

CHAPTER FIVE

White Women's Way: Self-Presentation within White Feminist Academics' Talk¹

Progressive white feminists, with anti-racist politics, seeking to educate and explain the experience of sexism, often compare sexism to racism. The use of this analogy suggests that the "analogizer" believes her situation is the same as that of a person of color. Nothing in the comparison process challenges this belief, and the analogizer may think that she understands the other's situation in its fullness. The analogy makes the analogizer forget any difference and allows her to stay focused on her own situation without grappling with the person of color's reality (Grillo & Wildman 1995:171).

White women are represented everywhere in Australian feminism, but are not racialised as whites. Instead they are presented as variously classed, sexualised, aged and abled even though the social construction of their racialised subject position is tied to the way in which whiteness "is taught, learned, experienced and identified in certain forms of knowledges, values and privileges" (Giroux 1997:296). What is evident from the previous chapters is that middle-class white feminists and Indigenous women speak out of different subject positions. The different knowledges that inform both Indigenous and middle-class white feminists' speaking positions disclose that there are limits to knowing the "Other". These limitations exist in any inter-subjective relationship. The degree to which they influence relations depends on the power and privilege derived from the structural location of the subject position deployed.

In this chapter it is argued that middle-class white feminist

academics, who advocate an anti-racist practice, unconsciously and consciously exercise their race privilege. The analysis of the interviews of feminist academics discloses a deployment of the subject position middle-class white woman in professional and personal practice. The chapter begins by providing a description of the methodology, followed by an analysis of the interviews showing how feminist academics engage with race and how the subject position middle-class white woman is implicated in this engagement.

Indigenous on white: the interviewees and the method

Ruth Frankenberg argues that "race shapes meaning and experiences for social, political, historical and cultural reasons rather than as a result of essential race difference" (1993:148). In the earlier analysis of multiple texts, the subject position middle-class white woman was revealed in different historically constituted discourses. In these discourses, race as construct and category has been reserved for those designated "Other" and this subject position is invisible for those who occupy and deploy it. However, what is missing from the analysis is how whiteness, as a racial identity, was performed by feminist academics in their personal and professional practice in Australia in the late 1990s. The degree to which "race" continues to be externalised and yet shapes feminist thinking and practice requires further examination in the contemporary Australian context.

In order to explore the way in which race shapes the thought and experiences of white feminist academics, twenty women were selected for interview from three universities between November 1996 and February 1997. However, eight women did not consent to be interviewed as they were too busy or said they did not teach anything on Indigenous women. Feminist academics were chosen because since the second wave of feminism in Australia the feminist movement's presence is strongest in academia and the bureaucracy.² The ages of the women ranged from the early 30s to the mid 50s; all were middle-class but some had working-class origins.³ They were predominantly single and the majority were positioned to be heterosexual.⁴ Three women had migrated from England, one from South Africa, one from the United States of

America and another had been born in Canada but raised in South Australia. The remaining six women were born and raised in Australia. The interviews ranged in duration from twenty minutes to three hours. Copies of the transcripts were sent to each of the women for their perusal and amendment.⁵ Some women provided additional information, some did not respond and some deleted sentences within the text. Only one of the women refused to allow me to use a number of pages of her transcript, because, she said, she was not aware that the tape was still on when we engaged with each other's comments. The women's status in academia varied. Three women were professors, two women were associate professors, and the rest were either at senior lecturer, lecturer or associate lecturer level. Although the group is not representative of the white female population as a whole, it is representative of the small number of white feminists in Australia who write on race, endorse an anti-racist politics and are members of the educated middle-class.

Framing and conducting the research: researcher and power

In order to elicit in-depth and diverse responses the questions were made as general as possible. The purpose of the questions was to gain an insight into the relationship between the interviewees' professional (public) life and their personal (private) life in relation to race and cultural difference. The questions were structured to move interviewees from their pedagogical practice and theory to life experiences as white feminists. Five questions were developed, influenced by the work of Ruth Frankenberg on the social construction of whiteness and my textual analysis of the relations between Indigenous women and white feminists in Australia.

