

Review

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Barbara Baird and Damien W. Riggs (eds). *The Racial Politics of Bodies, Nations and Knowledges*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.

Published in 2009, the present collection of essays originates in a conference held in 2007 and organized by ACRAWSA (Australian Critical Race And Whiteness Studies Association). This fact anticipates the book's scope and although the title does not suggest it explicitly, most contributions are firmly located in Australian whiteness studies. Whiteness studies, more generally, proliferated in the United States in the 1990s with influential studies by Ruth Frankenberg, Toni Morrison and other cultural critics who pointed to the social construction of whiteness and challenged its racial privileges. In the Australian context, the discourse has emerged, to a large extent, as a response to debates on Indigenous sovereignties in the late 1990s and gained momentum in early and mid-2000s. ACRAWSA was founded in 2003 and started a regular e-journal a year later, the same year *borderlands* published a special issue dedicated to whiteness studies, bringing together contributions from prominent Australian theorists of whiteness and critical race theory—Ghassan Hage, Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Damien Riggs were among them. The main initiative of whiteness studies is presumably to investigate how whiteness, as a normative category and a structural authority, operates in various spaces to secure its privileged position in political, economic, legal, educational and cultural spheres. In other words, the aim is to “unsettle” whiteness’ invisibility.

The same purpose is found at the outset of this publication. In the introduction the editors, Damien Riggs and Barbara Baird, repeatedly point out the need to examine the racialization of knowledge which, not only in Australia, has been shaped by the history of colonization, and which keeps forcing both Indigenous people and those non-Indigenous people who are excluded from the white majority into “complicity with colonial logic that offers inclusion in national spaces only through conformity to particular modes of being” (2). Apart from revealing and critically examining white

hegemony that shapes our bodies and identities, it is equally important, according to the editors, to analyze transformations and resistances to this hegemony and to scrutinize the complex and context-specific ways these processes occur (2). This is a significant statement as it addresses the principal criticism of whiteness studies, namely that in spite of the benefits of disclosing the invisible norm of whiteness as an abstraction, a self-consciousness about whiteness “can be recuperated to re-privilege the already privileged“ (Fee and Russell 187). The collection, in its diversity and comparative aspects, promises to avoid such traps.

The individual essays indeed vary in their scope, methodology and critical approaches but all of them engage critically with the ways in which whiteness has been used to secure certain models of inclusion and exclusion. Contributions are divided into four sections but there may be parallels found among them. The first section, “Place and Space”, is dedicated to demonstrating how whiteness manifests itself within various public spaces and continues to exclude the presence of marginalized groups from these spaces, be it healthcare institutions (in which, according to Bronwyn Fredericks’ survey, Indigenous women feel alienated and disempowered), tourist industry (attractions of which contribute to creating what Johan Edelman calls “touristic terra nullius”), specific sites (where, as Colin Slater reports, normative institutional knowledge, such as archaeology, is still, even as it is activated in support of Indigenous management of those sites, being privileged over Indigenous knowledges and histories of the places in question). These three papers expose the very subtle and nuanced ways of preventing marginalized groups from effective participation in the creation, control and maintenance of public places. Perhaps the most transgressive and illuminating essay in this section, by Kathleen Connellan, examines the link between the colour “white” and various contexts which perpetuate a desire for purity and cleanliness (from the use of soap in maintaining Christian and colonizing regime of clean bodies, to commercially produced skin whiteners or interior design with its imperative for white, smooth, clean surfaces). The second section’s focus is on various media and representations and how they interpellate their audiences as white: in photography, where images of suffering and violence are consumed with empathy but through the lens of distance, argues Anna Szorenyi, while Vikki Fraser combines the study of digital cultures and queer theory to suggest that websites, such as *mogenic.com*, aimed at young queer people, can, although they themselves create and participate in a marginalized space, promote a homogenizing discourse by operating “within the boundaries of white, male, gay sexuality and experience” (131). Ron Hoenig’s final chapter in this section analyzes how Australian print media news reports represent yet another underprivileged and disempowered group, refugees in Australian detention centres, concluding that the representations of lip sewing are sometimes, despite their counter-hegemonic purposes, appropriated by a discourse of national exclusionist narrative.

The next two sections that centre on notions of diversity, identity and voice further prove the variety of research undertaken within critical race theory. Three articles focus on education: James Lovell and Damien Riggs examine how children’s storybooks

represent diversity and how readers at a very young age are in fact being manipulated into models of behavior that exclude difference, which may result, for example, in a pathologising behavior of school bullying. The chapter by Catherine Koerner, Simone Tur and Christopher Wilson extends the idea of “unpacking racialization” to mentoring literature used in Indigenous students’ education. Teaching Indigenous material in both Australian and European classrooms is also elaborated in Anne Brewster’s article. A good example of providing a comparative element is Silvo Devetak’s chapter. Here he examines the “unity in diversity” principle officially promoted by the European Union, drawing similar conclusions to the other contributors about nuanced ways of excluding certain minorities. The last two chapters in the final section revisit colonial histories and intricacies of claiming an identity: Alice Te Punga Somerville presents the complexity of constructing a national identity by authorities but also by subjects themselves, and Fiona McAllan explores a similar topic but in the context of a settler sense of belonging.

Interestingly, a number of essays in the collection engage explicitly with positionality in their exploration, through a personalized, self-reflective and self-conscious criticism, of what it means to be a white middle-class academic who invests both professional and personal energy into a critique of racial privileges. As Riggs and Baird claim in the introduction, “it is of central importance that we engage with our relationships as white Australians to ongoing histories of colonization...” (1). The essays by Anne Brewster, who combines personal criticism and fictocriticism in her account of how the film *The Tracker* can be used to unsettle white identities transnationally, by Anna Szorenyi, who takes her own response to “concerned photography” as a starting point for theorizing white audiences’ responses to images of “distanced” suffering, and by Fiona McAllan, who uses her own complicated genealogy to theorize settler-Indigenous relations, are good examples of ways in which public intellectuals in Australia have attempted to demask their struggles of coming to terms with their own privileged positions.

What should be appreciated about the collection is its wide scope, and its presentation of a diversity of topics and critical approaches. Indeed, critical race theory and whiteness studies have developed out of assorted fields, such as feminism, postcolonialism, anthropology, and today, perhaps more than any other field, synthesize knowledge across disciplines. What can be condemned by some as lacking in focus may be welcomed by others as bridging the gaps and foregrounding productive parallels. The essays in this collection might even be said to extend the interdisciplinary foundations of the field. They draw on sociological disciplines such as health studies; on cultural studies analysis, such as tourism studies, design theory, photography or media representation; and on disciplines of education and history. It is therefore illuminating to see how many of the essays come to a similar conclusion: the racialization of bodies, nations and knowledges operates globally (albeit in context-specific locations), affects all people and is often so subtle that it is taken for granted. Indeed, although it is true that the Australian context is slightly overrepresented in the book and the majority of contributors are white (Australian) academics, there are significant transnational and comparative dimensions present. These are much needed, especially in the face of

arguments that Australian debates which focus on the impacts of colonization on Indigenous knowledges and sovereignties often turn inwards and fail to recognize the global nature of various practices of exclusion and marginalization. This collection of essays may well prove the opposite.

Works Cited

Fee, Margery, and Lynette Russell. "'Whiteness' and 'Aboriginality' in Canada and Australia: Conversations and Identities." *Feminist Theory* 8 (2), 2007 187-208.

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