Part II
Conversations on race, class, and gender
Shirley A. Jackson

The essays in Part II, “Conversations on race, class, and gender,” explore the ways in which we have come to understand and expand upon the dialogue on the intersection of race, class, and gender. Chapters 3–5 in this section both affirm and challenge the existing frames of reference by including conversations that provide varied experiences of those who may “do” race, class, and gender in the workplace, in counseling, and as part of a discourse of race relations that take into consideration the political nature of race. The three chapters included in this section underscore the changes in how intersectionality has been used and reflect on its place in the investigation of language and conversation.

In Chapter 3, Churchill, Baltra-Ulloa, and Moore explore the context of the black/white race binary in Australia. This analysis includes an overview of whiteness studies, white privilege, and white middle-class feminism. The authors criticize the ways in which race has been ignored in the conversation around class and gender, particularly with regard to the welfare state. The authors assert that the trope of multiculturalism has made it difficult to engage in conversations that delve into the much needed discussions about the intersection of geographic location, social location, and race in Australia.

In Chapter 4, Mitchell’s essay examines the role of relational cultural theory (RCT) and its applicability to African American women. Mitchell, through the use of RCT and focus groups deconstructs African American women’s social interactions. She shows how African American women, as a result of their personal experiences and in their understanding of their place in the social world, interpret how others see them and how they learn to see themselves. The author posits that it is the ways in which African American women interpret these relationships that serve as the center of their assessment. In essence, it is their perceived status in U.S. society based on their race, class, and gender that impacts them psychologically and psychically.

In Chapter 5, Embrick and Henricks’ essay examines the role of relational cultural theory (RCT) and its applicability to African American women. The workplace serves as the venue in which race, class, and gender conversations take place. Yet, these conversations are not always welcomed nor are they readily acknowledged. Even when discussions of race, class, or gender are taboo in the workplace, the authors argue that they nonetheless take place. There are ways to engage in conversations about how people are hired for a particular position in the workplace that make it possible for discussions of race and gender bias to occur.
While all three chapters focus primarily on black/white relationships in varying degrees, Churchill, Baltra-Ulloa, and Moore give an understanding of the Australian context through their inclusion of examples of how race is “done” when policies are enacted to address the multicultural state. In this regard, they shed much needed light on how the intersection of race, class, and gender are played out in the social and political arenas. The work of Churchill, Baltra-Ulloa, and Moore and that of Embrick and Henricks focus on race and conversations with “in-group” and “out-group” members. Conversely, Mitchell’s work addresses the concerns of African American women within focus groups as they interpret their interactions with non-minority group members of various social classes and genders that have occurred in a variety of settings.
Difficult conversations
Race, class and gender in White Australia

Brendan Churchill, Joselynn Baltra-Ulloa and Robyn Moore

Introduction

Since colonisation, Australian society has been hierarchically structured according to race, class and gender. Although Australians may acknowledge that these hierarchies existed in the past, their contemporary manifestation is denied through recourse to discourses of egalitarianism and individualism. Despite evidence that one’s racial identity continues to have a profound impact on life chances; that income inequality between rich and poor has increased significantly in the last twenty years; and that women’s earnings are decreasing relative to men, Australians stubbornly cling to the idea that Australia is a fair and equitable society in which everyone receives a ‘fair go’. Within this context, notions of disadvantage based on race, class or gender are rendered obsolete and to claim disadvantage according to these criteria is seen not as a genuine grievance but as a political manoeuvre. Introducing these ideas into public debate, therefore, is fraught. This chapter explores how race, class and gender form part of the national conversation. Drawing on critical Whiteness theory, the chapter also explores why these national conversations are difficult for White Australians and why, in particular, issues of race, class and gender remain siloed in public discourse.

