

Critiquing the Colour Blind Stance on Racial Politics in New Zealand

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SOPHIE TAPPER, MAY 24 2012

New Zealand is widely considered to have some of the best race relations in the world. Determining the best approach to reducing political and socio-economic disparities between Māori and Pākehā, however, consistently remains one of the most controversial and emotionally charged issues on this country's political agenda. While patterns of inequality between Māori and Pākehā in relation to income distribution, resource allocation, health, education and political representation are well-established, explanations for the origins and persistence of these disparities are highly contentious. Former National Party leader Don Brash's controversial speech at the Orewa Rotary Club in 2004 to gain support for his Opposition party preceding the 2005 election delineated his colour blind stance on racial politics in New Zealand, a view which has become popular among an increasingly resentful white majority. Expressly rejecting colour conscious, affirmative action type policies which disproportionately 'privilege' Māori as divisive, racially separatist and detrimental to the actualisation of harmonious race relations in New Zealand, Brash presented becoming 'one nation', and hence removing the relevance of racial identity, as an apparently fair and reasonable means to achieving equality between Māori and Pākehā.

However, this proposed policy could equally be seen as 'colour blind racism', as it illustrates the white supremacist mode of thought which pervades Don Brash's stance on racial politics in New Zealand. Critically analysing his assertions at Orewa by reference to the three key rhetorical devices symptomatic of colour blind racism, which legitimise and perpetuate systems that conserve white power and privilege, exposes the problematic nature of Brash's approach. Avoiding distinctions based on race in the pursuit of becoming 'one people' ultimately fails to address the deeply-rooted institutional practices and long term disaccumulation engendered by the colonisation process of the nineteenth century that sustain disparities between Māori and Pākehā, perpetuating white hegemony. Moreover, subsequent widespread support from the voting public for Brash's denouncement of 'special privileges' given to Māori, and the passive acceptance of a colour blind approach to racial equality by many Pākehā today, exemplifies that which is fundamental to the persistence of white supremacy: white privilege is so woven into the institutional practices, social values and received truths of society that many of its beneficiaries are unable to recognise—let alone address—its insidious existence.

In our allegedly 'post-race' society, there is growing consensus that the political approach to achieving racial equality should be distinctively colour blind. Advocates erroneously ascribe the birth of this ideology to Martin Luther King, who aspired to live in a society where "people are judged by the content of their character and not the colour of their skin" (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 1). To uphold his dream of creating a social order where racial identity is made insignificant, contemporary supporters of colour blindness argue that race and racism must disappear from our lexicon (Brown, 2003). In reality, however, King's version of racial colour blindness went far beyond the mere perpetuation of the status quo sans colour codes advocated by political leaders that have co-opted this ideology today. In an essay published posthumously, he observed that many whites who concede that people of colour should have equal access to public services and the right to vote fail to comprehend that blacks do not intend to "remain in the basement of the economic structure", and that political, economic and social change are fundamental to achieving this objective (Brown, 2003; Luther King, 1968, p. 316). Furthermore, King's argument was premised on group rights, while contemporary colour blindness is centred on the rights of individuals.

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Despite being predicated upon seemingly liberal values, the idea that affirmative action policies create racial division and society must therefore strive for colour blind 'equality' is in fact a longstanding conservative argument which plays upon a supposed threat to the white middle class (David, 2007). It offers an apparently egalitarian solution to achieving harmonious race relations, while avoiding the implications of whites' monopoly on power and privilege in perpetuating race-related issues. In this way, adopting an actively colour blind approach to equality in a systematically unequal society is inherently incapable of achieving its proposed objectives because it dogmatically refuses to acknowledge the white majority's imposition of power over the non-white minority (Fischer & Docker, 2000).

In explaining the concept of colour blind racism, critical race theorists Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Farida Fozdar identify three key rhetorical devices used by political leaders who adopt a colour blind approach to achieving racial equality in order to legitimise existing assumptions held by the white majority regarding the origins and explanations of persistent racial disparities, and essentially justify and promote the perpetuation of white hegemony as a viable solution. These are: portraying prejudiced individuals as the sole perpetrators of racism, framing this stance in the language of liberalism, and 'normalising' actions or opinions that could otherwise be perceived as racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Fozdar, 2008). On examination, each of these three facets of colour blind thought reveals the white supremacist implications that incontrovertibly problematise such a stance.