The first and second questions were concerned with the ways in which these women gendered their curriculum and how they included cultural difference. The third question asked women to identify themselves as belonging to a racial or cultural group and whether they knew people from racial and cultural groups other than their own. The fourth question was concerned with asking when or how they knew that cultural difference was manifesting

itself before them, and the final question asked them to discuss their relationship to racism. My research approach to the interviews was what Frankenberg names as "dialogical" (Frankenberg 1993:30). As the interviewer, I shared some information about my life and experiences in relation to cultural difference, race and racism with interviewees throughout the research process. I was aware of the discomfort my questions could bring to white feminists who, for the first time, were subject to an Indigenous gaze on social phenomena in which both researcher and interviewees were historically implicated. Feminists have long acknowledged the subjectivity of both researcher and interviewees and the imbalance in power relations between them (Harding 1987, Alcoff & Potter 1993, Behar & Gordon 1995). They have sought to minimise their power in the research process through various strategies, such as information exchange and interviewee interrogation of their analyses (Harding 1987:181-2, Frankenberg 1993:29-32). However, most empirical research undertaken by feminists involves researching women of their own race or white women researching non-white women. The capacity to share information or offer interrogation of one's analysis can easily be made from the location of privilege and power. I have not found any empirically based research conducted by a woman of colour on white women about their "Othering" and their experiences of the research process. Therefore, based on my experiences and knowledge about whiteness and the responses received from women who did not want to participate in the study, I would be positioned as both object and subject in the research process. "Race" would predominantly be perceived as belonging to me, the Indigenous "Other".

Unlike other informants or interviewees, who usually do not have knowledge of and experience in western research processes, the women I interviewed had both the knowledge and the skills to give measured and intellectualised responses. In order to minimise measured responses, I asked direct questions that specifically identified the subject matter but were generalised in format. The generalised nature of the questions yielded diverse and varied responses and allowed me some degree of intervention, despite the interviewees' familiarity with research processes.

This method was successful but it was limited by race. For example, when I compare the type of responses given by white women in Ruth Frankenberg's work on "race" with those in my study, it is obvious that Frankenberg's racial identity was invisible and familiar; not a reference point for racial difference. This indicates to me that had I been white I would probably have elicited a different range of responses from the feminist academics I interviewed. The interviews were both coherent and contradictory, and they provide insights about the deployment of the subject position middle-class white woman and her racialised invisibility.

Pedagogical practice

Feminists argue that universities are knowledge production sites where knowledges are contested, accommodated, created, reconstructed and deconstructed. They are sites for producing oppositional, revisionist and authorised knowledges which enter public discourses "in ways that may reinforce or unsettle our understandings of social problems, provide language for explaining or obscuring connections, and widen or foreclose conceivable political options" (Pettman 1992:151). In asking feminists the general question about how they gendered their curriculum, I wanted to ascertain to what degree the subject position middle-class white woman was centred in their pedagogical practice. All of the women interviewed stated that they gendered their curriculum, but in different ways.

Five of the women structured their courses specifically on the social construction of white masculinity and femininity. For these feminists, white women's gender is the primary difference acknowledged and engaged with; the universal subjects are white woman and white man. Whiteness is culturally central and normalised in their pedagogical practice. An unintended consequence is that the subject position middle-class white woman is essentialised as the embodiment of true womanhood. That is, through the exclusion of other women, the white woman becomes the universal standard for all women (Spelman 1990). The other seven women organised their courses around race, cultural difference, class and gender. They teach about structural inequality and the intersection of race, class and gender differences; they

are concerned with social structures that determine the characteristics and actions of individuals. However, in the interviews they did not discuss the relationship between knowledges, social responsibility and collective struggle which one would expect to find in an anti-racist pedagogy (Mohanty 1990:192). Instead they teach about the structural location of race as racial oppression and do not engage with their whiteness or the subjugated knowledges of those who experience such oppression. Their pedagogy is inclusive of the race of the "Other" but masks the subject position middle-class white woman from which they teach. Their pedagogy works to support white people's externalisation of race by restricting it to structure and "Other". In denying whiteness as a racial identity, "race" is removed from white agency in their analyses and this can diminish their students' scope for self-reflection as an anti-racist practice.