An overview of intersectionality – internationally and in Australia

Across the American, British and European academies, there has been a recognition and exploration of an alternative approach to identity politics through the theorising of the intersections between race, class and gender (Jordan-Zachery 2007; Phoenix and Pattynama 2006; Prins 2006). This approach, commonly understood as ‘intersectionality’, had its beginnings in the early works of Black female scholars in the United States who were confronting the ignorance of then–White feminist scholarship. White feminists omitted the racial dimensions of the inequalities experienced by women by putting forward a feminism that in theory did not consider race (Prins 2006; Weber 1998). In attempting to compare and contrast the social position of women with that of Blacks, White feminists stripped women of their racial identity and ascribed a Black identity solely to men (hooks 1981).
Intersectionality as a concept and a subsequent sub-field of study was crystallised by the early work of Kimberlé Crenshaw on the discrimination women faced in the labour market. For Crenshaw (1989: 138), intersectionality ‘denote[s] the various way[s] in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s employment experiences’. The emphasis on intersectionality sought to redress the problematic ‘additive’ or ‘multiplicative’ approaches to issues of race, gender and class, which essentialised Black women as worse off than White women because they suffer from both racism and sexism (Prins 2006), or worse from the ‘triple oppression’ of racism, sexism and poverty (Yuval-Davis 2006). Intersectionality eschews these limited ‘arithmetical frameworks’ (Prins 2006) and argues for a framework in which dimensions of race, class and gender are not reducible, but rather are mutually constitutive of each other. Race, class and gender are socially constructed; reflective of their social, cultural and historical contexts (Brah and Phoenix 2004; Weber 1998). Intersectionality challenges the siloed nature of race, class and gender as concepts and social categories allowing for an examination of issues across groups and within them (Crenshaw 1991). Since Crenshaw’s work, the concept of intersectionality has been extended beyond race, class and gender to include other dimensions, such as sexuality, ethnicity and age (Jordan-Zachery 2007; Weber 1998). In spite of the usefulness of intersectionality in theorising these multiple sites of inequality, studies applying an intersectionality framework have been critiqued for not considering power-relations of ‘unmarked categories’, such as Whiteness or masculinity (Choo and Ferree 2010; Moreton-Robinson 2000).

In contrast, the Australia academy has held little interest in the intersections of race, class and gender and, unlike the United States or Europe, there is no specific inter-disciplinary field of intersectionality which represents a body of scholarship interested in such issues. In fact, issues of race, class and gender have been ignored by and large in Australian scholarship. This is especially reflected in the works of Australian feminist scholars who have consistently omitted race from works on gender and class (Moreton-Robinson 2000). As Australian critical Whiteness scholar and feminist Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000: 33) argues, White feminists:

> ha[ve] been concerned with theorising oppressions, signified by differences embedded in power relations, which conceal white race privilege. An effect of such theorising is that privileged subject position and standpoint from which feminists conceptualise and write is not made visible in their work. This invisibility often leads white feminists to reinscribe racial dominance in their thinking.

For Moreton-Robinson (2000: 32), the ‘feminist project’ was so narrow in its focus on sex and gender differences that it led to ‘the creation of a universal woman: white, middle-class and heterosexual whose life is oppressed under patriarchy’. This limited theorising meant that the race privilege of White women was left un-theorised. This has left an indelible imprint on feminist scholarship in which the normalisation of White women’s experiences became the ‘default’ for women’s experiences (and the inequalities they faced) excluding all other women and the complexities of their lives (Moreton-Robinson 2000).

Failure to acknowledge the significance of race evidences the invisibility of normative states of existence to those who inhabit them (Dyer 1997: 3). Although Whiteness is embedded in Australia’s institutions and mainstream social practices, it remains obscured to those who are White. As Dyer (1997: 1) notes, historically White people have not recognised themselves as ‘raced’, but as the ‘human norm’. From this ‘invisible White standpoint’, the construct and category of ‘race’ has been reserved for those designated ‘other’ (Moreton-Robinson 2000).
Race, class and gender in White Australia

Though Indigenous people in the United States and Australia are treated with similar disregard – economically, socially and culturally marginalised – since the civil rights era, African Americans have established a firm national presence that can no longer be ignored. Consequently, Whiteness in the United States is constructed in opposition to African Americans, and White Americans are increasingly aware of their racial identity (Hartmass, Gerteis and Croll 2009). In contrast, White Australians continue to see themselves as ‘neutral and unsituated – human not raced’ (Dyer 1997: 4). Moreover, from their privileged position in the court of public opinion, White people’s experience of race being irrelevant is universalised to all Australians, thereby obscuring the racialised disadvantage experienced by non-White peoples. These impediments to incorporating race into the theorisation of power, privilege and disadvantage can be remedied by incorporating a critical Whiteness framework.