The first of the three rhetorical devices employed by those who adopt a colour blind stance on racial politics is portraying racism as solely perpetrated by individual acts of prejudice, rather than collective and institutionalised discrimination. Western countries of colonisation are credited with making significant progress in legally and politically rectifying racial injustices within the last 50 years, leading many within the white majority to dismiss collective, institutionalised white supremacy as a thing of the past (Brown, 2003). The abolishment of political exclusion and official segregation in these countries has meant that racism as a concept is no longer conceived of as societal, but as individualist: as Michael Brown observes in relation to attitudes towards racism in the United States, "today many white Americans are concerned only with whether they are, individually, guilty of something called racism. Having examined their souls and concluded that they are not personally guilty of any direct act of discrimination, many whites convince themselves that they are not racist and then wash their hands of the issue posed by persistent racial inequality" (Brown, 2003, p. 4). Many Pākehā feel similarly uncomfortable with accusations of personal 'racism', but at the same time feel that they can openly express their view that, collectively, Māori demands are 'unreasonable'—particularly if such statements are precluded by a disclaimer such as "I have Māori friends, but..." (Abel, 1997). Ironically, while the majority of Pākehā appear to believe that only individual acts of discrimination constitute 'true' racism in our contemporary society, they are often vocal in their accusations of 'reverse racism' in relation to the bestowment of 'special privileges' on Māori by the government, conveniently reconceptualising racism as collective discrimination when it is allegedly used against the majority.

As illustrated by reference to Don Brash's speech at Orewa, political leaders are able to capitalise upon the white majority's misconceptions regarding the nature of contemporary racism to legitimise their colour blind stance on racial politics as reasonable rather than 'racist'. By neglecting to challenge the view widely held by Pākehā that racism is limited to individualised and isolated prejudice, rather than collective and institutionalised discrimination, Brash's colour blind solution to achieving racial equality was perceived by many New Zealanders as pragmatic and astute, despite merely perpetuating the unequal status quo. Contrary to popular opinion, however, white racism today is not limited to those who express individual prejudice (Brown, 2003). The conception that an arbitrary line can be drawn between 'racists' (those who express and commit acts of racial prejudice) and 'non-racists' (those who support equality between races) fails to recognise that contemporary racism has a structural foundation and affects the consciousness of all actors in any society, no matter how individually prejudiced or tolerant they claim to be (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Brown, 2003). White supremacy persists in the form of "racialised social systems" which ensure that the race in the dominant, 'superior' position receives economic, political and social advantages, while the 'inferior' race (or races) receives disadvantages. As Bonilla-Silva explains, "contemporary ... racial privilege is reproduced in a mostly covert, institutional and apparently non-racial manner that does not depend on overt expressions of hostility" (Bonilla-Silva, 2003, p. 68).

Brash's proposal to eliminate colour codes is unlikely to achieve racial equality as he fails to address the fact that

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white racism persists in Pākehā's overwhelming control of power and resources across a broad range of institutions and social settings (Brash, 2004; Mills, 2002). Essentially, to be genuinely 'non-racist' in the face of racial inequality demands actively confronting the system of white privilege derived from colonisation which continues to pervade the basic norms and arrangements of society, subtly sustaining racial disparities (Terry, 1971). Subscribers to the colour blind ideology do not appear to realise that by neglecting to do this, their inaction perpetuates the racial inequality that they superficially oppose (Brown, 2003).

The second component of colour blind racism, as set out by Bonilla-Silva and Fozdar, is the way in which political leaders frame their colour blind stance on racial politics in the language of liberalism. In contrast to the 'de jure' white racism which characterised countries of colonisation in the past, those who propagate colour blind racism today often extend ideas predicated on liberal values such as fairness and equality to minorities, but in an abstract and limited way that rationalises unfair situations and ultimately avoids threatening white supremacy (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). As Fozdar notes, contemporary racist and anti-racist discourses are oppositional, and yet not categorically different: there is a considerable overlap in the way that apparently 'liberal' and anti-racist arguments can be turned to racist effect (Fozdar, 2008). The political beauty of the colour blind ideology, therefore, is that it allows white elites to state overtly racial views in a seemingly principled, even moral manner (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). By framing race-related issues in the language of liberalism, politicians can be seen to uphold equality, fairness and meritocracy while at the same denying the existence of systematic and institutionalised discrimination, consequently disregarding the implications of existing racial inequality and opposing all practical approaches to dealing with 'de facto' racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Bonilla-Silva calls colour blindness a "formidable racial ideology" because in spite of the fact that its purpose is to preserve existing power imbalances between the white majority and non-white minority, "at worst, it seems like racism 'lite'" (Bonilla-Silva, 2003, p. 79).

