

# Donna Awatere on Whiteness in New Zealand: Theoretical Contributions and Contemporary Relevance

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## Abstract

In June 2022, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern designated the US-based neo-fascist groups The Base and the Proud Boys as terrorist organisations. This designation marks one of the few times white supremacy entered the national political discourse in New Zealand. Discourses of whiteness are mostly theorised in the North American context. However, Donna Awatere's 1984 examination of White Cultural Imperialism (WCI) in her book *Māori Sovereignty* advanced an analysis of whiteness in New Zealand that has received limited scholarly attention and is essentially unexplored. This paper reintroduces Awatere's conceptualisation of WCI. It offers core tenets of WCI and theoretical insights into contemporary discussions of white supremacy that move beyond the focus of individuals and groups to a broader national framework of New Zealand. Two interrelated features of WCI, as defined by Awatere, are the minimisation and normalisation of whiteness and white racial hostility – inherent features that maintain, protect, and reproduce the white institutionalised body as the primary beneficiary of Western European domination that will always thwart Indigenous sovereignty and equality. This paper concludes that Awatere's articulation of WCI links whiteness in the New Zealand context to the broader network of global white supremacy that offers insight into contemporary criminal justice scholarship.

**Keywords:** whiteness, Māori Sovereignty, Aotearoa, Donna Awatere, Indigenisation, They Are Us

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## Introduction

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern designated the US-based neo-fascist groups The Base and the Proud Boys as terrorist organisations on 20 June 2022. New Zealand's position came in the wake of the federal trials of the January 6th riots at the US Capitol. It is important to note that Prime Minister Ardern's decision received support from the New Zealand Police Commissioner, Andrew Coster, who stated that "Those groups are respectively neo-Nazi, neo-fascist, white supremacist groups who have been responsible for some key unlawful events overseas, and so police supported the designation" (RNZ, 2022, para 6). The Commissioner's comments parallel rhetoric surrounding the massacre in Christchurch, where gunman, Brenton Harrison Tarrant, opened fire on two mosques killing 51 people. Tarrant, an Australian, was recognised as a white supremacist, but his Australian nationality was emphasised in equal measure, if not more.

These above events illustrate the tendency to locate discourses of racism and white supremacy away from New Zealand, even when they occur in this jurisdiction. For example, by highlighting that the terrorist was an Australian, Tarrant's actions are explained as a lone wolf, an 'outsider', whose ideology perhaps resonates only within a few small fringe groups. The subtext was clear: white supremacy and racism are not a fundamental part of New Zealand society. Being one of the largest mass shootings in modern times, the Christchurch massacre should have sounded the alarm to elevate white supremacy and white supremacist ideologies as a security threat. Instead, the country rushed to distance itself from white supremacy associations, most notably from the viral soundbite taken from the PM's speech. The hashtag's *They Are Us* overnight viral success served as an acknowledgement of New Zealanders' solidarity with Muslim citizens (Elers & Jayan, 2020). However, as Elers and Jayan (2020) argue, the hashtag represented an ideological tactic of whiteness, the default norm built into the infrastructures of New Zealand's polity. The authors argue that the hashtag was a symbol of complacency and mere performativity that does nothing to highlight the racism and the daily experiences of dehumanisation that Indigenous and other marginalised groups in New Zealand often express. Moreover, the oppositional binary that the chant carries shows a continual performance of colour blindness, which, in turn, reproduces norms that keep intact white power and privilege. At the same time,



the lived experiences of anti-Māori and anti-Pasifika attitudes observed through examples of media representations and political framing as the ‘inferior other’, the ‘criminal other’, the ‘deviant other’ and the ‘radical other’ are silenced (Elers & Jayan, 2020).

