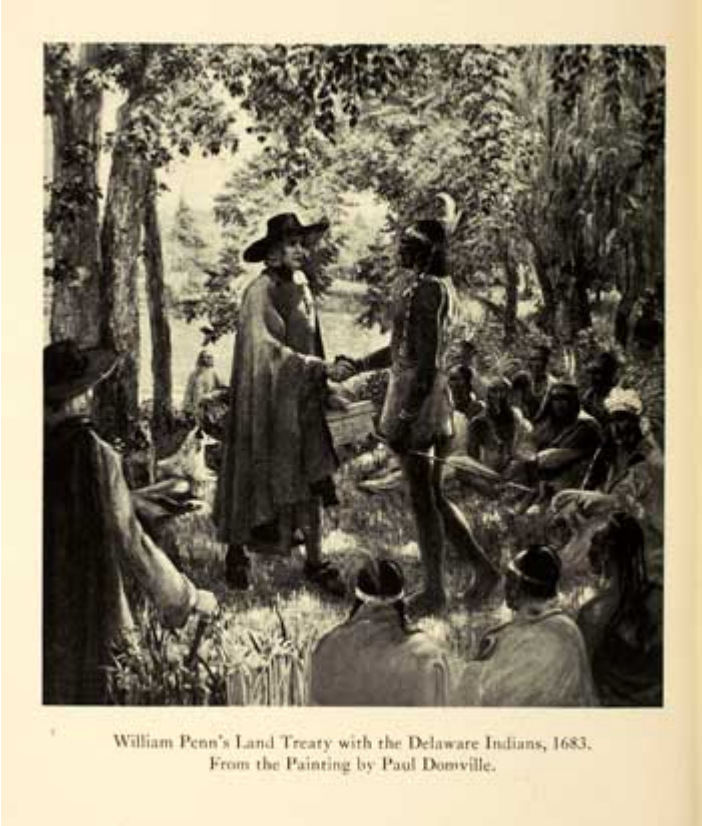
# The Other Charlie Brown



William Penn's Land Treaty with the Delaware Indians, 1683.
From the Painting by Paul Domville.

Early American studies in Australia

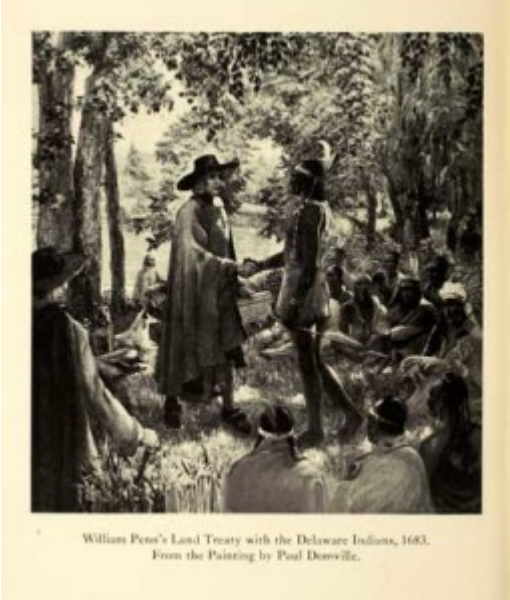
In November 2006 the Australian federal government pledged a grant of 25 million dollars towards the establishment of the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney—a contribution more than matched by several other prominent donors. The most well known of these on the world stage was Rupert Murdoch, chief executive of News Corporation, whose interest in the centre was primarily to provide a corrective to the overwhelmingly unfavorable opinion Australians held of the United States at the time. One of the first initiatives undertaken by the centre was to conduct a national opinion survey in order to establish exactly what it is that Australians don't like about America. As it turned out, 53 percent of the people polled cited the American "people and their culture" as that which they disliked most about the United States; 50 percent of respondents also identified "political values and institutions" as unlikable. If we couple these somewhat dispiriting findings with the current truth, rather ruefully acknowledged by my colleagues in literary studies, that our departments are hemorrhaging students to other more "practical," "real world" disciplines, Australian Americanists are left with the seemingly impossible task of making the study of American literature and culture both relevant and palatable to Australian students.