Brash drew upon liberal values throughout his speech to the Orewa Rotary Club, illustrating the way in which political leaders who subscribe to the colour blind ideology make use of this rhetorical device. At the beginning of his address, Brash proclaimed that "we are a country of many peoples, not simply a society of Māori and Pākehā where the minority has the birthright to the upper hand" (Brash, 2004). Equality remained a common theme throughout, often used in conjunction with democracy, modernity and prosperity. Brash assured his listeners that "in this country it should not matter what colour you are ... we must build a modern, prosperous, democratic nation based upon one rule for all", deployed the actions of the local authorities "introducing Māori wards without regard to whether the guiding democratic principle of 'one person, one vote' is violated" and declared that New Zealand must "build a prosperous nation of one people, living under one set of laws" (Brash, 2004). In a later television interview, Brash attempted to silence criticism that he was manipulating race-related issues in order to gain popularity by accentuating the fair, just and reasonable nature of his position on racial politics: "The reality is that I'm playing the reverse of a race card. I'm saying that all races should be treated equally and fairly" (Bradford, 2004).

By making specific reference to equality in particular, Brash cunningly played to the egalitarianism characteristic of New Zealand's political culture. As Jon Johansson highlights, the charge that any group is receiving some sort of privilege at the expense of other New Zealanders is bound to find a receptive audience (Johansson, 2004). Furthermore, Brash deliberately presented himself as an honest and forthright person for whom race-related issues are painful to discuss: he began his speech by asserting, "I believe in plain speaking. So let me be blunt", and ended with "I am deeply saddened to make a speech on issues about race" (Brash, 2004). As a result, Brash was able to cultivate the powerful image of a political leader with integrity, which reinforced the seemingly principled nature of his views (Johansson, 2004).

According to analysts of colour blind racism, however, it is "one thing to keep in step with the latest anti-racist language, another to pledge action against the huge institutional injustices" (Turner, 2007). While the language associated with colour blind racism may appear liberal or progressive, this disguises its conservative end (Fozdar, 2008). A former Governor of the Reserve Bank, Brash's approach to achieving racial equality draws upon the ideological values of neoliberalism, and accordingly he makes the assumption that equal rights are readily available to any entrepreneurial and self-interested individual who desires to improve their position (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2007). Consequently, Brash perceives affirmative action measures which 'privilege' one individual over another on the basis of racial identity as unfair, and detrimental to reducing racial disparities because they give the minority the 'upper

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hand'. This argument disregards the fact that the fundamental aim of affirmative action policies is to address historical and persistent underprivilege, and create the 'level playing field' which failed to exist in the first place (Fox, 2010). As President Lyndon Johnson, who introduced affirmative action to the United States, explained: "you do not take a person who for years has been hobbled with chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and say 'you're free to compete with all the others'" (Watkin, 2004). In the same way, Brash's seemingly liberal view that Māori and Pākehā should be given equal rights regardless of race omits to recognise that we are not yet an equal society (Fox, 2010). His neoliberal assumption that equality is 'universally' available to those who work hard disregards the fact that historical racial injustices have given the white majority a considerable 'head start', illustrating the white supremacist mode of thought which pervades his colour blind approach to achieving racial equality. In reality, as Māori academic Evan Poata-Smith and former Māori Language Commissioner Paul Hohepa contend, treating minority races who are clearly unequal as equal does not combat racism but rather perpetuates inequality while maintaining the ideological pretence of fairness (Poata-Smith, 2004; Watkin, 2004).

Ultimately, while Brash's colour blind approach to reducing racial disparities is predicated upon liberal notions of equality, these have been critically confused with conformity (Ballara, 1986; Poata-Smith, 2004). By hoping for Māori and Pākehā to become 'one people' in a society where white perspective sets the rules, he is effectively asking Māori to assimilate into a homogenous society where European traditions and institutions continue to provide the pattern of living for all New Zealanders (Ballara, 1986). This is evidenced by the fact that throughout his address at Orewa, Brash quoted the catchphrase "we are one people" (he iwi tahi tatou), attributing its origins to Lieutenant-Governor Hobson, who repeated this to each chief as they signed the Treaty of Waitangi (Brash, 2004). Such an explicit reference to a claim which has dictated Māori assimilation for over a century is illustrative of Brash's own Eurocentric perception of how an 'equal' society should appear (Poata-Smith, 2004). According to Brash's stance on racial politics, achieving equality between Māori and Pākehā requires Māori to decide between being a 'separate people' who make claims for 'preferential' treatment based on race, or 'equal New Zealanders' which would essentially require them to give up the differences which make them Māori and not merely 'brown Europeans' (Ballara, 1986). As Moana Jackson explains, "we are told by Pākehā to 'get real'. But it seems to me that means we have to be like you" (Saunders, 1998). What Brash, and many other Pākehā New Zealanders, fail to acknowledge is that genuine equality between Māori and Pākehā cannot be achieved while Māori still lack that which is fundamental to the dialectic of colonisation: the power to define (Jackson, 2007).

