The Racial Politics of Bodies,
Nations and Knowledges
The Racial Politics of Bodies,
Nations and Knowledges

Edited by

Barbara Baird and Damien W. Riggs

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INTRODUCTION

THE RACIAL POLITICS OF BODIES, NATIONS AND KNOWLEDGES

DAMIEN W. RIGGS AND BARBARA BAIRD

In the spirit of the conference at which the chapters in this book were originally presented, and as recognition of the racial politics of living as two white academics in a colonial nation, we begin this introduction by acknowledging the sovereignty of the Kaurna people, the First Nations people upon whose land we live in Adelaide, South Australia. We also acknowledge that prior to colonisation more than 200 Indigenous nations existed in Australia and we recognise the sovereignty of these nations and pay our respects to elders both past and present. By emphasising the relationship we as two white academics have to the fact of Indigenous sovereignty, our point is not to overwrite the multiple relationships between individuals living within Australia and beyond, nor is it to suggest that only Indigenous and white relations require attention. Rather, our point is that by opening with an acknowledgement of our location, it is of central importance that we engage with our relationship as white Australians to ongoing histories of colonisation, whilst acknowledging that these histories will differentially intersect with the lives of all people living in Australia and in other colonial nations.

As such, speaking of the racial politics of any nation requires recognition of the specific configurations of bodies and identities that are rendered intelligible within any given context. In Australia, with its specific history of colonisation that involved the claiming of the country as an “empty land” and the subsequent genocidal acts aimed at asserting the claims to belonging and rights of colonisers over Indigenous people, bodies are shaped by disparities in social and economic capital. Moreover, bodies are shaped by their varying relationships to privilege and disadvantage, with experiences of the former always contingent upon the latter. Thus, as we suggested above, the politics of race in Australia are not limited solely to white-Indigenous relations, and a focus upon the
differential allocation of privilege and disadvantage according to social norms provides one way in which to understand the range of relationships that all non-Indigenous people have to the fact of Indigenous sovereignty, in addition to the relationships between non-Indigenous people.

In relation to the racialisation of knowledge, the epistemic value accorded to the knowledge claims of white people in Australia is shaped by a colonial context in which written records and particular claims to truth continue to be valued over others, and in particular over the knowledges held within Indigenous communities. This framing of what counts as “knowledge” on the terms set by white people continues to be deployed not only to deny the fact of Indigenous sovereignty, but also to force other non-Indigenous people (not identified as part of the white majority) into complicity with a colonial logic that offers inclusion in national spaces only through conformity to particular modes of being.

Looking outside of Australia, and with recognition of the international nature of this book, it is important to recognise how colonial histories shape national contexts in a range of ways that whilst being markedly different, are similar in relation to the ongoing failure of colonial nations to adequately recognise the sovereign status of First Nations people. Whilst from the lens of Australia it can often look like countries such as New Zealand or Canada are doing a better job of coming to terms with the violence of colonisation and engaging in practices of reconciliation that seek to acknowledge Indigenous sovereignties, those who write from colonial nations outside Australia might contest this reading. We only need to look at ongoing disparities in health, economic and education between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous people in all colonial nations to see that the effects of colonisation are ongoing, despite political or individual rhetoric that may claim otherwise.

It was with a focus on these global issues of the effects of colonisation and the need to create spaces where dialogue can occur about the transformation of bodies, nations and knowledges that the 2007 Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association conference was convened. The Association itself, formed in 2003, has been a growing voice in speaking of issues of race privilege, racial hegemonies, and the ongoing histories of colonisation that shape colonial nations. The 2007 conference sought not only to continue this tradition, but also to speak of resistances to colonisation, of creative attempts at transforming spaces, and to look at how the racialisation of bodies, nations and knowledges occurs in complex and context-specific ways.

The conference was important for its truly international attendance, which is reflected to some degree in this collection. Speakers from a wide
range of contexts spoke across and through these differences to continue
the work of examining how racial hierarchies function, how these are
resisted, and where both similarities and incommensurabilites exist in the
functioning of racial politics as key determinants of social spaces. Importantly, the speakers contested simplistic accounts of racialised
practices that would isolate “race” as a singular category of difference, and
instead consistently spoke of the interplays of gender, sexuality, religion,
class and ethnicity as they function together to produce particular
subjectivities situated in a relationship to the norm of white heterosexual
middleclass maleness.