Critical Whiteness theory

Whiteness studies, as a discipline, began with the writings of African American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois, who challenged the social norm of seeing White racial dominance as inevitable due to the inherent deficiency of non-White people. Reversing the gaze to examine White society, Du Bois identified structural and social causes for racial inequality (Solomon, Portelli, Daniel and Campbell 2005: 148). Frankenberg (1993: 1) argues that Whiteness needs to be conceived across three dimensions: ‘[as] a location of structural advantage or privilege; a set of cultural practices that are unmarked and unnamed; and, as a standpoint, the place from where those who are White look at themselves and others’. Whiteness is not a homogenous monolith, but rather multi-faceted and situationally-specific, varying in relation to gender, class and sexuality and so forth (Green, Sonn and Matsebula 2007: 393). Crucially, all three dimensions of Whiteness are unmarked and unnamed in mainstream, dominant culture. Consequently, White people tend to be unaware of the racialised nature of their privileged status, cultural practices and standpoint. Instead, White people see themselves as the human norm (Dyer 1997). Whiteness eludes overt discussions while it nevertheless dictates how people should live, advantaging one way of thinking, one way of being and doing above all others.

By reversing the normative gaze, a critical Whiteness framework disrupts the cultural practices of Whiteness, thereby enabling examination of ‘the production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, privilege rather than disadvantage’ (Frankenberg 1993: 236). Adopting a Whiteness lens, then, allows for the theorisation of White power and privilege. The relevancy and usefulness of this framework to a post-colonial theorization of the intersectionality of race, class and gender is in its capacity to provide a platform for examining and explaining why power and privilege are discursive, invisible and raced, classed and gendered. Such examinations and explanations help unsettle some of the taken for granted understandings of how social inequality occurs and how multiple sites of oppression intersect in places like Australia (Walter, Taylor and Habibis 2012: 237). In particular a Whiteness framework contests the discursive strategies which construct the Australian nation as equitable and race-neutral.

Obfuscation of social division and difference

In Australia, there have been strategic attempts on behalf of the nation to obscure division and difference by making the issue of race invisible. Following the civil rights movement of the
1960s, social policy in Australia appeared to mimic the changing social, cultural and political landscape of the Global North. Australia abandoned its long-standing discriminatory policy against non-European migration, the infamous White Australia Policy (the first legislation passed since the inception of the Australian nation state in 1901), in favour of multiculturalism. Alongside this, the 1967 Referendum was overwhelmingly endorsed by the Australian community for the Australian parliament to legislate and implement policies for its First Peoples, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Such changes led to a transformation of the public face of Australia from one of overt White supremacy to an egalitarian alliance of various diverse cultures in which race became irrelevant. According to Ghassan Hage (1998: 105), however, rather than creating an egalitarian society, the purpose of multiculturalism is to portray the nation favourably by creating a discursive break with the past. Multiculturalism is seen as an undisturbed accomplishment by a non-racist, cultureless society that welcomes difference and finds peaceful ways to co-exist in harmony (Gray and Allegritti 2002).

While Australia prides itself on being a multicultural nation – tolerant and inclusive – the lived experience of most Australians is one of ‘spatial, economic and geographic segregation from the racialised “Other”’ (Walter et al. 2012: 234). In contrast with White Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders experience vast disadvantage on a range of socio-economic indicators – burden of disease, life expectancy, household overcrowding, unemployment, education and income. Not only are these social and economic problems not shared, but Australians of White European descent among the middle classes do not share physical space – neighbourhoods, schools or places of employment – with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who are often positioned in ‘disadvantaged outer zones’ on the periphery of cities and towns (Walter et al. 2012). This is perhaps understandable when recent survey data highlights that 94 per cent of middle-class Australians (of European descent) have little interaction with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in their day-to-day lives. Hence ideas about the ‘other’ replace actual experience (Walter et al. 2012).

The trope of multiculturalism persists as a key aspect of Australia’s egalitarian narrative and allows Australians to conceive of themselves as inclusive and tolerant by masking the reality of racialised economic, cultural and geographic segregation. The dominance of neoliberalism, in which the ideological deployment of individualism erases collective identity, further consolidates the erasure of race in contemporary Australia. However, treating everyone equally ‘discursively divorces structural racial inequality from historical and present day racism’ (Moore and Bell 2011: 601) and fails to account for racialised differences in life chances. This type of ‘new racism’ alters the socio-political terrain whereby racism is carried less through overt violent, physical threats, or verbal insults to people of colour, but rather through covert rhetoric under the guise of ‘nationalism’ and ‘cultural preservation’ (Pon 2009: 61), political correctness and, at times, even silence which essentially discriminates against anything different from the silent norm by default. This new form of racism is particularly apparent in Australia where ‘difficult conversations’ tend to be avoided.