The third facet of colour blind racism is the 'naturalisation' of actions or opinions that could otherwise be seen as racist, in order to legitimise and perpetuate white hegemony as the status quo. This rhetorical device requires some unpacking, as it manifests in multiple components. Firstly, political leaders who propagate colour blind racism present Eurocentric institutions, values and beliefs as normal, natural and universal in an attempt to discredit alternative, oppositional views which pose a threat to white dominance. White supremacist views are further legitimised by making moral comparisons with other countries of colonisation. Moreover, 'naturalising' white perspective enables subscribers to the colour blind ideology to avoid addressing the continuing significance of historical injustices committed at the hands of their descendants by rejecting minorities' differing perceptions of the past in relation to the future. Advocates of a colour blind approach instead adopt the neoliberal view that a 'cultural deficit' among minority races is responsible for persistent inequalities, as their strong sense of collective racial identity has hindered their ability to participate in the market as 'rational', entrepreneurial individuals.

In making the argument for adopting a colour blind approach to achieving racial equality, white elites often invoke generalities in order to present their view as the 'unthinking' position of the 'common person' which needs no justification (Fozdar, 2008). This rhetorical device essentially plays upon the already 'normalised' nature of whiteness in many Western societies.[1] As Robert Terry explains, "to be white means to be in charge without much thought given to what it means to be white at all" (Terry, 1971, p. 4). Māori author Malcolm Mulholland observes this phenomenon among New Zealanders: "We don't realise that actually all our systems are Pākehā- we just consider them neutral, [that] they work for everyone" (Fox, 2010). Meanwhile, Sue Abel further identifies a similar trend in the way in which the New Zealand television news media has traditionally covered stories relating to Māori and the Treaty of Waitangi. Here, the dominant 'unity' discourse which asserts that New Zealand needs to become 'one people' in order to achieve harmonious race relations is frequently portrayed as 'common sense' and 'natural' rather than a construction, while oppositional Māori views are either unheard or disregarded as 'radical' (Abel, 1997).

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The notion that Māori and Pākehā should become “one nation, one people” espoused by Don Brash at Orewa illustrates this component of colour blind racism. It is founded upon the commonly held view that the white majority conduct their public and private lives according to universally held systems and values which are not culturally bound but normal, natural and necessary (Jackson, 2007; Poata-Smith, 2004). Brash presented his position on racial politics as the ‘unthinking’ and ‘common sense’ opinion of the everyday New Zealander, whether Māori or Pākehā: “I’m sure most Māori are as embarrassed by the present situation as most non-Māori are astounded” (Brash, 2004). Māori who hold antithetical views, such as those who claim that sovereignty never properly passed from Māori to the Crown, are dismissed as “radicals” who are “living in a fantasy world”, signalling that opinions which challenge the ‘common sense’ of the status quo are unworthy of being heard (Brash, 2004). Furthermore, in an attempt to emphasise the universalism of his views, Brash made reference to similar concerns about government policies encouraging racial divisiveness expressed by journalist Chris Trotter, who, it is stressed “is not known for his sympathy for the National Party” and “writes unashamedly from the left” (Brash, 2004). The fact that someone from the opposite end of the political spectrum apparently agrees with Brash’s stance lends support for his assertion that dealing with these “crucial issues” by becoming unified as “one nation” is a natural and universal solution (Brash, 2004).

‘Naturalising’ white perspective in this way effectively permits the majority to deny the validity of other ways of seeing the world and thus privilege their own gaze above all others. Moana Jackson argues that there is a conviction among many Pākehā political leaders that the Māori perspective is only a ‘cultural’ explanation of something which ‘normality’ or ‘truth’ has already determined, allowing them to disregard the fact that Māori have always had their own systems of “knowledge and understanding, law and government, value and values” as comparatively insignificant (Jackson, 2007, p. 179). Jackson suggests that this ‘normalisation’ of the ‘superior’ Western way of life, and the trivialisation of any alternative perspectives, echoes the disempowerment of indigenous groups which occurred during colonisation: “When people decide that they have the right and ability to define what is ‘worthy’ and ‘real’ and then impose that upon someone else, while distorting or dismissing any contesting views, they are colonising at an especially primal level” (Jackson, 2007, p. 178).

The justification of institutions and practices which perpetuate white power and privilege as natural, normal and essentially ‘not racist’ is further maintained by political leaders who advocate a colour blind approach to achieving racial equality by eliciting moral comparisons with other Western countries of colonisation. Fozdar observes that this is a feature endemic to New Zealand’s race relations climate, with many Pākehā justifying white racism by claiming that while things may not be perfect in New Zealand, Māori are a lot better off than other indigenous people– such as the Australian Aboriginals– and they should appreciate it (Fozdar, 2008). By setting New Zealand’s colonial history above others within a ‘global hierarchy’ of ‘racist’ and ‘anti-racist’ countries, the atrociousness of the injustices that occurred as a result of British colonisation in the nineteenth century is abated. Consequently, white elites are able to present Māori complaints as unjustified, and even ungrateful, given their comparatively superior position.