The sections of this book, as outlined below, collect together groupings
of chapters that share similar themes, or which speak of particular identity
claims. Whilst obviously there are considerable overlaps between all of the
sections, each of the sections provides a unique snapshot of what scholars
from across the globe are saying about particular topics of relevance to the
study of race and whiteness.

**Section 1: Place and Space**

The authors represented by this first section share a focus on the
racialisation of places and spaces. They invite us to question what it means
for particular knowledges to be claimed over others, and how this shapes
the ways in which differing bodies can move in particular spaces. As such,
these papers highlight the difference between the fact of rights and the
ability to enact them: whilst in most countries the rights of non-white or
Indigenous people are recognised and protected, this does not mean that
these groups of people are accorded with the necessary cultural or social or
economic capital to enact those rights. In other words, when any particular

group, as a result of social inequities and histories of exclusion, is denied
the capacity to manage and determine their social and economic needs,
they will have fewer opportunities to take up the rights accorded to them
as citizens. When public spaces are not only shaped by the norms of
dominant groups, but when movement in social spaces requires a certain
degree of cultural, social and economic capital, marginalised groups will
continue to be excluded, despite the existence of legislation saying that
they have the right to inclusion.

The limitations of inclusion are evident in the first chapter by Bronwyn
Fredericks, who outlines how Indigenous women in northern Queensland
in Australia question and contest notions of access in relation to health
services. Fredericks suggests that when white norms for public spaces are
centred, Indigenous people will always feel unwelcomed and unsupported.
Furthermore, not only do such spaces fail to be “hospitable”, but they perpetuate inequities in relation to access by failing to recognise the specific needs of Indigenous people. On the other hand, the women to whom Fredericks spoke reported positive empowering experiences when visiting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health services.

Moving in many ways outside of Australia, the next chapter by Kathleen Connellan explores multiple sites in which public spaces are shaped by racial norms. Writing about her own life growing up as a white woman in South Africa, and moving on to look at the colour white and the enactment of whiteness as a claim to purity and cleanliness, Connellan explores the complex associations between the racialisation of space and the promotion of whiteness as an aesthetic norm. Turning also to examine skin whitening products and the emphasis upon white imagery in modern design, Connellan highlights how the colour white both functions as an arbitrary signifier but that it also is connected to real world practices that exclude certain groups of people.

 Returning to Australia, Johan Edelheim examines how tourist sites are constructed as sites of denial that ignore histories of dispossession and which replace Indigenous histories with white histories of heroism. Examining his own experience of one particular tourist site in New South Wales, Edelheim outlines the story that the site tells and the histories that it renders invisible. In so doing, Edelheim argues for an account of a “touristic terra nullius” in which Australian places are taken as spaces available for the claiming by the (non-Indigenous) tourist eye, and into which the viewer is co-opted into a particular account of colonisation.

Finally, Colin Salter engages in a comparative analysis of two sites of contestation over land—one in Australia and one in Canada—where non-Indigenous people have supported the struggles of local Indigenous people. In particular, Salter focuses upon how non-Indigenous supporters of Indigenous land rights are variously made complicit with what Moreton-Robinson (2004) terms the “possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty”. Salter examines how claims to knowledge about land are always already predetermined by white systems of law and white institutional knowledges like archaeology that function to exclude Indigenous ways of knowing, and which overwrite Indigenous histories and relationships to land by asserting the legitimacy of white law and knowledge as the appropriate arbiter of Indigenous land claims.

Together the chapters in this first section of the book highlight the complex racialisations of space and place that occur to the detriment of groups of people located outside of the dominant majority. The chapters demonstrate how the shaping of public spaces in turn shapes particular
bodies and their freedom to move. Importantly, however, the chapters in varying ways also highlight resistances to white hegemony and the transformations that can take place when we read spaces and places in non-normative ways.

Section 2: Media and Representation

The three contributors to this section take as their focal points three different forms of media, and explore how each form functions to normalise a particularly white way of seeing the world. In the first chapter, Anna Szorenyi writes about photographic books that represent the lives (and deaths) of people living outside of the overdeveloped West. Szorenyi elaborates how these texts interpellate the reader as white and that, in so doing, they construct the lives of non-white people as spectacles to be witnessed (and then ultimately ignored) by the white viewer.

The second chapter, written by Vikki Fraser, takes as its starting place a website ostensibly aimed at all young same-sex attracted people, and explores how the website primarily constructs its audience as young white gay men. Drawing on queer theory and critical race and whiteness studies, Fraser carefully examines how the website, through its profiling system and imagery, creates an image of “queer” that is not only racially normative, but also potentially exclusionary toward non-white queer young people.

