that protects turf; and participate in any process that determines the future of the area. Although I have associations with members of the Aboriginal community, and affiliated organizations, and have supported Aboriginal Elders in their efforts to raise concerns about the future of The Block, I do not belong to that community. Rather, along with a range of other people, I generally occupy the non-Block area but I do visit when invited.

As a study of whiteness, this book is not a document about the Indigenous people who live their lives on The Block. I am, however, respectfully aware of the circumstances under which their community exists. So, in Cities of Whiteness, my aim is to present the unearthing of specific processes of whiteness that occur and marginalize and, in direct and indirect ways, exclude the Aboriginal community from its privileging capacities. For the city of Sydney, a normative cultural form of whiteness, that was embedded with colonization remains, regardless of the city’s multi-cultures and multicultural portrayals. It is from within such an urban setting, in an ‘industrialized, western, first-world nation’ such as Australia, that academic studies often ‘identify, confirm, and thereby exclude, certain cultural formations as chronically marginal’ (Seth et al. 1998, 9). Although several academic accounts have avoided casting The Block in this way (Anderson 1993a, b, 1998; Kohen 2000), it remains the predominant script in popular imaginings, and needs to be
continually challenged. My purpose is not to silence resistances to this script from within The Block – but to unveil, with some urgency, some of the damage already wrought by activations of whiteness, and the potential for more creative activities of whiteness in inner Sydney, and beyond.

**Organization of *Cities of Whiteness***

The book consists of five chapters. This introductory chapter has outlined the strands of the theoretical debates that underpin the arguments proffered throughout this book.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 follow a thematic structure. Chapter 2 details the background to why The Block is a ‘(post)colonial paradox’. It outlines the context in which The Block emerged and the history of its ongoing status of ‘not belonging’ in the inner city of Sydney, Australia. It traces the rise of a culture of defensiveness – of urban space – and its link to a largely non-Aboriginal ‘working-class’ culture of besiegement in the neighbourhoods that surround the Aboriginal site. Chapter 2 also details how this status of paradox is continually reinforced by shrill discourses of the media, police and others. It foregrounds the production of specific values, that perpetuate the ongoing racialization of The Block.

Chapter 3 details one of the two key types of urban transformation that exemplify the reproduction a historical geography of racialization. This chapter documents the rebirth of inner city landscapes as desirable ‘heritage’ real estate, and the subsequent rise in heritage appreciation. The mobilization of whiteness in the activation of one of Sydney’s ‘final (gentrification) frontiers’, which was stigmatized by the Aboriginal presence, is also detailed. Chapter 3 also considers the rise of heritage protectionism that works to celebrate very select histories – the ‘heritage’ of the colonizers that rendered the colonized territories as *Terra Nullius* (or ‘empty land’). It then considers the rise of ‘industrial heritage’ and its role in the preservation of ‘white’ working-class cultural codes around the place that gave birth to The Block. Such cultural codes are being commodified and consumed by the ‘new middle classes’, who also invest in their protection.

Chapter 4 details more recent and somewhat subtler processes of whiteness. The production of new urban cultures that promote fantasies of escape into the past evoked through preoccupations with heritage and its protection, have become part of new imaginaries of escape more generally. New ways of living are promoted through the conversion of old industrial areas into ‘New-York style’ apartments (which are ‘condominiums’ in other parts of the world). Within these emergent
urbanisms, new ways to deny or be indifferent to the presence of urban pathology have emerged. Building design and surveillance technologies have helped to minimize engagement with the local, which in turn has opened up less desirable, or stigmatized locales, such as Redfern, in the pursuit of cosmopolitan worldliness. And Chapter 5 draws together the set of threads that have rendered the city of Sydney as one of many ‘Cities of Whiteness’.

Notes

1 The ‘stolen generations’ were the result of Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their parents and communities, who were then fostered, or adopted, into (mostly) non-Aboriginal families. Connections with kinfolk, community and cultural heritage and practices – and in many cases, Aboriginal identities – were severed. These generations of Aboriginal people had been ‘stolen’ from the worlds of Indigeneity.

2 Indigenous Australians (and others) use the term ‘shame job’ which, generally speaking, means a ‘disgrace’.

3 Darlington is often included within the broader area of ‘Redfern’, and it is also (somewhat confusingly) conflated with the neighbourhood of Redfern.

4 Residents of Chinese origin had occupied this part of the city since the turn of the twentieth century.

5 Neighbours described our Surry Hills house as ‘Portuguese Pink’. As the area gentrified, new neighbours began to pressure us to remove the paint and render – every other house was gradually stripped back to reveal the sandstock bricks, which proved to be a mistake as the bricks are extremely porous and were not designed to be without a waterproofing skin of cement render.

6 With hindsight, I now realize that I had commodified The Block in my own middle-class way, as a repellent for other middle-classness. Other commodifications of The Block are discussed in Chapter 4.

7 ‘At $508,000 Redfern may do a Paddington’ (Sydney Morning Herald, 18 December 1996, p. 3).

8 This is a ‘low profile’ engagement, but I have assisted when asked. I was, by request, on the management committee of a local welfare agency that services The Block community. I provided advice for the listing of The Block on the Australian Heritage Commission’s National Register (Database Number 001785, File Number: 1/12/033/0011), and provided material for a NSW state government ‘Inquiry into Issues Relating to Redfern/Waterloo’ (December 2004).

9 In accordance with the site’s status as Aboriginal land, I do not wish to trespass so my visits to The Block occur generally by invitation – from an individual, or request to attend a public meeting, rally or performance.