Justifying racial views by making moral comparisons with other countries of colonisation– a facet of the third component of colour blind racism– can also be demonstrated by analysing Brash’s speech at Orewa. He declared that we should celebrate the fact that, despite war between the races, the separation of Māori from their land by settlers and their own apparently “deficient leadership”, Māori received rights associated with citizenship before any other country of colonisation: “The gaps that existed in every other colonial country were closing here as Māori took advantage of full employment” (Brash, 2004). Reference was subsequently made to Sir Apirana Ngata’s declaration at Waitangi in 1940 that despite a “number of land grievances it was unlikely that any ‘native’ race had been as well treated by settlers as Māori”, leading Brash to declare that “those who said a hundred years later New Zealand possessed good race relations by world standards weren’t wrong” (Brash, 2004). However, it is likely that this says more about the inhumane nature of colonisation globally than the compassion and open-mindedness of New Zealand’s first British settlers. The existence of racism towards indigenous people which is perceived to be ‘worse’ than what Māori have experienced does not, and should not, exonerate the need for New Zealand to strive for better race relations by challenging the systems of white power and privilege derived from colonisation which continue to dominate the structure of society.

Even when proponents of colour blindness are inclined to acknowledge the severity of racial injustices, the

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'naturalisation' of Eurocentric beliefs and values in order to perpetuate existing systems of white privilege symptomatic of colour blind racism commonly manifests in the rejection of minorities' different perceptions of the relationship between past and present, in order to avoid addressing the role of colonial injustices in sustaining racial inequality. Western cultures have a tendency to adopt the philosophy that 'the past is in the past', and thus the descendants of those who committed atrocities against indigenous people during colonisation should be exonerated from their ancestors' culpability. New Zealand historian Michael King encapsulates this attitude in his contention that while British colonisation did "irreparable damage to the Pacific people", it is "ridiculous" that white New Zealanders today should assume the mantle of guilt when "Pākehā is not the same as the British of the nineteenth century" (Bell, 2004, p. 91).

In contrast to Pākehā's emphasis on looking forward towards the future and not dwelling on the past, Māori have a very different view of history. For them, the present and future are merely the past revisited, and in this way the future only has meaning if they carry the past with them: as Jackson explains, Māori walk to the future with "history dogging our footsteps" (Jackson, 2007, p. 173; Scott, 2006). As a result, redress is an incredibly important part of their culture. However, instead of appreciating this cultural distinction, many Pākehā assume that their conception of the way in which the past relates to the present is the universal standard by which other cultures can be judged. Therefore, by claiming redress for historical injustices through the Waitangi settlements process instead of 'moving on' Māori are labelled irrational, obstinate and greedy. This has significantly contributed to the increasing frustration and resentment felt by many Pākehā towards Māori. A survey conducted by the Human Rights Commission in 2003 found that 29% of those surveyed knew little or nothing about the Treaty of Waitangi, and that New Zealanders were generally becoming tired of hearing about what it means for Māori (Barber, 2003).

Playing upon these sentiments among the white majority, the idea that 'the past is in the past', and both Māori and Pākehā must instead look forward to the future, was a recurrent theme throughout Brash's address. He criticised the Labour government's role in facilitating Māori claims for compensation under the Treaty of Waitangi settlements process, arguing firstly that Pākehā should not be held responsible for colonial injustices that they "had nothing to do with", and secondly that focusing on the past has encouraged Māori leaders to "adopt grievance mode" rather than looking towards the future (Brash, 2004). While admitting that "many things happened to the Māori people that shouldn't have happened", Brash maintained that the Pākehā of the twenty-first century cannot be held accountable for the atrocities that occurred at the hands of their British ancestors: "There is a limit to how much any generation can apologise for the sins of its great grandparents" (Brash, 2004). In addition to arguing for the irrelevance of injustices committed by British colonisers in the present day, Brash attempted to partially shift the blame by pointing to less than honourable Māori actions throughout New Zealand's history, contending that once Māori came into contact with Europeans "any dispassionate look at our history shows that self-interest and greed featured large on both sides" (Bell, 2004; Brash, 2004). While Brash accepts that analysing contemporary relations between Māori and Pākehā in the context of the past is unavoidable, he suggests that by refusing to "put this behind us" Māori leaders are building a culture of "grievance" rather than "aspiration", locking New Zealanders into nineteenth century arguments at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and hindering our ability to move forward as a "modern, democratic and prosperous nation" (Brash, 2004).