In the final chapter in this section, Ron Hoenig explores Australian news media reports and their representations of lip sewing by refugees held captive in detention centres. Hoenig suggests that while refugees who engage in lip sewing are constructing themselves, reflexively, as mute by the very act of sewing, they are also constructed as mute through the refusal of the media to recognise the voices of refugees who speak out about the violence of the detention centre system. Furthermore, Hoenig suggests that lip sewing is represented in the media as a coercive behaviour that is seen as warranting the mistreatment of refugees on the basis of the “threat” they are seen to make to the Australian nation.

In varying ways, these three chapters draw out attention to both what is represented in the media, and who the representations are aimed at. Primarily, the representations that are made available are either pathologising, stereotyping or exoticising of non-white people, and they are aimed at a white audience. Even when media are aimed at groups of people located outside the norm of white heterosexual middleclassness, they still evoke a racialised norm in which the experiences of white people are centred as the norm.
Section 3: Locating “Diversity”

The chapters in this section cross two broad topics (education and the European Union) and are encompassed by considerations of how diversity is represented or understood. Whilst the topics are relatively disparate, the theme that runs through each of the chapters is their collective emphasis upon how diversity is understood. Part of the work of critical race and whiteness studies has been to examine how, in the case of racial difference, whiteness is constructed as the invisible marker against which “diversity” is measured, and to firmly locate whiteness as part of diversity in which, whilst it may often be the statistical norm (in relation to population numbers), it should not *a priori* be accorded a normative status.

The first chapter, by James Lovell and Damien Riggs, sets the scene for this section, by exploring how understandings of difference and diversity are represented in children’s storybooks. Lovell and Riggs suggest firstly that difference is constructed as that which does not occupy the dominant position and, secondly, that difference identified in this way is only seen as valid or intelligible if it can be of benefit to the dominant group. These findings highlight the subtle and indeed mundane ways in which, from a very young age, people are schooled into seeing the world in ways that position certain identities or behaviours as the norm, and from which all other identities and behaviours are seen to diverge.

In the second chapter, Silvo Devetak takes up the topic of diversity and explores how diverse groups of people are offered inclusion within the European Union (EU). Devetak explores how certain groups are currently excluded from the EU and how this occurs, in part, despite the provision of laws aimed at protecting all groups of people, and at other times because certain laws do not offer enough protection for all groups of people. The chapter concludes by offering some direction for the EU in relation to the ways that a wide range of beliefs and values can be respected within the EU, and the need for the EU to offer terms for inclusion that are critical of established orthodoxies.

In the final chapter, Catherine Koerner, Simone Tur and Christopher Wilson outline some of their own work in developing and practicing a peer mentoring scheme for young people that is mindful of the particular position of young Indigenous students who participate in their program. The program they have devised focuses on the racial politics of white mentors working with Indigenous students and on the need to connect Indigenous students with Indigenous community as a strategy for educational success. Koerner, Tur and Wilson highlight the need for white mentors to be aware of the normative status of whiteness and to critically
reflect upon the diverse needs of all students, with an emphasis upon tutoring within a context of Indigenous sovereignties and the need for white students to engage with and reflect upon their own location within a relationship to the norms of whiteness.

Despite their wide-ranging focus, the three chapters in this section speak together about how “diversity” is represented, where it is located, and how it is understood. By challenging the assumption that diversity is always outside of the norm, these chapters remind us of the importance of constantly turning the gaze back upon that which is often left unmarked.

Section 4: Identity and Voice

Perhaps the most varied section, this fourth and final selection of chapters, in various ways provides accounts of the shaping of identities across colonial contexts, and the ways in which particular voices sound out louder than others. With a broad range of foci, these chapters nonetheless share an emphasis upon how particular knowledges are made to matter, and how bodies are variously located within a relationship to colonial and racialised norms in the context of colonial nations.

In the first chapter Alice Te Punga Somerville relates aspects of the life story of a key figure in recent Maori history; Te Rangihiroa. Specifically, Te Punga Somerville writes of Te Rangihiroa’s attempts at securing US citizenship and the varying ways in which his identity was constructed not only under US and New Zealand law, but also by Te Rangihiroa himself and by his white supporters. In so doing, Te Punga Somerville draws attention to the complex practices of racialisation whereby national belonging is configured on the terms set by the dominant majority, and where conformity to particular racialised norms will sometimes, though not always, ensure inclusion within national spaces.