Taking the hashtag *They Are Us* as a point of departure, this paper argues that Donna Awatere would consider this specific action as a reflexive or knee-jerk response that downplays white hostility – a kind of muscle memory associated with whiteness. Such knee-jerk responses are passed down through the institutionalised white body politic and are validated by white systems of operation (Harris, 1993; Mills, 2014; Morrison, 1992; Parris, 2015; Smith, 1999, Yancy, 2016). The global reception of the hashtag *They Are Us* was championed as depicting the soul of New Zealand, subverting critical attention away from white supremacy. In this instance, whiteness was operationalised to divert attention away from the everyday systems that breed and harbour white supremacist ideology, attitudes, and racism by styling itself as the hero, a valiant force that overcame hate with love. The appearance of white systems as intrinsically representing ‘goodness’, maintains its status as virtuous and righteous, ensuring that the system never comes into question, thereby circumventing serious critical analysis (Gordon, 2005; Yancy, 2016). This paper considers this response as highly racialised in that it encapsulates a type of epistemic violence that silenced racially devalued voices in the colonial matrix of power (Elers & Jayan, 2020, Mignolo, 2009).

Limited attention towards whiteness, we argue, further substantiates Donna Awatere’s 1984 position wherein she argues that the lack of serious engagement with persistent forms of whiteness will continue to deepen inequalities to a point where justice and equality will be out of reach for Māori. Awatere points to the often willful misunderstanding – or a retelling and reframing – of past events to manufacture a national amnesia of oppressive forces thwarting Māori sovereignty at every societal level. While not explicitly, Awatere describes a component of a whiteness matrix that is inextricably linked to the state’s failure to address issues Māori continue to experience (Hogue, 2022).

*Māori Sovereignty*’s groundbreaking and trenchant analysis presents one of the first critical accounts of whiteness in New Zealand. The advancement of the concept of white cultural imperialism (WCI) that is specific to New Zealand

is broadly defined as a system with inbuilt rewards that institutionalised the white body as the principal beneficiaries of British imperialism. The fact that white systems determine the limits by which Māori can govern Māori illustrates the omnipresent nature of whiteness. Its power lies in the normalcy and invisibility of whiteness, which renders white supremacy as largely undertheorised in New Zealand.<sup>i</sup>

Our two-part discussion first outlines white cultural imperialism including (1) the formation/invention of the institutionalised white body, (2) the invisible and normalised nature of whiteness, and (3) the minimisation of white racial hatred. Part two shifts to the North American conceptualisation of whiteness. Here, Awatere analysis is placed in conversation with North American critical theorising of whiteness as an ideology of power and disenfranchisement.

### **White Cultural Imperialism**

Donna Awatere (1984) maintains that WCI predates the Treaty of Waitangi<sup>ii</sup>, which marked the beginning of the undermining of Māori sovereignty. Fundamentally, the Treaty-based partnership places Māori as dependent and subordinate to the rights of the Crown (Cooper, 2022; Elers & Jayan, 2022; Mutu, 2019). To this point, she poses the question: “What would white New Zealand be if it weren’t for Britain” (p. 11)? For example, she provides a continuum of violence linked to the racial demand for white land ownership (through force and trickery) that marked the arrival of white power (a white ruling order of domination) before the Treaty was drafted and signed in 1840. What was not achieved through war and disease was brought to completion through WCI, which is most visible through the legal system (Awatere, 1984; Jackson, 1987). At the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, Māori outnumbered the white population<sup>iii</sup> by ten to one. It only took one generation for the Māori population to decline and become the minority through diseases, wars, and a significant influx of white settlers from Great Britain (Awatere, 1984; Mutu, 2019).