The age breakdown of the respondents is not available on the survey's Website, and I suspect it was not university-aged students who polled significantly in

this negative way. Nevertheless, the idea that over half my students might harbor disdain for the authors and artifacts—as well as the political values and institutions they reflect (and reflect upon)—on which I had lavished so much time and attention over the course of researching my Ph.D. was a rather daunting place from which to start planning a new course in American literature and culture. As I discovered at the most recent meeting of the Australian New Zealand American Studies Association held in July of last year, I was not alone in this anxiety. During a roundtable discussion on Australian attitudes towards the United States in the American studies classroom, both David Goodman (history, University of Melbourne) and Heather Neilson (English, University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy) reflected on the implications of the national survey for teachers of American studies. Neilson even went so far as to offer her students their own version of the national survey in order better to understand what it might mean to "dislike" American "people and their culture." Goodman and Neilson's complete analyses, and the discussion that followed, have been published in the December 2008 issue of the *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, but I want to take up one particular thread of the discussion here and unravel its significance for the teaching of early American studies, and in particular, the work of one of the new nation's most prolific writers, Charles Brockden Brown.

# Narcissistic Pedagogy

One of the talking points raised by Goodman and taken up by several commentators was the observation that Australian students are so utterly immersed in American culture that our task as teachers of American studies is less to offer information, than to provide strategies for organizing and interpreting this knowledge. Yet what struck me was that what is meant by the umbrella term "American culture" in this context is, far more specifically, contemporary popular and political culture. In the national survey, Australians rated television news programs as the most significant source of information about the United States (78 percent), along with the Internet (45 percent), television entertainment programs (39 percent), and feature films (38 percent), with books or stories by Americans coming in ninth at 31 percent. Neilson's literature students cited technology, culture and music, and clothes as positive aspects of American culture; negative aspects included arrogance, ignorance of other countries, foreign policies, and "ignoring the UN."




"William Penn's Land Treaty with the Delaware Indians, 1683," taken from the painting by Paul Domville. Frontispiece from Albert Cook Myers, William Penn: His Own Account of the Lenni Lenape or Delaware Indians, 1683 ( Delaware Co., Pa., 1937). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

When we consider students "immersed" in American culture, then, what we really mean is that they are cognizant of, and in many ways receptive to, American dominance of the entertainment media, while remaining informed about, and critical of, the United States' military-industrial complex—a position, I might add, that they share with many Americans. What is missing from this picture, and what I have certainly found to be lacking in my own students' understanding of contemporary American cultural dynamics, is a sense of the historical underpinnings of current social phenomena such as racial inequality or politicized religious fundamentalism. My task as a teacher, therefore, has been to present literary culture both as a point of entry into this history and as a means of tracking the ways in which American culture is not and never has been monolithic. Early American literary history reveals the global circulations of political, popular, and artistic culture during the late eighteenth century in the form of both debt and exchange, and in doing so, it complicates the idea that American culture is something that Australians can separate themselves from and point to as something distinctly other than us.

Making American history relevant to Australian students in this way is, as Goodman argues, a narcissistic activity. It encourages students to think that "American" studies is all about them, that it is less an opportunity for gaining a "comprehensive and systematic understanding" of American society via an attempt at distanced, objectifying study, than an exercise in self-definition—in what it means to be Australian. With this criticism in mind, I have tried to put narcissism to productive use in the classroom. Insofar as I have implemented a "narcissistic pedagogy," I have followed a two-pronged approach. The first is to identify and tap into students' own (mis)conceptions,

concerns, and interests and either apply them to, or read them against, American literary texts. The second, which is more or less the obverse of the first, is to use American literature to uncover something about Australian experiences. What does aligning ourselves with, rather than against, America tell us about us?

Quite a lot, as it turns out. The two novels by Charles Brockden Brown I've chosen as test cases for this experiment perpetuate certain stereotypical notions of what constitutes Americanness. They also provide opportunities to question how we relate those versions of American culture to our own Australianness historically and in the present. *Wieland* (1798) and *Edgar Huntly* (1799) simultaneously confirm and explode mythologies regarding an American national character. *Huntly* in particular, provides compelling counterpoints to some of the received ideas now circulating in Australia's own culture wars.