In the second chapter Anne Brewster outlines her own experiences as a white woman attempting to negotiate the teaching of critical race and whiteness studies in Australia and beyond. Drawing upon the movie The Tracker and her use of it as a pedagogic tool, Brewster highlights the complexities of claiming a speaking position as a white person in a colonial nation, and the considerable privilege and epistemic authority that underpins the voicing of white identities.

In the final chapter of the book, Fiona McAllan too draws our attention to the problematic location of white people in colonial nations such as Australia who seek to elaborate an account of belonging that does not overwrite the fact of Indigenous sovereignty, but which nonetheless makes a grounded claim to identity. McAllan’s writing represents one attempt at
negotiating the contested ground of racialised power relations in Australia by attempting to speak of the histories and trajectories of all people living in Australia—Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

As the concluding section of this book, the chapters included here necessarily highlight the disjunctures and difficulties faced by any person attempting to make a claim to identity in the face of established norms of intelligibility. Importantly, these chapters do not gloss over failures or the problematics of such claims, but instead highlight the complex relational work that must be undertaken by anyone seeking to consider their location within colonial nations, and particularly those who occupy dominant locations.

Conclusions

We believe that this collection of chapters is timely. Not only do the chapters represent the diversity of research being undertaken within the broad banner of critical race and whiteness studies, but they also converge at many points, centring upon the conference topic of “transforming bodies, nations and knowledges”. That academics from across the globe would so often come to similar conclusions about the impact of racialisation upon the lives of all people has much to say about the need for ongoing attention to ongoing histories of colonisation, social exclusion and racialised inequities in access to respect, social capital and citizenship and material resources.

As editors of this collection and as co-convenors of the 2007 ACRAWSA conference, we are pleased to be able to present these chapters to a wider audience. We feel that each chapter in its own way has much to contribute to the field of critical race and whiteness studies and beyond, and we hope that the publication of this book will engender much discussion and transformation of racial politics that continue to be productive of privileges and disadvantages.
PART I:

PLACE AND SPACE
CHAPTER ONE

HOW THE WHITENESS EMBEDDED IN HEALTH SERVICES IMPACTS ON THE HEALTH AND WELL-BEING OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLES

BRONWYN FREDERICKS

Introduction

Aboriginal women are treated differently by non-Indigenous health care providers based on perceptions of Aboriginality and skin colour and white race privilege within health care environments. The experiences shared below are from some of the Aboriginal woman respondents in a research project undertaken within Rockhampton, a regional area in Central Queensland (Fredericks 2003). The experiences give an insight into how the Aboriginal women interviewed felt and their observations of how other Aboriginal women were treated within health care settings based on skin colour and perceptions of Aboriginality. A number of the women demonstrated a personal in-depth analysis of the issues surrounding place, skin colour and Aboriginality. For example, one of the women, who I named Kay, identified one particular health service organisation and stated that, “it is a totally white designed space. There is nothing that identifies me to that place. I just won’t go there as a client because I don’t feel they cater for me as a black woman”. Kay’s words give us an understanding of the reality experienced by Aboriginal women as they move in and out of places within health environments and broader society. Some of these experiences are examples of direct racism, whilst other examples are subtle and demonstrate how whiteness manifests and plays out within places. I offer acknowledgement and honour to the Aboriginal women who shared their stories and gave me a glimpse of their realities in the research project from which the findings presented in this chapter are taken. It is to this research project that I now turn.

During the late 1990s, I commenced a formal research project exploring Aboriginal women’s perceptions and experiences of health,
well-being, identity, body and health services within Rockhampton. Using an open-ended question sheet as a guide, twenty Aboriginal women from a range of ages and with a diversity of backgrounds provided in-depth interviews (Fredericks 2007a; 2007b). Some of these women’s experiences are shared within this chapter in the hope that they will lead to a deeper understanding of how racism manifests through the perceptions and personal practices of health service providers.

The Aboriginal women I interviewed want to see evidence that they are part of the places that are called health services. What will become obvious within the following sections is that planners, designers, managers and health personnel need to give consideration to how people access and dwell within places culturally. As Weisman explains; “design is a reflection of prevailing social, political and economic values and is often symbolic of the place that each individual holds in society” (1992, 10). Places are not the passive environments we would like to think they are. According to Kitchin, they act as a social text that conveys messages of belonging and exclusion and reproduces power relations within society (1995, 45). They are also, as suggested by Foucault, sites of social struggle and contested realms of identity (1980, 149).

