

Critical Race and Whiteness Studies

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Book Review

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Baird, B., & Riggs, D.W. (Eds.). (2009). *The Racial Politics of Bodies, Nations and Knowledges*. Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

The Racial Politics of Bodies, Nations and Knowledges examines how place, identity and knowledge are shaped and affirmed by particular ways of understanding the world and by particular relationships of privilege and disadvantage. This edited collection brings together an important group of essays that explore these issues in both an Australian and an international context, providing discussions not only of how such relationships occur and what they look like, but also how they can be challenged and reshaped.

The book is divided into a number of sections that explore various aspects of these relationships of privilege and disadvantage. The essays contained in the first section of the book explore issues surrounding place and space. In this section we are introduced to the relationship between different aspects of place and race, racialization, and being. In particular, the chapters in this section point to the complexity of the impact of norms of whiteness on place, especially those places marked by colonisation. Authors in this section examine such complexities in relation to the influence of white healthcare services on the experiences of Aboriginal women attempting to use those services, the ways in which place and space are constructed through particular privileged narratives of history, and the ongoing ways in which whiteness itself is constructed as a signifier of purity and cleanliness, and the challenge this construction poses for the West in a changing, increasingly global, world. This section is appropriately concluded by a chapter posing the difficult question of how white people can most effectively support the struggles of Indigenous peoples around the world without simply reinforcing

their privilege as white people. This final chapter argues that white people must recognise and acknowledge their complicity in such relationships – a theme which reflects the essence of this entire edited collection which at every point requires those of us who are white readers to evaluate our own privilege and complicity in particular ways of viewing and enacting that privilege upon the spaces around us.

The second section of the book turns its attention to representations of race, and in particular to such representations as seen in various forms of media. This section of the book explores the positioning in the media of white people as both spectators but also as those who most often speak. The first chapter in this section examines the concept of photographs of the suffering of people in developing countries, arguing that such photographs position white people as spectators of suffering – a positioning which does not necessarily truly confront white people in ways which unsettle their privilege. As a corollary to this, the final chapter in this section of the book discusses the ways in which white voices within the mainstream news media in Australia are privileged over the voices of those who are the subject of such stories – in this case asylum seekers in detention. Together, these two chapters examine the ways in which whiteness remains centred in dominant constructions of the world, with images of the suffering of disadvantaged people often functioning to only re-affirm white dominance and notions of white superiority. The second chapter in this section of the book also explores the construction of whiteness as the norm within media forms (including media forms that are explicitly set up to be inclusive), such as online communities for queer youth. This representation of whiteness as the 'norm' therefore locates white people as invisible in the stories being told, but as authoritative in their ability to tell those stories. Thus again in this chapter we return to the theme of a need to decentre the white subject; to shake the idea held by many white people that the world 'belongs' to them.

In the third section of the book the essays turn to a broader examination of diversity and 'difference', together with suggestions for negotiating and reconstructing normative understandings of belonging or constructions of space. These examinations of diversity take up a wide range of foci, including a discussion of constructions of 'normality' in children's storybooks, an examination of the European Union and its treatment of minority countries, and a discussion of a mentoring program implemented within a university to increase participation rates of Indigenous students. This third section of the book thus examines how particular understandings and treatments of diversity are held, and what the outcomes of those understandings are. The strength of this section of the book lies in its discussion of tangible outcomes that result from particular constructions of 'normalcy' that marginalise some groups at the expense of others. Furthermore, the authors of these chapters offer constructive approaches to challenging and critiquing dominant accounts of 'diversity', thus suggesting ways in which those occupying dominant positions can appropriately address issues of inequality without assuming positions of authority.

Finally, in section four, the book turns its focus to the level of the individual, with a series of essays that examine identity and voice. In this section, the authors of the chapters examine how identity is constructed by both the individual(s) themselves, and by the broader societal level around them, highlighting the interactions between dominance and marginalisation and the effects of this interaction on the construction of identity. Chapters in this section consider the complex ways in which identity is constructed – with Chapter 1 examining a case study of the construction of identity by the state in relation to applications for citizenship (particularly in relation to constructions of racial superiority/inferiority), and Chapter 2 discussing the difficulties and intricacies of teaching about racial issues across cultures. Finally, Chapter 3 of this section provides an examination of how law can shape place and identity – specifically in relation to Indigenous laws in colonial Australia. Together, these final chapters provide a reflexive discussion of the nature of identity and the ways in which those in positions of power can attempt to create identities for those from marginalized groups – thus leading the book back to its starting point in relation to the ways in which place and space are shaped by dominance and the constructions built by those in relative positions of power.

As such, *The Racial Politics of Bodies, Nations and Knowledges* represents an important examination of understandings of whiteness and other forms of privilege that highlight the complexity and inherently diverse and difficult nature of this subject matter. In a world which is engaging with such debates every day in relation to issues such as the effects of climate change, the challenge of increasing numbers of refugees, and the results of globalization, this book makes an important contribution to our understandings of the relationships that shape our world, and suggests ways to better challenge the disparities and inequalities we see around us. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, by including a broad range of essays from a diverse group of writers and perspectives, *The Racial Politics of Bodies, Nations and Knowledges* challenges us as readers to consider our own relationships to race and place and the judgements and assumptions we bring with us to the issues presented within the book. In doing so, the book encourages us to not only think critically about the discussions raised in the book, but also to think reflexively about them and our own role in perpetuating or challenging inequalities.

Whiteness studies is an interdisciplinary arena of academic inquiry focused on the cultural, historical and sociological aspects of people identified as white, and the social construction of whiteness as an ideology tied to social status. Pioneers in the field include Ruth Frankenberg (*White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, 1993), author and literary critic Toni Morrison (*Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, 1992), and historian David Roediger (*The Finally*, the role of whiteness and white privilege in sustaining racial injustice is elucidated. The insights of critical theories of race and racism have the potential to open up new possibilities in education that challenge rather than reproduce power systems. Do you want to read the rest of this article? Request full-text. Whiteness studies is an interdisciplinary arena of inquiry that has developed beginning in the United States, particularly since the late 20th century, and is focused on what proponents describe as the cultural, historical and sociological aspects of people identified as white, and the social construction of "whiteness" as an ideology tied to social status. Pioneers in the field include W. E. B. Du Bois ("*Jefferson Davis as a Representative of Civilization*", 1890; *Darkwater*, 1920), James Baldwin