## *Wieland*, Romanticism, and Revolution

I taught *Wieland* as the first complete text on the syllabus for Romanticism in Literature, a course that, in previous years, had focused on British romanticism in its European context, with very little emphasis on transatlantic engagements. Reorienting the course to a transatlantic focus positions eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American literature within an Anglophone literary canon. Where twentieth-century texts are regularly taught in a range of courses at the University of Queensland, earlier American texts are rarely taught and, even then, are taught as a kind of "genre fiction." By concentrating on the transatlantic currents of romanticism, I encourage students to consider the secondary status of American literature within their Anglocentric English curriculum. Given students' unfamiliarity with American contexts, I framed *Wieland* with an introductory tutorial on the Declaration of Independence and some passages from J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* celebrating on the one hand the harmonious ethnic hybridity of the American people, while on the other representing scenes of slavery and revolutionary violence. The juxtaposition of these texts shows American political culture and national character to have been diverse, multiple, and even self-divided from the start; Crèvecoeur's America is populated by a geographically disparate, politically and culturally divided group of people (divided over questions of slavery or affiliation with the Old World, for example), whose very claims to civilized settlement are undermined by acts of violence against each other and against the original inhabitants of the land. These early documents defining Americanness laid out for students the tensions already inherent in the nation, even as its brave new status was celebrated.

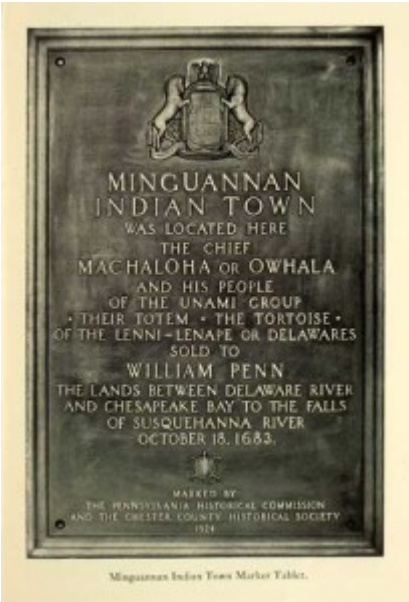
Similarly, Brown's *Wieland* evinces anxieties about a nation that harbors within itself destabilizing violence. The narrative is told from the perspective of Clara Wieland, the sole survivor of a gruesome family tragedy in which her

brother, believing himself to have been divinely instructed, brutally murders his wife, their children, and an unfortunate young woman staying with the family, before making an attempt on the life of his sister and ultimately killing himself. The voice Theodore Wieland hears instructing him to kill his family may or may not be a ventriloquistic prank played upon him by Francis Carwin, an enigmatic stranger whose accomplished "biloquism" has wrought havoc with the sanity and safety of the family since his arrival in their isolated, incestuous little community. The plot is thickened by the fact that Theodore and Clara's father died mysteriously some years earlier, apparently as a result of spontaneous combustion brought on by a fit of religious enthusiasm. Scholarly interpretations of the novel vary quite radically: does the fate of the fatherless, pastorless Wielands reflect an anxiety about the failure of strong centralized leadership (be it vested in the person of a king or a president)? Or does it remind all citizens of their duty to involve themselves in the commercial and political public sphere lest one's extreme isolation and individualism run to antinomianism?

With respect to antinomianism and, indeed, the religious history of the United States more generally, students were on a very steep learning curve. Very few had encountered the tenets of Calvinism, let alone an account of the Antinomian Controversy that divided the Massachusetts Bay Colony, so part of the lecture time was given over to an explanation of notions of election, predestination, and the essential depravity of humankind. At the same time, I was at pains to point out that the settlement established by Puritans—with their inflexible view of this world and the next—became the nation in which freedom of religion is enshrined as the First Amendment. The resulting discussion of the origin and meaning of the amendment put pressure on students' received ideas about American religion and its relationship to governance. Australian students who came of age during the presidency of George W. Bush can possibly be forgiven for seeing American religious culture as dominated, and therefore defined, by a particular kind of combative, martial, evangelical Christianity; but a brief investigation of eighteenth-century religious history, from the Great Awakenings to Jefferson's Deist leanings provides students with the tools to dismantle the idea of a single version of American Christianity.