Brash's contention, which mirrors the view held by many Pākehā, that society would experience harmonious race relations if minorities stopped complaining about the past and just worked hard to better themselves in the future exemplifies the white supremacism implicit within the universalisation of Eurocentric beliefs and values (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). By dismissing non-Western philosophies regarding the treatment of history as an obstacle to achieving racial equality, the white majority inadvertently make the assumption that their way of viewing the world is superior, and those who do not conform to it are the "cultural architects of their own disadvantage" (Brown, 2003, p. 43). However Brash's assertion that Pākehā cannot be held responsible for the sins of their ancestors does contain an element of validity. As Avril Bell suggests, it is important for the future of race relations in New Zealand that "Pākehā guilt" in relation to the colonisation of the Māori people in the 19th century is "accepted as one aspect of Pākehā's historical legacy but not the sum total of that legacy" (Bell, 2004, p. 101). Interestingly, Māori academic Ranginui Walker agrees, expressing that there is no need for an "unnecessary guilt trip" in an interview with National Radio in 2002 (Bell, 2004, p. 91).

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Yet if Pākehā wish to take pride in the accomplishments of their colonial forebears, they must also accept a sense of responsibility for their failings (Bell, 2004). Instead of obsessing about whether the white majority of today should be held responsible for the atrocities of colonisation and espousing reasons as to why they are innocent, Bell argues that European New Zealanders must simply “bear” their guilt by accepting that it exists and attempting to deal with its on-going consequences (Bell, 2004). Ultimately, regardless of whether or not Pākehā should be held directly accountable for historical injustices, “the contemporary social and political dominance of Pākehā is linked to settlers’ domination of Māori in the past,” and thus both parties must engage with the complexities of New Zealand’s colonial history in order to change patterns of interaction in the present day (Bell, 2004).

By ‘naturalising’ colour blind views in order to encourage the white majority to accept the existing status quo as universal and ‘just the way that it is’, white elites are able to claim that a ‘cultural deficit’ among the minority is responsible for the persistence of racial disparities, rather than the white majority’s hegemony on power derived from colonisation. The seeming universalism of white institutions, beliefs and values in the eyes of the majority means that minority races who attempt to claim ‘special privileges’ as a result of colonial injustices are often accused of ‘playing the race card’ by holding whites accountable for their failures instead of accepting the blame themselves (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). This argument is largely founded upon the ‘culture of poverty thesis’, which asserts that the poor are poor because they lack motivation, the right values or are lazy (Poata-Smith, 2004). From this standpoint, claims made by minority races that all responsibility for their unequal position in society lies with white racism merely obscure the reality of their own failure and lack of effort (Brown, 2003).

Proponents of a colour blind approach to reducing racial disparities commonly adopt the neoliberal view that in order to achieve socio-economic and political equality with the white majority, those who identify with a minority race must attempt to participate in ‘modern’ society as individuals rather than relying on the ‘privileges’ they receive as members of an marginalised ethnic group (Brown, 2003). This approach effectively asks Māori to abandon their collective racial identity in order to compete in the economy as ‘rational’ individuals and allow the free market to determine, apparently in all fairness, their socio-economic status (David, 2007). Yet as Poata-Smith explains, “advocates of neoliberalism tend to emphasise the role of personal or social preferences as determinants of the degree of inequality in society, whilst downplaying or ignoring the significance of the initial unequal distribution of wealth and power that is apparent in New Zealand society” (Poata-Smith, 2004, p. 81).

In his speech at Orewa, Brash made the assumption that the Eurocentric political, social and economic institutions which govern society are universal, implicitly attributing racial inequality to a ‘cultural deficit’ among Māori that has hindered their ability to take part in ‘modern’ society. For Brash, whose approach clearly draws upon neoliberal ideology, inequality between Māori and Pākehā is a product of the “government funded culture of welfare and dependency” which is destroying Māori’s “entrepreneurial spirit” (Brash, 2004; Poata-Smith, 2004). He implores Māori to build a “culture of aspiration” rather than “grievance” by focusing less on gaining redress for historical injustices and more on the “adaptability”, “resourcefulness” and “openness to opportunity” which was evident within Māori society in the nineteenth century and has “survived the trauma of colonisation” to be reflected in Māori entrepreneurship across a range of “business, sporting and cultural activities” today (Brash, 2004). Brash’s belief that adopting market-based values is fundamental for reducing racial disparities is underpinned by the notion that the free market is the primary vehicle by which Māori can achieve economic, social and political development, and consequently ‘catch up’ with Pākehā (Brash, 2004; Poata-Smith, 2004). This is accompanied by the idea that cultural values and belief systems which conflict with those prescribed by neoliberalism are obstructing Māori’s progression into ‘modern’ society. For example, Brash warned that “personal spiritual beliefs should be not allowed to drive our development as a modern society”, before asserting that “Māori-ness explains very little about how well one does in life. Ethnicity does not determine one’s destiny” (Brash, 2004).