### ***Land Grabbing Project: Emergence of White Identity***

Awatere's sharp analysis of Māori initial encounters with British forces, with a particular focus on the type of capitalist imperialism that ensued, is often discussed from the position of Māori mass dispossession that led to generations of deprivation (Cunneen & Tauri, 2016; Mutu, 2019; 2020; Poata-Smith, 2013; Stewart-Harawira, 2020). Awatere's astute attention toward the institutionalisation of the white body has received less attention but is nonetheless crucial to understanding the forces Māori encounter in pursuit of self-determination. She describes a social relationship, which Charles W. Mills<sup>iv</sup> (1997/2014) would later define as the Racial Contract: Whiteness could not have accrued the level of perpetual benefits without a sustained focus on Māori as being a problem population (see, Gordon, 2013). Awatere's attention here is similar to the question W.E.B. DuBois posed in 1903: What does it mean to be a problem? DuBois, as Gordon (2013) notes, does not speak about being Black but rather its meaning, which demarcates the line between identity and liberation. Identity, as described by Gordon (2013), "calls for the question of a being's relationship with itself" (p. 65), and liberation is concerned with questions of 'ought' and 'why': Who is to be liberated?

Awatere presents a prognosis akin to DuBois. The crucial stage of defining Māori as the problem provided justification for the acquisition of Indigenous lands, fisheries, and major bargaining resources. The colonisation of Indigenous lands and people facilitated a period of capitalist development and the creation of a new social, cultural, and racial hierarchy – white domination (Awatere, 1984; Gaventa, 1982; Ross, 1997). Interrogating the roots of white imperial forces, Awatere describes Māori Sovereignty as consisting of Māori ability to determine their own destiny over land and fisheries, which is continuously threatened by monoculturalism—a destructive force in which Māori encounter the omnipresent threat of whiteness.

Paramount to monoculturalism, Awatere notes, is its pervasive invisibility driven by two inherent features: white supremacy and white cultural imperialism. Because of monoculturalism, Awatere cautions that a true bicultural society – in which each group is given equal consideration – can never come to fruition. The concept of biculturalism became popularised in New Zealand during the political rhetoric of the 1970s and 1980s and in response to expressions of dissent from Māori and white activists combating Māori land

dispossession, racism, and strategies of assimilation (Barclay & Liu, 2003). Awatere further notes that biculturalism presents Māori as having a choice as opposed to effective use of power to quell dissenting voices. The radicalisation of Māori politics in the early 1970s heavily influenced government policies. In addition to criminalising Māori voices of dissent, which Donna experienced, the government imbued policies with elements of Māori bicultural ideology and culture – a type of ‘face-lift’, Tauri (1998) argues, that set in motion an era of indigenisation to (re-)legitimise institutional practices of Māori oppression. Such tactics enabled the government to draw focus away from questions of social, economic and justice concerns expressed by Māori. Māori imprisonment intensified under the co-opting of biculturalism as Awatere (1984) predicted with little to no confrontation from radical voices. This example illustrates Awatere’s argument that the Crown has always decided the extent and conditions for which Māori can chart their fate, resist and govern, which will always present biculturalism as a myth at best.

Espousing biculturalism without confronting and dismantling tropes and stereotypes used to justify the continued oppression and dispossession of Māori is a continuation of the colonial project. Awatere argues that stereotypes of the ‘Māori heathen’ and ‘Māori savage’ never vanished but strengthened under white colonial systems of confinement. The trope of the savage, Awatere writes, morphed into Māori as ‘troublemakers’, ‘ethnic parasites’, and ‘burden to white tax papers’ (p. 19). The creation of tropes plays out significantly in the gatekeeping systems: housing, education, employment, and criminal justice. For example, in 1976 and 1981, Māori constituted one-tenth of the workforce but made up one-third of the unemployed. Six times more white people earned \$10,000 or more compared to Māori, at a time when Māori wages had to support 2.2 people and white wages 1.5 people. White cultural imperialism strengthened over time through the persistence of negative stereotypes and prejudices among members of the core structure that cultivated a racially discriminatory consciousness that placed Māori in a permanent state of disadvantage and white people in a perpetual state of ignorance – oblivious to the institutionalisation of white supremacy (Awatere, 1984). These examples illustrated, for Awatere, a system operating effectively under WCI.