Difficult conversations about race, class and gender

In Australia, the ‘national conversation’ is largely repetitive, highly predictable and often scripted; dominated by ‘issues’ (the economy, national security, health and education) and driven by the ‘players’ (politicians, political parties and the media). Conversations relating to race, class and gender are often discussed within or alongside other debates, they are rarely direct and open conversations that the nation has with itself. Initiating these ‘difficult conversations’ is further impeded by labelling them ‘divisive’. This is particularly true in the case of race.
Race as an ‘issue’ is subsumed within conversations about national security (namely migration, asylum seekers and Indigenous Australians) and is only applied to those groups of non-White peoples in society who have been racialised as the ‘Other’ (Gale 2004). Race is seen as a part of the political arsenal, particularly for the politics of the Right, which can be deployed for political purposes and elections. The federal election in 2001 is a case in point. The then-government led by conservative Prime Minister John Howard centred his re-election campaign on issues of national security and border protection after a series of events relating to asylum seekers travelling to Australia by boat. The subsequent media coverage of these issues focused on the ‘politics of fear’ – the fear of the ‘Other’ (Gale 2004). Race again was also seen as a political instrument in 2007, another election year, when the then-Federal Government launched a ‘national emergency’ intervention into the Northern Territory’s Indigenous communities following reports of child sexual abuse. The emergency response intervention was seen as a part of the Howard Government’s electioneering strategy by a critical minority. Such conversations about race are overwhelmingly negative and ‘problematis[e]’ Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders or non-White migrants; these groups are undoubtedly positioned as the ‘Other’ (Hage 1998; Gale 2004). Rare are positive conversations in public discourse about these groups of people within society.

Conversations about class-based inequities or divisions are incongruent with how the nation sees itself and its citizens (Habibis and Walter 2010) and as such are often avoided in public debate. When Australians dare to speak of class or class-like inequalities, they talk about the ‘wealthy’ and the ‘poor’ in contrast and comparison to one another. These conversations focus on the differences between the rich and poor as natural occurrences and norms of Western lifestyles rather than socially constructed inequalities (Pease 2010). This is in line with the popular belief that Australia is a ‘classless and free’ society (Pease 2010: 66) or the ‘belief that we are all middle class now’ (Habibis and Walter 2010: 250). This perception is ultimately flawed and reflects not only the reluctance of Australians to talk about class, but also wider societal changes in Australia’s economy and labour market, which have diluted class consciousness and affiliation (Habibis and Walter 2010). Despite this, there have been several issues recently in the national conversation that have been concerned with class and class warfare with a particular focus on the middle class.

The present-day government has been implementing significant policy changes to Australia’s welfare state, which reduce benefits and entitlements provided by the state to individuals and families on the basis of their financial eligibility – often referred to as ‘means testing’. Class was again put on the national agenda when Deputy Prime Minister and Treasurer Wayne Swan argued that the rising influence of ‘vested interests’ – the billionaire chiefs of Australia’s mining companies – were threatening both Australia’s egalitarian social contract and the current ‘Australian lifestyle’ enjoyed by the middle class.

Similarly, discussions on gender are rare and often subsumed by other issues or debates, for example ‘working families’. This is in part because Australia like many Western nations is said to be living in a ‘post-feminist world’, in which gender equality or any discussion around it is seen as ‘redundant’ (Summers 2003). In late 2012, Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s widely reported ‘misogyny speech’ put gender – particularly issues of sexism and misogyny – back on the agenda. In her speech, Gillard listed a number of sexist offences charged against the Opposition Leader Tony Abbott. Gillard’s speech was not only personal, but was ‘also talking on behalf of every woman who has ever been offended by a man telling them abortion is ‘easy’ or felt demeaned by being described as merely “housewives” who spend the day ironing’ (Summers 2012). Moreover, the speech has been seen by some as part of a political strategy to incite a ‘gender war’. The speech, which went ‘viral’ on both mainstream and social media...
across the globe, ignited a national conversation about the deep sexism and gendered inequalities still entrenched in Australian society. Whether these conversations will once again be marginalised or will continue remains to be seen.