Brash’s assumptions reveal the way in which neoliberalism is often presented as a universally applicable economic theory, whereby the ‘invisible hand’ of the free market will achieve economic growth across society, inevitably leading to the reduction of social and political disparities (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2007). Neoliberal policies are largely articulated as though founded upon neutral, technical and scientific ‘facts’, with the frequent use of the term ‘rational’ implying that any criticisms of the theory are ‘irrational’ by definition and thus not worth contemplating (Bargh, 2007a). Yet by insisting that Māori adopt a neoliberal approach to development because participating in the free market as

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individuals will free them from dependency on the state, political leaders such as Brash fail to take into account the systemically negative impact of neoliberal practices on Māori throughout history: the neoliberal reforms initiated by the Labour government in the 1980s widened disparities between Māori and non-Māori in terms of economic status, educational achievement and health (Bargh, 2007b; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2007). The centrality of the 'rational' individual within neoliberal theory conflicts with Māori's strong sense of collective identity, which corresponds to their belief in the existence of a wider consciousness (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2007). Insisting that Māori undertake entrepreneurial ventures in order to participate in the market economy also threatens the way that Māori have traditionally thought about and governed their resources; a relationship which is diverse and holistic, rather than solely market-based and profit-driven (Bargh, 2007a).

Moreover, as theorists argue that development will only occur if the market's 'invisible hands' are completely liberated, a key component of neoliberalism is the removal of the 'inefficient' state from the economy, and consequently the political from the economic (Bargh, 2007b). As Māori academic Maria Bargh observes, a neoliberal approach to racial equality faces a conflict between wanting to be seen to allow individuals who identify with a minority race the 'freedom' and 'empowerment' to govern themselves economically and yet not trusting them to do so politically (Bargh, 2007a). Māoridom remains largely distrustful of this separation of economic and political goals (Bargh, 2007b). Because the dispossession of one people, land and culture by another cannot be isolated from its political reality, solutions to achieving racial equality in a postcolonial society must always be located in a political as well as economic context (Bargh, 2007b). By denying Māori the right to reclaim political authority, and with it the opportunity to pursue development contrary to policies and practices prescribed by neoliberalism, Jackson argues that Brash's approach to achieving equality confuses the "economic development we might want ... with the complete self-determination we are entitled to" (Jackson, 2007, p. 172). A neoliberal approach to reducing racial inequality does not bring Māori and Pākehā any closer to achieving equality in the true sense of the word because it continues to trap Māori within what Jackson calls "ways of development research and analysis that are not our own" (Saunders, 1998). Instead, Māori's reality must be shaped by Māori and, in turn, Pākehā must respect that (Saunders, 1998).

Critically analysing Don Brash's colour blind stance on racial politics in New Zealand by reference to the three key rhetorical devices which legitimise and perpetuate colour blind racism reveals the white supremacist mode of thought which pervades his approach to achieving racial equality. It is important to note, however, that as the leader of a political party (formerly National and currently the ACT party), Brash's views on race relations both shape and are shaped by the voting public. As Bonilla-Silva explains, it is a mistake to interpret racial ideologies as solely the work of the white elites: political leaders may sell 'racial projects' but the white majority also have an interest in maintaining white supremacy, and play a significant role in their production (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). New Zealanders' response to the notion of Māori and Pākehā becoming "one people" is therefore fundamental to the political viability of colour blindness as a potential solution for racial inequality in this country.

Issue saliency surrounding the state of New Zealand's race relations was high when Brash spoke in January, 2004 (Johansson, 2004). The controversial Foreshore and Seabed legislation passed in 2003 had increased tensions between Māori and Pākehā, and many European New Zealanders appeared to be fed up with the 'political correctness' of Helen Clark's Labour government in dealing with Māori 'demands' (Johansson, 2004). Internal polling conducted by National revealed that race relations was a "sensitive issue for voters and one most likely to sway their party allegiances" (Johansson, 2004, p. 116). This proposition proved to be accurate: a 17% increase in support for the previously struggling National Party according to opinion polls conducted over subsequent weeks indicated that the Orewa speech appeared to resonate with a large proportion of New Zealanders (Bell, 2004; NZPA, 2005). The initial emotional surge of support for Brash's argument that 'special privileges' received by Māori represented a drift towards racial separatism signified that many of the public agreed with his basic message that "enough is enough" (Johansson, 2004).

This response was not entirely unexpected. As a political ideology, colour blindness is particularly appealing to the 'common (white) person' whose opinion on race-related issues is customarily at odds with the government's official line (David, 2007). For many New Zealanders, the Orewa speech finally allowed them to express pent up resentment regarding the policy directions taken by previous governments (Johansson, 2004). Poata-Smith suggests that

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Brash's call for 'one nation' appealed to the underlying racist current within New Zealand society (Poata-Smith, 2004). A significant proportion of Pākehā, both then and now, feel threatened by outspoken Māori public figures such as Hone Harawira and Willie Jackson, and are growing tired of hearing about Māori claims to partnership and sovereignty under the Treaty of Waitangi (Poata-Smith, 2004). One non-Māori woman's complaints during the 2003 Human Rights Commission survey exemplified this view: "It's them again. It's all them, them, them. What about our rights?" (Barber, 2003).