As we worked our way through American and British romanticism, students were able to track different iterations of the idea that a single individual can have a direct, unmediated conduit to the divine. Placing *Wieland* alongside Blake's "There is No Natural Religion" or Emerson's *Nature* allowed students to examine the difference that form and context make to questions about the relationship between humanity and divinity. Needless to say, they are more indulgent of Emerson's transparent eyeball than the claims of either George or Theodore "W." The issue at stake in the case of these latter is, of course, what we might describe as the mapping of the First Amendment onto the Second. What for Blake and Emerson is a means by which to realize a poetic or artistic potential becomes in other hands and contexts a way of obstructing or neutralizing dissent, leading to conceptions of American religious and political culture as monolithic and monomaniacal.

Considering *Wieland* in such a context challenges students' narcissism by simultaneously confirming and then undermining the most prevailing stereotypes of Americans: as gun-toting or, in Wieland's case, pen-knife-wielding religious fanatics who lack any kind of self-awareness or any tradition of informed dissent. Brown's novel is shocking to students not because of its graphic collisions of religion and violence—which are all too familiar in a world that is post-Waco, post-Columbine, post-9/11 and its aftermath—but because it reveals that people were talking about such issues as early as 1798. *Wieland* exposes the deep historical roots of certain frighteningly present aspects of American culture, while simultaneously revealing the structures of critique that have accompanied literal and ideological violence throughout American history. Countering every act of state-sanctioned violence towards Others, both within and outside of America's borders, have been dissenting voices. From Brown's critiques of religious excess and frontier violence, to Lydia Maria Child's exploration of the Indian Question, to Harriet Beecher Stowe's or William Hill Brown's attacks on slavery, writers of fiction have participated meaningfully in the political sphere. In considering a text as foundational to American literary history as *Wieland*, students can unravel the idea that the political culture of the United States is, or has always been uniform, or, indeed, in any way "united" in the ways that both its proponents (like those who insist that foreign critics "hate us for our freedoms") or its detractors (like the 53 percent of Australians polled who don't like America's people or its culture) want to suggest. American culture, like any other, is revealed to be necessarily irregular, self-divided, and inconsistent.




"Minguannan Indian Town Marker Tablet," a marker placed by the Pennsylvania Historical Commission and the Chester County Historical Society, 1924. This photograph between pages 92 and 93 of Albert Cook Myers, William Penn: His Own Account of the Lenni Lenape or Delaware Indians, 1683 (Delaware Co., Pa., 1937). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

# *Edgar Huntly* and Indigenous Knowledges

If teaching *Wieland* engaged with students' versions and visions of the American people and their culture, teaching *Edgar Huntly* offered students the opportunity to reflect on Australia's own history of contact between indigenous and settler communities. Even outside of a deliberate strategy of narcissistic pedagogy, there are in fact ways in which Australian and American colonial dilemmas overlap—not least because the very existence of Australia as we know it was contingent upon the existence of the United States of America. I taught *Huntly* as a contribution to the University of Queensland's "Indigenous Knowledges" initiative, a pedagogical and research strategy that aims to promote insight and understanding into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures (historical and present) in order to facilitate "cross-cultural awareness" between students of a variety of backgrounds. While the claim that *Edgar Huntly*, as a novel about the American frontier, can tell us something about indigeneity in Australia may seem dangerously flattening or generalizing, *Edgar Huntly*'s setting and narrative throw into relief the legal fiction of *terra nullius* that justified the colonization of Australia and the ongoing dispossession of its indigenous people.

In 1770, Lieutenant James Cook charted the east coast of Australia and claimed it for George III, naming the new land New South Wales. In 1776, the Revolutionary War began; one of the colonists' first acts of resistance was the rejection of British convicts. Two subsequent attempts to establish penal colonies in West Africa failed in the early 1780s, while attempts to reestablish the convict presence in America also failed as convicts either mutinied or were rejected by the newly independent United States. In 1787, the year that the United States Constitution was written and circulated, the first contingent of convicts bound for New South Wales sailed from Portsmouth aboard the First Fleet. The action of *Edgar Huntly* is also set in 1787. The novel's analogies between the moral constitution of its protagonist and the Constitution of the nation have been remarked upon by several scholars, but what I want to foreground here, as my students were able to foreground for me, is the way that Brown's warnings regarding the effects of frontier violence have equal resonance for the colonists bound for Botany Bay. The narrative of *Edgar Huntly* propounds the view that every act of violence does damage to the perpetrator virtually equal to that meted out on the victim. In a compelling representation of the colonial mirror, Huntly is seduced into more and more extreme acts of violence against Native Americans, and thus comes to duplicate and imitate the savagery that he initially deplores. The barbarity imputed to indigenous peoples is revealed to be the stuff of white settlers. This concern with the effects of violence upon the perpetrator incorporates the novel into a wider romantic conversation, which saw all the various forms of colonization, including slavery, transportation, and indenture, as morally corrupting.