Unequal power dynamics, that enable white holders of power to drive and dictate Māori economic, political, and social domains, hinge considerably on a



myth that white New Zealand holds as a truth: that a New Zealand cultural identity exists that is unique and distinct from British imperialism. Awatere interrogates this fallacy for birthing a web of delusion that has shaped and ensnared the white consciousness. Apart from British ties, which are observed through white New Zealanders' obsession with the Royals and adoption of British holidays (e.g., Queen's Birthday, Guy Fawkes Day, Anniversary Day, and Labour Day) and the British sports imports (e.g., rugby and cricket), a national New Zealand memory is found wanting. Accompanying these major British exports is a British chauvinistic patriotism that has given rise to a delusion of a distinct New Zealand identity that is distant and separate from British or global whiteness, when in fact, the creation of New Zealand's white identity is on par, particularly at its foundation, with WCI across other settler contexts. For example, Awatere (1984) states that "White people have no real identity of their own apart from that which exists through opposition to the Māori" (p. 11). Here she points to the relational aspect of white identity that is predicated on the creation of the 'other'. The relationship creates a deficiency or a type of blindness to whiteness that is directly linked to past ties with Britain that have never been officially severed. Moreover, this relationship is analogous to Australia and Canada. Of the key events that shaped New Zealand and ushered in a new predominantly-white rule, Awatere identifies land-grabbing wars, specifically, which consolidated diverse white ethnic groups into a single white identity.

### ***White Body Supremacy***

In the US, for instance, the brutal colonisation of First Nation peoples combined with the forcible enslavement of Africans in North America facilitated the assertion of domination over Native and Black bodies. English colonists created whiteness, which enabled them to soothe the dissonance among white bodies to facilitate further the delegitimisation, dehumanisation, and tokenisation of Black bodies (Harris, 1993; Menakem, 2017, Ross, 1999). This process created a culture of white-body supremacy. Through the creation of institutions, the white body became institutionalised through science, history, governance, courts, land ownership, housing, and psychology as the standardised, normal 'body'. It is in this process where Native and Black bodies were defined as aberrant or substandard (Menakem, 2017). Awatere unpacks how labelling

Māori as a problem population was a key condition in the creation of whiteness to position whiteness as the ruling order, on which laws and the legal framework would hinge. Colonised peoples' struggle for humanity meant "they have always been compelled to define what it means to be human because there is a deep understanding of what it has meant to be considered not fully human, to be savage" (Smith, 1999, p. 26). Europeans' internalised beliefs of Māori 'savagery' was the foundational ideology underpinning tactics of repression, denial, and disciplinary restraint (Belich, 2002; Smith, 1999). Awatere, through WCI, elucidates the continuation of processes of denial arguing that anti-Māori racism, after all, requires the law to support it.

Richard Quinney (2002), in his book, *Critique of Legal Order: Crime Control in Capitalist Society*, speaks to the role of law in the creation of the criminal other. He states that "[the] awareness that the legal system does not serve society as a whole, but serves the interest of the ruling class, is the beginning of the critical understanding of law in capitalist society" (p. 95). It is through the use of the legal system that the ruling class preserves an order that allows dominant economic interests. Crime control, under capitalist ruling order, becomes the premiere device to dominate [white] cultural interests that are maintained and promoted for the benefit of the dominant culture (Quinney, 2002). Quinney's (2002) examination, while astute, is situated primarily along class lines, ignoring the long history of elites mobilising poor white bodies to facilitate the interests of white elites under the colonial state. Racialised bodies, by default, are presented as carrying equal degrees of power/access as poor white bodies. In Annette Gordon-Reed's discussion of enslaved Africans' liberation in Texas, she traces Native and Black presence in Texas that predates 1619. Gordon-Reed (2021), like Menakem (2017), unpacks events that engendered racial thinking and racialised bodies in the US imposed by Europeans. The creation of people called "white" and categories of people who were "nonwhite" was done for the purposes of deciding what rights people had and how they could be treated or mistreated (p. 83). White men, regardless of class, were entitled to deference, with the right to vote, hold offices, and obtain housing. In the eyes of many poor white people, the empowerment of Black people devalued the intangible benefits derived from whiteness, such as being able to walk through the front door, obtain employment, and express dissent, less valuable (Gordon-Reed, 2021; Harris, 1993).