A decolonising pedagogical practice places importance on the relations between different knowledges, learning and experiences to understand differences (Mohanty 1990:192). Some of the women interviewed sought to engage in a decolonising pedagogical practice. One feminist incorporated race and colonisation in her teaching on gender in Australian history. She sees her role as

to understand what happened and to use my education and training to bring it to other people's knowledge so that they can come to terms with what is our collective past. Because we have a collective past. We have a separate history, but we have a collective past as well and where it comes together is of course the total discrepancy of power.

The pedagogical aim is to develop critical thinking among students so they can inform themselves and transform their world view. The idea is to convey to their predominantly white students that their respective positionings influence the way they interpret the world. What is not taught as being problematic is "how whiteness as a racial identity and social construction is taught, learned, experienced and identified in certain forms of knowledge, values and privileges" (Giroux 1997:296). The determinate connection between white feminist academic and white student lives in the centre, and the lives of Indigenous women and students on the margins remain invisible. Perspectives that ac-

knowledge the "Other" on the margins inadvertently privilege the subject position middle-class white woman because she remains uninterrogated and unnamed (Apple 1997:127).

In my questions, I sought to ascertain if cultural difference was included in their curriculum and how it was represented and interrogated. As stated previously, some of the feminists interviewed did not deal with cultural difference in their subjects. Three women gave priority to imparting knowledge that centres whiteness within the boundaries of white-male-dominated institutions. The subject position middle-class white woman — naturalised, unmarked and unnamed — is the centre of their gendered curriculum. The omission of the cultural difference of other women reinscribes a hierarchy of white cultural values that are enforced and built into the power structure of their respective universities. Other feminists sought to transform their curriculum and decentre the subject position middle-class white woman by including cultural difference through the use of texts by Toni Morrison, bell hooks and Gayatri Spivak. As one feminist stated:

Racial/cultural difference questions are taken up to some degree in all these subjects but more so (sometimes much more so) in some rather than others — although cultural difference in one way or another is always an issue.

Cultural difference is incorporated within the curriculum through an "Other" literature that does little to disrupt the experiential knowledge of students in the Australian context. The racialised "Other" belongs to another country and is therefore culturally safe for interrogation. An assumption that underpins such a teaching strategy is: racialisation is the same everywhere. Other feminists taught cultural difference in terms of the problems faced by Indigenous and migrant women in the health care system in Australia. This suggests that students are not taught to recognise whiteness as shaping, for political, cultural and historical reasons, the normative practices and diverse relationships within the health system. Instead, the health system, like other institutions, is often presented as having shortcomings but it is racially neutral; whiteness remains invisible and unnamed. Similarly, another feminist taught cultural difference in terms of its impact on the legal personality:

One of the things I tend to do certainly in a first year subject, also I do it where the issue comes up in other subjects, there is this whole idea of legal personality which is one of those basics about who is entitled to claim legal redress and working with the idea that it isn't a natural concept. Law structures who is entitled to speak to it and in what contexts. In the last century, for example, companies enjoyed a far greater degree of legal personality than women, and women's legal personality tended to be structured according to marital status and according to race.

The primary referent here is the female gender (read "white"), although race (read "black") is identified as a marker that also changes the relationship of the female to the Law. Cultural difference is reduced to the way the law treats women. Although it is acknowledged that "race" is a factor that shaped a woman's legal personality, "race" is synonymous with the non-white "Other". "[S]ociety operates in such a way as to put whiteness at the centre of everything, including individual consciousness — so much so that we seldom question the centrality of whiteness, and most people, on hearing 'race', hear 'black'. That is, whiteness is treated as the norm, against which all differences are measured" (Reddy 1994:12). The legal personality of white women was tied to their marital status in the 19th century whereas the legal personality of black women was connected first and foremost to their "race" (Williams 1991; McGrath 1993).