As yet I have no evidence to support a claim that Brown had the new colony of

New South Wales in mind when he wrote his novel. The earliest account of the colony was written by Watkin Tench, a British marine officer of the First Fleet. Published in 1789, his *Narrative of the Expedition to Botany Bay* was immensely popular and ran to three editions in its first year of publication; it is entirely possible, therefore, that Brown had come across it. But regardless of Brown's intent, students were quick to identify the novel's implications for the doctrine of *terra nullius* and the part it has played in shaping Australian history. While none of the contemporary commentators on the settlement of New South Wales denied the existence of Aboriginal peoples—Tench even went so far as to record that the country was "more populous than it was generally believed to be in Europe at the time of our sailing"—the later legal fiction that the land colonized was not owned by its original inhabitants produced the historiographical fiction that its settlement was largely peaceable. The effects of the doctrine of *terra nullius* have been broad ranging and extend in devastatingly practical ways far beyond the realm of scholarly (in)attention to the violence of colonization that I highlight here. What I want to emphasize, however, is the implication of academic discourses such as literary and social history in the ongoing project of denying the extent and nature of Aboriginal dispossession.

It was not until 1981, with the publication of Henry Reynolds's watershed work *The Other Side of the Frontier*, that Australian historical studies engaged in an extensive investigation of frontier violence. Reynolds's book ended with the following challenge:

*Frontier violence was political violence. We cannot ignore it because it took place on the fringes of European settlement. Twenty thousand blacks were killed before federation. Their burial mound stands out as a landmark of awesome size on the peaceful plains of colonial history. If the bodies had been white our histories would be heavy with their story, a forest of monuments would celebrate their sacrifice. The much noted actions of rebel colonists are trifling in comparison […] How, then, do we deal with the Aboriginal dead? (201-202)*

This challenge was taken up by a number of Australian historians and public intellectuals whose responses to his question ignited the "history wars," which raged across the Australian academy, Parliament, and broadsheet newspapers for most of the 1990s. It is not my intention here to offer a detailed account of the different sides of this controversy but to discuss how the narrative of *Edgar Huntly* calls into question the validity of one of the most prevailing positions held by conservative commentators on the debate. Critics of Reynolds's work declared that he had overstated the casualties of frontier violence and suggested that Australia's later achievements as a nation somehow counteracted or mitigated the nominal violence of its coming into being. The view was also advanced that later policies enacting enforced assimilation were formulated out of concern for the well-being of Aboriginal Australians—that the relocation to missions and dormitories, the denial of citizenship, the removal of children, the systematic denigration and dismantling of traditional

communities and their customs were all performed in their own best interests.

Along a parallel track ran the argument that present-day white Australians could not be held accountable at the level of shame or sorrow for the dispossessions suffered by indigenous people because they were simply unaware of the extent of the abuse. Reynolds countered this claim with the publication in 1998 of *This Whispering in Our Hearts*, a collection of documents dating from 1768 onwards, all of which had attempted to draw attention to the injustices meted out upon indigenous Australians. The book's title is taken from the closing remarks offered in 1842 during a public lecture by Sydney barrister Richard Windeyer. Windeyer was a staunch Lockean who declared that those who bestowed no labor on the land obtained no right of ownership over it. Yet he ended his lecture with the questions, "How is it our minds are not satisfied? What means this whispering in the bottom of our hearts?"