Awatere maps similar propaganda campaigns perpetuated through misinformation and disinformation of history and other sciences that tagged the Māori body as deviant and inferior. In her analysis, she states that white people have set up a gatekeeping system for themselves, arguing the criminal justice system picks up where housing and education leave off. For example, during the 1960s and early 1970s, police were more likely to prosecute a Māori child than a white child for the same offence. Any Māori child was four times more likely than a white child to appear before the court. Between 1961 and 1975, the number of Māori children convicted in children's courts increased five-fold, while the convictions of white children did not double. If found guilty, a white child was twice as likely to receive a fine, while a Māori child was twice as likely to be sent to youth detention (Awatere, 1984).

Awatere observed that judges, police, and the public were equally aware of the dismal outcomes for Māori, but that did not change the course of mass confinement and imprisonment. Māori mass imprisonment indicated the system functioning as it should under WCI. For her, the outcomes confirmed that as much as left-leaning white people find the philosophies of white hate groups egregious, right-wing groups embody the white philosophies of British imperialism and white superiority, from which they, too, benefit. It is not uncommon for white New Zealanders to disassociate themselves from white supremacist philosophies. They do so while simultaneously enjoying the benefits such philosophies created for them. White cultural imperialism, within the context of being the prevailing mode of consciousness, prevents white people from seeing the hypocrisy and from recognizing that they have been socially conditioned to see British ways of being and dominating as the norm.

The second part of this discussion draws on critical discussions of whiteness in the North American context. The subsequent section further contextualises Awatere's radical critique and intellectual trajectory of whiteness.

### **Whiteness as an Ideology**

Our discussion has, thus far, provided a brief sketch of Donna Awatere's conceptualisation of white cultural imperialism, specifically how she maps out hegemonic systems of whiteness in the New Zealand context. She emphasises the unexamined nature of white culture beyond the superficial, stating obvious

privileges. As argued earlier, it is widely known that the Indigenous body is hyperpoliced and likely to receive harsher penalties than the white body in the criminal justice system, which Awatere (1984) argues only leads to superficial measures offered as legitimate evidence of humane and more equitable race relations. In examining the indigenisation of the justice systems under neo-colonialism, Tauri (1998) calls attention to an example of such a superficial response. Indigenisation of institutional practices refers to the process of recruiting Indigenous peoples and values in the enforcement and delivery of existing socio-legal services or programmes rather than understanding Māori relationship with the system or addressing Māori demands for the fair allocation of resources. Indigenisation processes, by design, “encourage belief among Māori that justice could be attained by their acquiescence to state instituted and controlled forums such as the justice system” (Tauri, 1998, p. 171). As a result of such processes, the analysis remains on rehabilitating ‘problematic’ Māori, while the significance and impact of whiteness go uninterrogated.

An important facet of whiteness is its ability to reproduce purposeful/strategic amnesia that blinds white people to perpetual harm inflicted against Māori in all areas of life. Awatere argues that Māori were forced to accept the white will over their own and to acquiesce to the power of white sovereignty. Māori were forced to live by rules that were not of their own making. She states, “these rules condemned us to a defeated life. The destiny of the Māori people was altered” (p. 14). The result of a whitewashed account of the historical and ongoing practices of colonisation is how white people live lives that are dominated by permanent amnesia.