In relation to the gendered nature of places, MacGregor outlines the ways in which there are “complex interrelations between who women are (identity) and the environments in which women live (spaces and places)” (2001, 342). Miranne and Young explain that it is the aspects of women’s identities such as class, race, ethnicity, culture and sexual orientation that add complexity to the interrelationships between women and space and place. Women don’t just physically use spaces and places: they interpret, represent, and produce and reproduce space (Miranne and Young 2000). Aboriginal women’s sense of place within health services operates within this complex context.

Dyck (1995) and Dyck, Lewis and McLafferty (2003) explore how women manage the physical, social and economic consequences of their illness along with the complex layering of social, economic and political relations that frame their health. It is demonstrated through this research undertaken with Aboriginal women in Rockhampton, Central Queensland that culture and racism impact on the way in which Aboriginal women experience and engage with places that offer health services. It is further demonstrated that if Aboriginal women are not part of the design process and management of such places that they are reflected within the social, political and economic values by their absence, a fact that provides a symbolic representation of the position that Aboriginal women hold within that community.
What became apparent through this research project is that Aboriginal women need to feel welcome, comfortable, secure and culturally safe if they are going to access and utilise health services openly, freely and happily, and in an informed and empowered manner. This is also outlined in Kirk et al. (1998) in the research they did focusing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and cervical cancer in Queensland. It was additionally identified in research undertaken focusing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in Queensland (Kirk et al. 2000a; 2000b). My research builds on the work of Kirk et al. and suggests that if Aboriginal women do not have a connection to a place, then they will not utilise that health service or they may do so only with a great deal of effort, angst and energy. In a sense these places within the landscape can be contemporary sites of trauma. A research methodology was developed which would offer a form of witnessing, validation and support in asking questions and discussing issues, which would draw emotional responses (Fredericks 2007a; 2007b; 2008).

**Method**

Aboriginal women who lived within the Rockhampton area of the Central Queensland region were interviewed as part of a research project exploring “how the relationship between health services and Aboriginal women can be more empowering from the viewpoints of Aboriginal women” (Fredericks 2003). The assumption underpinning this study was that empowering and re-empowering practices for Aboriginal women can lead to improved health outcomes. The focus of the study arose from discussions with Aboriginal women in the community as to what they wanted me, another Aboriginal woman, to investigate as part of a formal research project (Fredericks 2007a; 2007b). The terms empowering and re-empowering were raised through these early exploratory discussions. They were later discussed during the interviews. Re-empowerment was discussed from the viewpoint that Aboriginal women were once empowered as sovereign women who had control of all aspects of their lives. Aboriginal women became disempowered as a result of colonisation and thus the term re-empowering was discussed and agreed upon.

The ethics process included presentations before an Indigenous inter-agency meeting of over 50 representatives from community organisations and Indigenous work units; an Aboriginal women’s meeting; and an individual organisation that was recognised as having specific responsibility for women’s issues. This was in addition to the university ethics process.
A panel of supervisors oversaw the project, including an Aboriginal woman recognised for her long-term involvement in Aboriginal women’s activism. She was nominated by other Aboriginal women in the community as the appropriate person to be a cultural supervisor and to assist in any cultural dilemmas. She worked with the other two supervisors, academics, who additionally provided specific research support within the university.

Twenty Aboriginal women participated in in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews in a participatory-action research process, which incorporated the principles of an Indigenous methodology as put forward by Rigney (2001) and decolonising concepts asserted by Smith (1999). In addition the process drew heavily from the field of ethnography (Bowling 1997; Creswell 1998). Ethnographic data collection—as understood from the writings of Creswell (1998)—can include documents, observations and interviewing. These were all tasks that were undertaken in this project. The benefits of ethnography allow for interviewees to provide “rich and quotable material” (Bowling 1997, 231), and “enable them to give their opinions in full on more complex topics” (Bowling 1997, 231). It was agreed by all the participants in this project that they would be given pseudonyms for ease of discussing the research outcomes and protect them. They still needed to live within the community of Rockhampton and receive health services and interact with health professionals in a range of contexts. The research project as it developed allowed for concepts of reciprocity and reactivity to be enacted within the research process and for the researcher to be immersed in the day-to-day lives of the members of the research group (Creswell 1998, 58; Fredericks 2008). For me as a member of the Rockhampton Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community at that time this was imperative.

