

WHITE SPACES NETWORK CONFERENCE



**WHITE SPACES? RACIALISING
ORGANISATIONAL FEMININITIES
AND MASCULINITIES**

**8TH - 9TH JULY 2009,
WEETWOOD HALL, LEEDS**
by Shona Hunter



White Spaces network members (L-R) Pauline Leonard (University of Southampton), Jennifer Mease (Texas A&M University), Catriona Elder (University of Sydney), Daniel Conway (University of Loughborough), Shona Hunter (University of Leeds – Network Lead), Say Burgin (University of Leeds) and Melissa Steyn (University of Cape Town)

The 'White Spaces' network aims to provide a unique forum to open up scholarship and practice in management, organisation, governance and policy through engagement with ideas from the field of 'critical whiteness studies'. Critical whiteness studies turns the core logic of traditional race and ethnicity studies on its head by concerning itself with the accumulation of power in multicultural societies, rather than experiences of disadvantage. It is interested in how this accumulation of power has come to be associated with certain social, cultural and material practices valued in western liberal democracies. This diverse field has produced complex debate around white ethnicities which have been circulating for some time within cultural, postcolonial, literary and historical studies, but which have somewhat ironically remained marginal to policy studies and organisational theory. The network has developed in response to this marginalisation, focusing its work on exposing, describing and analysing the reproduction of institutional power in formal and informal organisational settings.

The network held its inaugural conference 'White Spaces: racialising organisational femininities and masculinities' on July 8-9 2009 at Weetwood Hall, Leeds, UK, with financial support from an SPA small grant, the World Universities Network and the Feminist Review Trust. The conference aimed to consolidate, sustain and develop activities already undertaken by collaborators, with particular focus on including a broader range of postgraduate students and participants outside academia.

The conference was attended by more than 60 delegates from 11 different countries including Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, South Africa, United States and the UK. The presence of a number of academics, artists and activists from South Africa was a particularly welcome addition to the conference participation. Given the importance of South Africa in the global politics of race and racialisation the relative neglect of academic work from this context within UK-based critical whiteness studies is a significant intellectual omission that the conference was pleased to be able to challenge. As part of this effort we were also pleased to welcome Melissa Steyn from the University of Cape Town as one of our keynote speakers.

Participation was strongly interdisciplinary, from architecture, communication studies, fine arts and design, gender studies, geography, management, policy studies, sociology and included participants working in private and public sector contexts. These professionals mainly worked with diversity and equality, but some were based in mainstream public service work within the NHS and local government and charities such as One to One Children's Fund. A further strength of the varied participation was the number of participants who had multiple roles across practitioner, academic and activist contexts.

Other conference keynotes were by Nirmal Puwar, Goldsmiths College, Vron Ware of the Open University and Mick Rowlinson of Queen Mary University. Vic Seidler, also of Goldsmiths College, stood in at very short notice in the absence of Aida Hurtado from the University of California. Thirty nine other

papers were presented under 12 conference themes. These included educating whiteness; white masculinity, power, subversion and resistance; white lives, emotions and resistances; reproducing bourgeois whiteness; civilising/violating whitenesses; white sexualities and space; benevolent whitenesses; constructing white educational authority; white embodied ideals; desiring privilege; constructing white families; and defining whiteness.

Dialogue and Debate

Because the conference aimed to facilitate ongoing collaborations amongst participants we included an open session called 'Dialogue and Debate' on the afternoon of the second day. The session aimed to provide space to reflect on and discuss key conference themes in more depth to consider where the sessions took participants theoretically, methodologically and substantively, and also to think about disciplinary connections and differences and build future directions for collaboration. This proved to be a particularly popular addition to the more usual academic conference proceedings for a number of reasons. Many participants reported the difficulties of speaking (or even thinking) through whiteness in their everyday institutional contexts. Including academic contexts like sociology and social policy, sessions provided important space to talk more personally about institutional and professional contexts as well as individual connections to the field of whiteness studies. They also gave important time to discussing, more frankly than in some of the paper sessions, issues related to radicalism/cooption in critical whiteness studies and the relationships, connections and disconnections between whiteness

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studies and critical race theory more often associated with critical scholarship from black academics and activists. These sessions were important spaces for engaging in challenging and sometimes uncomfortable discussions around multiple positionalities - social, professional and national. Cross-national comparisons were useful as many participants come from countries where there is no established 'white studies' field.