US critical race scholars have long interrogated whiteness as an ideology that relies on the collective social force (as opposed to individual white people) that shapes the lives of white people as well as the lives of racial minorities. The spectacle of racism teaches white people the consequences of being Black or Indigenous but does not teach white people *how* this subverts the power of whiteness when it is not interrogated (Kelley & Yancy, 2022). As Steven Haymes (1996) argues, to understand racial identity formation, we need to appreciate the way white is discursively represented as the polar opposite of Black – a reflection of the Western tendency to privilege one concept in binary opposition to another. White people gain knowledge of themselves as the racial barometer by which other groups are measured. In other words, race as a pivotal aspect



of one's life seems to exist only within a racially diverse group or experience. A homogenous grouping of white people is seen as raceless until a Black or non-white person is present. When white is considered the norm, it goes unmarked and is unnoticed, a condition Awatere (1984) regularly problematises.

Yancy (2012) speaks to this notion by asking to whom is whiteness invisible? He returns white people to the problem of whiteness by shouting, "Look a White!" This proclamation is an intentional flipping of the script of Fanon's experience of a young white boy 'seeing' him and shouting, "Look, a Negro!" (Fanon, 1967). Fanon feels the impact of the collective white gaze. In this situation, he becomes a dreaded object, a thing of fear, a frightening and ominous presence. This pointing is the power of racial gesturing and an expression that calls forth an entire white racist worldview. By ignoring racist practices and structures through an ideology of whiteness, the status of whites as racial actors is undermined whilst simultaneously suggesting that "having race" is only for racialised others.

The world of whiteness is implicit as a default version of living comfortably in society (Matias & Mackey, 2016; Mills, 1997, 2015). As Gordon (2004) argues, whiteness includes interworking practices and meanings that occupy and reinforce the dominant position in a particular racial formation. The insidious nature of whiteness is that it successfully occupies the empty (yet loaded) space of "normality" in everyday structures. Whiteness is seen as a 'clear' but opaque social construction that elevates the status of people considered white at any given point in history (Leonardo, 2015). Within this default status and version of what is 'normal', whiteness is the lens through which other bodies are viewed as 'of colour' and thus, racialised. Lewis Gordon further iterates, "whites' social location (i.e., their status as racial actors as part of the racial hierarchy) is always present whether or not it is ever actively taken up or becomes self-consciously salient" (p. 628). The power of whiteness as an ideology is that it normalises the process of whites viewing and othering Indigenous and Black people, as opposed to asking whites to see how they understand their own racial selves and their unearned status (Seidl & Handcock, 2011).

Bonilla-Silva (2003) further argues that whiteness is the visible uniform of the dominant racial group. Whites (as a dominant group) can live and 'do race' without even actually being self-conscious or aware of it. When white

people say they don't belong to a racial group, they are demonstrating the hegemonic notion of understanding whiteness, ultimately reinforcing its existence solely in juxtaposition to blackness. As just one example, the slogan All Lives Matter in contrast to Black Lives Matter doubles down on the inability to see well-documented and stark disparities in the criminal justice system and the overpolicing of Black lives. By simply suggesting that Black lives matter, the fear and vitriol espoused by white people demonstrate the threat they feel when illuminating the exposure of whiteness (Yancy & Butler, 2015). Gordon (2004) explains this well by noting that the 'blackness' of blacks is more often an object of focus than the 'whiteness' of whites.

### **Epistemology of White Ignorance and the “Good White”**

This discussion opens with the Prime Minister's acknowledgement of US-based white supremacy groups as violent and deserving of government action in New Zealand. White supremacy, however, was never acknowledged as a destructive force within the country. The way white people speak about their racist uncle or parent has now changed to their sons and daughters being what they refer to as 'sucked in' by white supremacy rhetoric but are nevertheless good kids. Donna Awatere (1984) points a critical lens toward a white consciousness that is blind to this phenomenon. She implored white people to do the work to understand why a young person today would identify with white supremacist hate speech. Condemning white supremacy in New Zealand, for policymakers, is likely to condemn one's family members, who after all, do not mean any harm.