It is important to note that this research process was developed in consultation with Aboriginal women in the community and through discussion with other Indigenous researchers in Australia and overseas. Research processes were sought and discussed that would not only be academically rigorous but that would not perpetuate further disempowerment and marginalisation for the Aboriginal women involved and the Aboriginal women in the community (Fredericks 2007a; 2007b; 2008). The interviews that resulted presented a powerful insight into the lives of Aboriginal women, past and present, and contributes to a deeper understanding of the past and present interactions between Aboriginal women and health services (Fredericks 2007c). Some of the women’s narratives will be presented within the next few sections.
How the Whiteness Embedded in Health Services Impacts on the Health and Well-Being of Aboriginal Peoples

Mainstream health services

Health services that are available for the general Australian population are generally what are referred to as mainstream health services. These can be accessed for a range of reasons and can also be accessed by Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal women I interviewed spoke at length about their experiences of mainstream health services in an attempt to name what was positive and what was negative in their interactions. Kay, who is 46 years of age, experienced a lot of sickness as a child and has experienced a lot of sickness as an adult and hence has accessed mainstream health services over a long period of time. When Kay was reflecting on her past health experiences she recalled two very significant events that occurred, both while in her twenties. The first occurred when she was in her mid-twenties, as she was experiencing a lot of pain and found it very difficult to get medical treatment for the pain at the time. She said that “everyone thought I was imagining it, [but] I had gall-stones ... 201 stones, they were amazed that I made it as long as I did”. She ended up being admitted and having the stones and her gallbladder removed. She recounts the process,

I was the youngest one in the hospital, I thought I would have a tiny mark, I didn’t know what questions to ask. I got big dog stitches. I was in my mid-twenties. I got the dog clips. I was the only one who got the apprentices [possibly interns/new registrars]. I was really upset, just because I hadn’t asked about the scar didn’t mean I wanted to be the ugliest. Aboriginal people we mark when we scar, that kind of scarring [shows me]. If I hadn’t been so sick ... I felt it was discrimination. How come all those old [white] women got the clamping situation and I got the old dog stitches. I felt really ashamed then ... I felt it was because of the colour of my skin.

The second significant event was when she was pregnant with her first child and went up to the hospital. “That doctor said, good, she’s right, she is obviously having her second or third child”. The doctor made an assumption about Kay that became a barrier to her asking questions about her birthing process. How Aboriginal women present to doctors, doesn’t always reveal what is happening with them as Kay explains:

on the exterior I’ve got it together and on the inside I am so scared. I am so ashamed how fearful I am, how I am ignorant, never touched a baby in my life, never had any one who had a baby in my life. I didn’t know what was happening with the baby, like, I didn’t know that we even bleed after you have a baby ... it’s hard to believe now, but that’s how it was ... another assumption that people make about us.
Not knowing what to do and what happens is a barrier in addressing health issues and carrying out healthy practices. As Kay identified, she was frightened and she wasn’t really in a position to ask. She felt the staff made assumptions that she knew what to do because on the outside she had “it together”. As Kay suggests, whilst she may have showed outward signs that she was confident, she wasn’t. Kay, in reflecting on this experience, stated that looking back … as a pregnant woman I was treated in a way that white women weren’t, you knew you were part of something a little bit different but you don’t know why.

Kay shared a few more examples and stated that

It has never made any sense to me that people could treat me different because of the colour of my skin … now I look back I recognise it was racism that I didn’t want to face … I wasn’t given equal treatment.

It is when Kay looks back on the events that she can analyse them more thoroughly and interrogate what happened or the treatment she received. And elsewhere in her interview she stated “things are set up for white skinned people … white race privilege is so institutionalised”. Kay demonstrates insight and knowledge of white race privilege based on her own reflections of her experiences. She talked about her process of reflecting back and the importance of this reflection in self-growth and becoming stronger as an Aboriginal woman.

Some of the more recent experiences shared with me by Kay and other Aboriginal women, and what I have read through the literature, leads me to the understanding that there are issues of discrimination based on skin colour and issues around Aboriginality and the experiences of place. Some of these at times present as contradictory and represent the struggles for and around Indigenous identity within broader Australian society. The recent experiences of other Aboriginal women are shared in the following paragraphs.

Mary, a young Aboriginal woman, details one experience based on an occasion where she had gone into the Accident and Emergency area of the local public hospital and was asked a series of questions by the Registered Nurse at the reception desk. The nurse was filling out the form about why Mary had presented at that point in time as Mary spoke to her. Mary then said that she wanted to look at the form and noticed that the Nurse had not ticked that she was Aboriginal. Mary said to the nurse that she “might like to tick that I was Aboriginal”. Mary explained to me that the nurse had