The White elephant in the room – using Whiteness to explore race, class and gender in Australia

The three examples above highlight the types of conversations about race, class and gender that are held in Australian public discourse. Critical Whiteness theory can be applied to these examples to elucidate how national conversations discuss race, class and gender and why race is omitted. Conversations about race in Australia are negative in their representation, they seek to essentialise and problematise groups in Australia who make up the ‘Other’ – Indigenous Australians, migrants (usually from non-English speaking backgrounds) and asylum seekers. The negative tone of these conversations reinforces the ‘Otherness’ of these groups. The conversations are also purposeful in that their negative representation is used as a part of a conversation for electioneering by governments. In contrast, neither debate about class and class warfare nor sexism, misogyny and the inequalities experienced by women were extended to the lived experiences of Indigenous Australians or migrants from non-Western backgrounds. Both conversations about class and gender were heavily focused on issues pertinent to the ‘middle class’, a class which Indigenous and migrants (from non-English speaking backgrounds) rarely occupy, and thus these conversations were decidedly ‘White’ in their nature. The experiences of Indigenous and migrant Australians were once again subsumed within the White experience instead of being distinguished, much less interrogated.

Those participating in the debate assumed that their experience – the White experience – is universal. The latter point is particularly poignant when considering that the protagonists (Swan, Gillard, the middle class) and antagonists (billionaire miners, misogynists) of these conversations are all White. This is again a reflection of the position of Indigenous and migrant Australians in the Australian community in which not only are their experiences disregarded, but their voices are silenced from mainstream discourse. This is in contrast to the example above in which Indigenes, migrant Australians and asylum seekers, however, are topics of conversation on issues about national security, migration or ‘problem’ Indigenous communities. Furthermore, Indigenous and migrant Australian voices are silenced from national conversations while White Australians are allowed to participate and debate national issues. White peoples’ experience of ‘governmental belonging’ (Hage 1998) ensures they feel they have the right to comment and participate in national conversations. In contrast, although Indigenous Australians and migrants may have citizenship rights, they do not have the privileges of White citizenship in which they have the legitimate right to talk about the nation.

Such examples underscore a paradox that Australians can and will engage in conversations that have been previously thought of as irrelevant in contemporary Australia – class and gender – but will not countenance conversations about class and gender from a race perspective, or the intersection of race, class and gender. Australians are willing to engage in conversations about class and gender but only from a limited standpoint. This is reflected in the limited work that has been done on the intersections of race, class and gender in Australia. This is because conversations about class and gender such as those examples detailed above universalise the White experience. The experiences of Indigenous and migrant Australians are demeaned by refusing consideration of any other inequalities for these groups but ones pertaining to race. By failing to racialise Whiteness, only those positioned as not White are raced, reinforcing the inherent privilege of Whiteness.
The exclusion of Indigenous and migrant Australians from conversations of class and gender may be just as purposeful as limiting conversations about race solely to Indigenous and migrant Australians who are positioned as ‘problem Australians’. Conversations about class and gender that exclude their racial dimensions assist in maintaining the power and dominance of Whiteness and those who carry White privilege. Any conversation about class and gender from a racial perspective would mean that White people would need to make space for the experiences of Indigenous and migrant Australians, accepting that their experiences of being White was not shared by all (which suggests that their experience is a racialised experience) and would let Indigenous and migrant Australians people out of their ‘race’ box. These conversations may also force White Australians to recognise their own White raced privilege. Hence, any consideration of race, class and gender and their intersections or interactions would force greater consideration of race, racism and racial inequalities, which explains the obfuscation of social division, or what’s ‘difficult’ about ‘difficult conversations’.

Conclusion

The intersections of race, class and gender have largely been ignored in both feminist and non-feminist Australian scholarship. Echoing this paucity of research is a public discourse that also ignores the racial dimensions of class and gender. Drawing upon critical Whiteness theory, the omission of race from discussions of class and gender can be seen as purposeful and as a way of maintaining power relations. A national conversation that discusses the intersections of race, class and gender is difficult because any consideration of class and gender from a race perspective would unsettle the discourses of individual and egalitarianism which are so fundamental to the way in which the nation sees itself. To suggest that the ‘White Experience’ is not the only experience would be to recognise the existence of social division and difference in Australia based on race. Thus, conversations about class and gender that exclude race can be seen as a way of maintaining the ‘Whiteness’ of White Australia.

Note

1 By ‘Global North’, we are referring the northern hemisphere/metropole (see Connell 2007).

References