Awatere's analysis calls out the ways white people can insidiously and subversively explain away their complicity in upholding whiteness. Applebaum (2022) notes that the ambiguity of white supremacy (whiteness as a matrix) is fundamental in upholding the many dimensions of whiteness. In fact, this ambiguity is what allows many white people to abdicate responsibility in claiming their racism, as too often, white racial enlightenment comes with the othering of whites who are less “advanced” in their white racial awareness. As Yancy (2012) so firmly declares, “anti-racist whites can still be white racists” (p. 166). Within the context of the 'good white', one's awareness of their white racial consciousness can easily derail into a performative act when failing to connect good intentions with being complicit in the larger system of white racial domination (Jensen, 2005). Applebaum (2015) explains this well:



*In what might seem like a paradox, white benevolence is an important site to interrogate the type of problem that white complicity is. White benevolence not only comes with implicit requisite demands but might also function to silence those upon whom benevolence is bestowed. Because benevolence is considered “good,” the one who bestows the benevolence has in effect secured his/her innocence and does not have to question his/her implication of injustice (p. 3).*

Further, white benevolence relies on an epistemology of ignorance, or white ignorance, for it to flourish. White ignorance functions to mystify the consequences of unjust systems that systematically marginalised groups endure so that those who benefit from the system do not need to consider their complicity in perpetuating them (Applebaum, 2019; de Saxe & Ker, 2023; Mills, 1997). Awatere’s (1984) attention to white liberals who denounce extreme-right or white supremacist groups speaks to this type of ignorance that thwarts a true alliance toward Māori Sovereignty. Even among other migrant groups, union/labour movements, and white feminist movements, Awatere (1984) puts little hope in alliances because one cannot oppose what they fail or neglect to see or understand. White ignorance is maintained by social structures and institutions that sustain epistemic injustice on both a structural and individual level. As a form of epistemic exploitation, white ignorance not only puts the onus on the marginalised to explain their oppression, but it also manifests by refusing to believe the marginalised, dispossessed, and oppressed (Applebaum, 2019; Berenstain, 2016; de Saxe & Ker, 2023; Norris, 2019). Ignorance, in this sense, serves to maintain racial privilege in ways that are hidden, so it fails to expose what it is actually doing. Although often perpetuated unintentionally, upon close inspection, it becomes clear that by ignoring the power of “knowing”, members of the dominant group have a vested interest in “not knowing” (de Saxe, 2021). Awatere (1984) echoes this interpretation by noting how white people create and maintain a blissful state of grace where such ignorance is valued as innocence.

This misinterpretation and maintenance of ignorance uphold the status quo by stratifying, privileging, and denoting whiteness as invisible (Leonardo, 2015; Morrison, 1992). An epistemology of ignorance does not produce cognitive

dissonance for those with power and privilege because it is rooted in a hegemonic understanding of a world steeped in normalising whiteness. This is why individual reforms cannot in and of themselves lead to epistemic justice unless they coincide and interconnect with structural and institutional transformation. Additionally, Orozco and Diaz (2016) argue that individual white people may claim innocence (and ignorance) from engaging in personal participation in equity initiatives such as housing, school integration, etc., doubling down on the misinterpretation of their innocence and the very real de facto segregation that persists within such initiatives. Consequently, the very systems in which many whites purport to work on changing and transforming are upheld by their innocence.