Conference participant Claire Dempster reflected on this more open format: "As a Family & Systemic Psychotherapist working in the NHS I was struck by how psychotherapeutic - particularly psychoanalytic - thinking and language was drawn on to explain processes around whiteness. The concepts and tools of psychotherapy are designed for particular purposes. Moving them from that domain is a change of application. Any conceptual framework, therapeutic or methodological includes ideas, terms and language steeped in rich and racialised history. Certainly this was part of the reason Potter and Wetherell (1992) examined their research tools as well as their topic in 'Mapping the Language of Racism'."

For me, examining whiteness has to address the concrete or material realities of life. The White Spaces? conference was an opportunity to examine whiteness, but it was also an occasion where unwittingly we 'lived' it too in coming together. There is a need to locate ourselves within these debates - in our relationships, communities and places of work. This avoids whiteness being something that other people do - a complicated version of 'othering'. It is between these processes and their relationship to the content of what was said that we have much to learn. Avatar Brah captures it well, suggesting that learning about whiteness is "Not just acquiring knowledge but of deconstructing whiteness as a social relation, as well as an experiential modality of subject and identity."

Say Burgin, who has since established the semi-autonomous postgraduate research arm of the White Spaces network, says of the 'Dialogue and Debate' session: "It offered a moment to engage with other conference participants on equal footing. It was crucial to the great success of White Spaces? in that it offered all of us a chance

to debrief, to wrestle collectively with questions we had been chewing on for two days and to raise issues for future endeavours into whiteness studies. This session was more than a unique aspect of the conference; it offered an equally unique moment for postgraduate attendees to exchange ideas and criticisms with established academics and other professionals."

Because of the external funding, conference organisers were able to support a further linked public event designed to prompt an addition to academic forms of engagement with the core conference themes. After the formal conference closed on the second evening we held a poetry reading event organised in cooperation with local voluntary arts group Black Cat Productions at the Old Red Lion pub in Leeds city centre. The poets Dorothea Smartt and Jane Liddell-King read from their recently published collections of poetry related to the conference themes of whiteness and the reproduction of racialised and gendered power - Smartt, *Ship Shape*, Peepal Tree Press (2008) and Liddell-King, *Faces in the Void* (2008) respectively). The event was attended by over 30 people, half of whom were members of the general public who had not attended the formal conference proceedings. The readings were followed by lively questions, answers and debate and enabled a broader audience to engage with the themes and issues considered at the conference.

Further initiatives emanating from the conference include the formal establishment of the network theme on 'Social policy and change: state initiatives to displace whiteness'. This theme brings together work across politics, public policy, social policy and governance and cultural and historical sociology to consider the continuities and shifts in contemporary racialised governmentalities. When we talk about



Postgraduate delegates Nina Held (Lancaster University), Say Burgin (University of Leeds), Katy Sian (University of Leeds) and Linda Lund Pederson (London School of Economics)

racialised governmentalities we are thinking about the logics, tools, techniques and mechanisms of contemporary governance across a wide variety of state formations. We are interested in how formal and informal state practices support the enactment of whiteness as a normative ideal, even as their policies ostensibly aim to combat racisms. This theme builds on important work done in UK social policy which can be traced back to Fiona Williams's (1989) *Critical Social Policy: An Introduction* and later Gail Lewis's (2000) *Race, Gender and Social Welfare: Encounters in a Postcolonial Society*.

Work already in progress under the theme explores the relationship of the policy turn to equality, diversity and human rights to the reproduction of whiteness as an organisational ideal. It also includes a special issue of the journal *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State, and Society*, 17(4) edited by Shona Hunter, Elaine Swan (University of Technology, Sydney) and Diane Grimes (Syracuse University, New York) to appear in 2011.

The network website is now live at <http://www.wun.ac.uk/research/white-spaces-network>. Anyone interested in becoming involved in the network should contact Shona Hunter s.d.j.hunter@leeds.ac.uk for the broader network or Say Burgin hy08snb@leeds.ac.uk for the PGR arm of the network.

References

Lewis, G. (2000) *Race, Gender and Social Welfare: Encounters in a Postcolonial Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Wetherell, M. and Potter, J. (1992) *Mapping the Language of Racism: Discourse and the Legitimation of Exploitation*, NYC: Columbia University Press.

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