

Talking race: Patrick Wolfe's scholarly activism

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To read Patrick's scholarship is to listen to him speak. His voice talks from the page with the fullness of thinking, the distillations of knowledge, and the enthusiasm for inciting change that defined him as a scholar. In the same way, complex encapsulations and analyses of injustice and the long-term structures of power that continue to churn out generations of oppression could tumble easily from Patrick's everyday speech. Fully formed and ready for battle. The intellectual integrity that bound his voice, his scholarship, and his underlying activist imperative to generate transformation through words, for me, defines the lasting legacy of his work.

What Patrick has contributed to the study of colonialism and imperialism, and especially to the burgeoning interrogation of settler colonialism has been explored extensively both before and after he passed away. But in his most recent scholarship he seemed to return to the enduring inquiry that pre-dated his interrogations of the state of settler colonial nations. Race, and the twisted histories of its construction and capacity for recapitulation, its behaviour as a regime of oppression, its endurance, and its petty idiosyncrasies remained always at the core of Patrick's scholarship. From his place and relationship to the structures of racialised power in Australia, he interrogated race most explicitly as a contingent regime. His was, in a sense, a personalised interrogation that eventually, in his most recent book *Traces of History*, led to highlighting the linkages that bound the making and operation of race to an inherent territoriality (his words not mine, *Traces of History*, pp. 34–37).

Re-reading Patrick's work offers a reminder that it was the struggle against racism, and the position he occupied as a white man in Australia – a most live and ongoing site of colonial and postcolonial oppression – along with his own initial, and readily admitted naivety regarding the ways race is experienced, that seemed to drive his interrogation of settler colonialism. This trajectory is followed in both *Traces of History* and *Settler Colonialism*. In colonial territory, with its varied historical, economic and spatial particularities, lay a key to understanding the shifting mythologies that attached to racial regimes. Here lay the logic for the seemingly random distinctions in the ways racial fantasies attached to observable and imagined physical difference – the way a natural talent for rhythm attached itself to different categories of Blackness for instance, or the differing means by which a single drop of coloured blood could be discursively dispersed. Patrick's scholarship, in other words, grew out of implicit and explicit acknowledgements of his own racial privilege. He used this to articulate a powerful, and now extensively cited language with which to scrutinise and unpick the intimate workings of sites of colonial displacements of Indigenous peoples.

If Patrick's scholarship accentuated the historical and territorial, his activism revolved around the politics of positionality. This bled inexorably into his teaching and mentorship. When I first encountered him as an honours student in the University of Melbourne's Department of History, it was a time, much like the present, when a student of colour could complete a university degree in History without ever encountering a teacher the same colour as themselves. This could be, and is, profoundly alienating and silencing. Patrick was a rare teacher who explicitly saw colour as an historically structured asset and a strength, a key to unlocking deeper insight. His approach could make students feel they had something valuable to say, not despite being Brown or Indigenous, but because of it. At the same time he brought vast fields of knowledge together, and could carry students through impossibly complex histories of the seemingly simple daily myths of racism. Most of the reading he set was written by Brown and Black authors speaking and writing their own critiques of colonialism and race, and he made students engage with the way they used their voice. While positionality and the voice, or the question of who is speaking, why, and with what innate authority remains for some a formulaic tool of academic critique. For Patrick it was his moral compass.

Patrick used his voice, not just to articulate a new discourse and analysis capable of undermining structures of power. He also used it to maintain a space of academic silence, one into which the historically gagged could speak for themselves. His work could slide over detail in the quest for overarching structures and logics, but the visceral reality, the violence and lived experiences of the processes he studied were never far from his analysis. As such, he

hoped not just to write about race and colonialism, but to engage and assert the transformative power of knowledge. His work has helped to map the ways race, colonialism and settler-colonialism were not natural states, but were made and therefore could be unmade. Their seemingly unspeakably deep, sinuous histories could be articulated, untangled and detached from the future. As he said in the conclusion to *Traces of History*, 'race, being historically contingent, can be overcome' (p. 271). This activist edge, his engagement in the stuff of changing the ruts of histories of oppression, epitomises Patrick's spoken and written persona. Reading him remains, 'as ever' he might say, like listening to him speak.

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