Lewis Gordon (2022) in his book *Fear of the Black Consciousness*, writes of the interlocking relationship between white supremacy, ignorance, and denial as a foundational feature that birthed the pandemic of anti-Blackness:

*The guiding theme of these pandemics – antidemocracy, colonialism, racism and a disease – is invisibility. As pandemics of invisibility, they are nurtured by the insistence, whether psychological or ideological, against the appearance of their symptoms [...]. There is a form of responsibility present in all denials. The history of the United States and many other countries marked by white supremacy is a long tale of covering national memory with blankets with regard to colonialism, racism, and the attempted, sometimes successful, genocide of Indigenous peoples. That denial is among the foundations of such countries (p. 17).*

Awatere's analysis of white cultural imperialism similarly describes the phenomenon of anti-Māori racism and its denial as the driving force in the development of administrative devices for centralised power that governs people. Awatere argues that the non-racialisation of the white body is most commonly observed when the only culture being studied by schoolchildren is Māori. White people, for this reason, have never interrogated the roots of anti-Māori attitudes and beliefs, which were central to the creation of white identity in New Zealand. Biko Agozino (2004) refers to such academic language as a "conspiracy of silence" (p. 345) in his examination of conventional criminology's



complicity with perverted Western ideas of crime and punishment. He argues that, in general, social sciences' complicity is evidenced by its disciplines' service to colonialism (Agozino, 2004, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

Donna Awatere's critical analysis has largely been abandoned in academic scholarship. In the edited volume *Towards a Grammar of Race in Aotearoa New Zealand*, Tecun, Lopesi, and Sankar (2022) foreground whiteness drawing on Awatere's foundation. The authors' claim reiterates Awatere's: A clear understanding of the genealogy of race (whiteness) in New Zealand's local setting and how it relates to the global context is lacking. As a result, the invisible omnipresent line where race marks the boundaries of power in New Zealand is scantily explored, which has resulted in a language deficit or silence used to interrogate racism and white supremacy in the present. The silencing is also reflected in ways white racial hatred is discussed and described as something casual or a result of unconscious bias, situating racism as something a few people do who are nonetheless good people. Like Awatere forty years earlier, Tecun, Lopesi and Sankar (2022) explore the underdeveloped theorisation of whiteness as a phenomenon in New Zealand academic discourses that exists by design. For Awatere, whiteness and the accumulation of power influence the legal system and all other systems to a degree wherein adding Māori components does little to change Māori fate.

Because of this invisibility, white people move through the world with a non-racialised identity. Awatere draws attention to the unexamined nature of white cultural imperialism that is reflected and normalised in academic research. Anti-Māori views, she argues, are couched in polite academic language obscuring the intensity of white hostility to Māori sovereignty. Awatere frames these relationships as symbiotic wherein all systems under white culture imperialism perpetuate Indigenous subordination. Sustained examination of the methods with which anti-Māori views are passed down through generations, emerging in crime, housing, and education policies will make considerable strides toward an examination of whiteness.

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<sup>i</sup> There was certainly a rich oral tradition that was acutely aware of what we are referring to as white systems and imperialism. From very early on, Māori developed a nuanced understanding and awareness of what whiteness represented and how it was operationalised. Such an awareness is best seen in the teachings, songs and prophecies of leaders like Kingi Tawhiao, Te Kooti Rikirangi. See Judith Binney's (2012) historical biography of the life of Te Kooti Rikirangi called *Redemption Songs*.

<sup>ii</sup> Legal scholar, Margaret Mutu (2019) states that while the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi is understood as the founding constitutional document of New Zealand, some Māori (hapū in the north) still considers the He Whakaputanga 1835 as the founding document, which declared that the hapū would never give law-making powers to anyone else.

<sup>iii</sup> We acknowledge that Pākehā is the more widely used term in New Zealand for white people, however we have chosen instead to use the term white people just in this paper so that it is more consistent with our analysis on whiteness. Awatere herself used the terms "white people" and "Pākehā" interchangeably in *Maori Sovereignty*.

<sup>iv</sup> Mills understands the Racial Contract as an account for the way things are and how they came to be (i.e., the descriptive) *as well as* the way they should be (i.e., the norm). The general purpose of the Racial Contract is always the differential privileging of whites as a group with respect to the nonwhites as a group, the exploitation of their bodies, land, and resources, and the denial of equal socioeconomic opportunities to them.