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The white man in the desert: Aboriginal whiteness and settler belonging

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In the dry season of 1889 on the remote northwest coast of Australia, a station manager with a violent past went in search of a white man rumoured to be living deep in the desert. This episode is the starting point for an exploration into the strange history of Indigenous whiteness, from the archaic Caucasian theory to Aboriginal albinism. I approach these episodes as efforts to fashion coherent racial narratives of settler belonging and quieten colonial ghosts by seeing Indigenous people as ‘really’ white. An important but forgotten chapter in this history is the “archaic Caucasian” theory, a prominent scientific belief from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century that Indigenous Australians and Europeans were part of the same racial family. The brutal story of colonization could thus be retold as a family reunion of distant cousins. Isolated cases of white (in fact, albino) Aboriginal people haunted the public imagination and supported – both scientifically and politically – efforts to biologically absorb and socially assimilate Indigenous people into the majority-European population, most infamously through the mass child removal now known as the Stolen Generations. The past few decades have seen these efforts fail to achieve their aim of disappearing Indigenous identity from Australia. Instead, tens of thousands of Australians who would be judged by the architects of assimilation as wholly white have newly embraced their Indigenous heritage and identity, sometimes aided by DNA testing. The ghostly presence of whiteness has shape-shifted into the persistence of Indigeneity in an increasingly diverse Indigenous polity. The failure of Indigenous people to follow the eliminatory script and conveniently disappear reflects and produces an intricate play of identification and disavowal.

This seminar will take place at **3pm** in **Seminar Room B, Coombs Building**.

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