Johansson explains that a leader who can articulate widely shared concerns and recommend practical solutions to them holds a considerable advantage over his or her rivals (Johansson, 2004). By 'naturalising' the Eurocentric institutions, values and beliefs which permeate the structure of New Zealand society while simultaneously providing an apparently egalitarian solution to reducing disparities between Māori and Pākehā without compromising Pākehā's dominant position within this structure, Brash was able to play upon the perceived threat posed to the hegemony of the white majority by Māori's 'special privileges' in order to gain political support. Politicians such as Brash lend legitimacy and respectability to views regarding the position of minority races in society held by the white majority, allowing them to feel comfortable that their opinions are 'not racist' (Poata-Smith, 2004). Yet by providing 'solutions' to racial inequality which merely legitimise the status quo, and consequently failing to acknowledge the existence of structural racism in the form of institutions and practices which perpetuate white power and privilege, opinions espoused by political advocates of colour blindness such as Brash merely exacerbate race-related issues.

By neglecting to engage with the reality that Māori are currently made subservient by a society structured to perpetuate white power and privilege, Don Brash's colour blind stance on racial politics is incapable of achieving true racial equality, and can in fact be seen as a manifestation of white supremacism. As the new leader of the right wing ACT party, Brash has continued to "beat the race relations drum long and loud," but whether he will continue to generate support for his stance from the voting public remains to be seen (Watkins, 2011). There is evidence to suggest New Zealanders may have changed their views on race since 2004: UMR research polls conducted in 2006 revealed that only 5.1% of the public saw "race relations/Māori issues" as the most important issue facing the country, compared to 40% of those polled one month after the Orewa speech (Collins, 2007). Moreover, a recent ACT advertisement which itemised ways in which radical Māori extremists have succeeded in imposing a separatist agenda on New Zealand caused widespread public outrage, leading to the resignation of creator John Ansell– the same marketing director who designed National's controversial yet largely successful Kiwi/Iwi election billboards in 2005 (Hill, 2011).

While the proposal to adopt a colour blind approach to eliminating racial disparities appears to have lost a significant amount of support among the voting public, it must be acknowledged that concerns raised by Brash relating to Māori 'privileges' are part of a much larger problematic. Claims of 'reverse racism' remain prevalent among many European New Zealanders today, particularly as Pākehā and Māori continue to struggle with reconciling their conflicting views on the relationship between the past and present. It is evident that Brash's colour blind approach to achieving racial equality– and harmonious race relations as a result– is not the answer, but what is the alternative solution? Many academics and public leaders (both Māori and Pākehā) emphasise the importance of reciprocal engagement and partnership for the future of New Zealand's race relations (Scott, 2006). In line with this viewpoint, and contrary to Brash's assumption that unity can only be achieved by Māori and Pākehā abandoning their collective racial identities to become 'one people', Bell suggests New Zealand would be best served by cultural politics based on the recognition of Māori and Pākehā's separate, but entangled, histories and fates (Bell, 2004).

As Bell notes, the idea of a relationship between Māori and Pākehā where both their differences and similarities are acknowledged and valued is encapsulated in Edward Said's notion of "entanglement" between the colonised and coloniser, whereby Said uses the musical concept of counterpoint to indicate what an entangled view of colonial histories and contemporary identities might mean (Bell, 2004). Counterpoint involves two or more melodies existing together in a complex relationship involving both discordant and harmonious moments, and maintaining both distinction and connection, this "entangled" process eventually leads to a richer musical form (Bell, 2004). In this way, Māori and Pākehā need to be able to struggle, confront, concede and argue while at the same time listen, understand, negotiate, respect and celebrate each other's divergent systems, values and beliefs (Bell, 2004). Of course this is merely a provisional solution, and there is still much to be done if New Zealand is to experience

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harmonious race relations in the future. Central to the success of this notion is an acceptance by Pākehā of their colonial history and its repercussions in the form of the white supremacist mode of thought which, as illustrated by Brash, continues to pervade society today (Bell, 2004). Acknowledging and understanding Māori's desire for a social context where they are equal with, and yet distinct from, Pākehā, would represent an important step towards creating a politics of engagement to deal with race-related issues in New Zealand.

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[1] The use of whiteness here is as an organising principle that maintains white people's access to power and privilege, but not necessarily as a result of the individual and conscious actions of white people.

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