My students received *Edgar Huntly* as less a whisper than a shout. At the novel's conclusion, the Lenni Lenape Indians are forced further into the wilderness—which may be read as a foreshadowing of their ultimate, inevitable disappearance. Yet the graphic violence of their clashes with Edgar and other white settlers renders them as having left an irrefutable trace on the landscape. Moreover, Brown's vivid depiction of this violence and its effects on settlers gives the lie to any claim that such encounters were negligible affairs, mere skirmishes. Reading the novel as a story taking place at the very moment of the settlement and colonization of New South Wales brought students to consider what an Australian *Edgar Huntly* would look like. The resulting narrative, brought about by their acknowledgement of the active Indian presence in Brown's text, recuperates the Aboriginal Australians deemed never to have existed by the doctrine of absence that sustained colonial conquest. Reading *Huntly* within the context of the colonization of the Pacific reveals the degree to which the violence of settlement was not a misguided attempt at civilizing barbarous races, nor simply a product of insufficient cultural sensitivity, but was deeply strategic in the sense that it involved consciously undertaken self-deceptions and ignored whispers of conscience, throughout its entire history.

From *Wieland*, in which a violent past is inexorably hereditary, to *Edgar Huntly*, in which attempts to begin the world anew simply produce new brutalities, Brown's projection of the future of the early republic is rather bleak. Why, then, choose his work to spearhead a campaign to redeem American culture in the eyes of Australians? His novels draw out situations to their logical (or perhaps illogical) extremes and raise more questions than they answer. Yet the "negative capability" of his work (to borrow Keats's term for the ability to be in "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason") opens up a crucial space of free play and speculation for students. Like the novels themselves, this freedom can be vertiginous—and frustrating to those who seek systematic or complete knowledge—but this is precisely why they offer such rich opportunities for cross-cultural encounter and self-knowledge. Is this emphasis on self-knowledge

narcissistic? Perhaps. But if one of our tasks as teachers and scholars is to maintain the relevance of our fields, and I believe it is, offering students the tools with which to construct a place for themselves within a global narrative is a pedagogical goal worth aspiring to.

# Further Reading:

The complete results of the national survey can be found on the United States Studies Centre Website. Heather Neilson and David Goodman's presentations to ANZASA, along with the transcript of the discussion that followed, appear in the *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 27:2 (December 2008): 104-137.

Stephen Shapiro provides exhaustive transatlantic context for Brown's novels in his elegant and eminently readable *Culture and Commerce of the Early American Novel: Reading the Atlantic World-System* (University Park, Pa., 2008). Jane Tompkins and Shirley Samuels offer foundational readings of *Wieland* that are also highly intelligible to undergraduates in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York, 1985) and *Romances of the Republic: Women, the Family and Violence in the Literature of the Early American Nation* (New York, 1996), respectively.

Deirdre Coleman's *Romantic Colonization and British Anti-Slavery* (Cambridge, 2005) explores the effect of the loss of the American colonies on British colonization between 1770 and 1800 by tracking utopian and romantic efforts to establish colonies without slaves in West Africa and Australia. Henry Reynolds's *The Other Side of the Frontier* (Ringwood, Vic., 1982) details the violence between settlers and indigenous peoples that nevertheless erupted in the Australian colonies. His *Why Weren't We Told* (Ringwood, Vic., 1999) and *This Whispering in Our Hearts* (St. Leonards, N.S.W., 1998) address the "Great Australian Silence" on the question of Aboriginal dispossession and point to those activists who worked to combat this silence. For an overview of the "history wars" fought over these questions, see Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark's book of the same name (Carlton, Vic., 2003); for an account of questions of truth and authenticity as they have been called into question over the course of this culture war see Bain Attwood, *Telling the Truth about Aboriginal History* (Crows Nest, N.S.W., 2005). Attwood is also currently developing work that compares the iconography celebrating William Penn's treaty with the Lenni Lenape (another context for *Edgar Huntly*) and John Batman's treaty with the Wurundjeri elders at Port Phillip Bay (present-day Melbourne). Maryrose Casey's response to Attwood from the perspective of indigenous literary history and historiography appears in Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Maryrose Casey, and Fiona Nicoll, eds., *Mythunderstanding: Transnational Whiteness Matters* (Lanham, Md., 2008). The other essays in this volume are well worth reading for their situation of whiteness studies within a comparative American-Australian framework.

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