The absence of an interrogation of whiteness as cultural difference is evident in the response of another feminist who utilises critical race theory to unmask the way race and gender position people differently within the Law. However, she claims that it leaves white students with a dilemma. Critical race theory accepts that all speaking positions are valid even though it forces students to recognise that the Law is grounded in a white value system that privileges white people over others. All speaking positions are valid but are not of equal worth. Who is listened to or heard depends on their ability and capacity to exercise power as part of the dominant group. White feminists and their white students practice cultural relativism every day, but do not perceive this as a dilemma for those positioned as "Other". In this way whiteness remains centred and is masked in pedagogy. It was clear from the interviews that where a feminist had a consciousness of her subject position as a middle-class white woman, and drew on her

experiences and cultural locatedness to inform her pedagogy, whiteness was unnamed as the dominant cultural form. Her students are taught about how cultural differences are manifest in values, behaviour and ideas; different knowledges inform different behaviour. Although students can be taught to recognise that meanings have a culture specific context, only certain meanings are legitimate and accepted as official knowledge within Australian society. "These meanings, of course, will be contested, will be resisted and sometimes transformed but this does not lessen the fact that hegemonic cultures have greater power to make themselves known and acceptable" (Apple 1997:124).

The hegemony of whiteness manifests itself in pedagogical practice when feminists seek to recentre themselves by making "oppressions" the common denominator between themselves and Indigenous women. White women's oppression was mentioned repeatedly in the interviews, specifically in relation to the issue of cultural difference. So while cultural difference was equated with Indigenous women, the white race privilege, which confers dominance on its female members, remained unnamed and invisible. Race, class and sex oppressions were the key representations of the "Other's" cultural difference given by feminists. This reveals a limited capacity to identify the specificities of cultural differences grounded in different knowledges and realities from their own. The interviews also provide insights about how the invisibility of whiteness works in feminist pedagogy to normalise, naturalise and maintain its privilege while appearing to be culturally and racially neutral, progressive and inclusive. The way in which cultural difference is taught centres the concerns of the subject position middle-class white woman. As Carlson argues, "In the twentieth century, white hegemony has been maintained less through the legal denial of rights and military force and more through control of popular culture and education" (Carlson 1997:137).

Self-presentation, identity and sociality

Sociality plays an important part in affirming or disrupting subject positions in cultural contexts. As such, inter-cultural inter-

subjectivity provides opportunities for encountering differences and similarities that may lead to the disruption of assumptions about the "Other". Ruth Frankenberg (1993) found that white women who socialise and work with the "Other" tend to advocate an anti-racist practice more than white women who remained socially distant. As the feminists I interviewed subscribed to an anti-racist politics, I was interested in ascertaining whether or not they socialised outside their racial group. I asked the questions: "Do you have contact with people of different racial or cultural groups from that of your own?" and "Do you see yourself as belonging to an ethnic or cultural group?"

All the women had contact with people from different cultural or racial groups. Four of the women had contact in their childhood. Two socialised with migrant children from their schools. One lived next door to a Chinese family and spent time with them; her mother suffered from mental illness and she found refuge in their company. Another went to boarding school with Asian students. These women now have limited contact with students or colleagues from different cultural and racial groups; most contact occurs through their work as academics. This limited contact with the "Other" was the case for most of the other feminists, with the exception of three women who had socialised or worked with people from different cultural or racial groups. One feminist had been involved politically with Indigenous women and another shared a house with Chinese and Indigenous women. Another feminist had been active in the civil rights movement in the United States and had a continuing friendship with an Australian Indigenous couple. However, outside the academic environment they socialised predominantly with white people. Their interaction with difference is a matter of *choice* — not an imperative.

Inter-subjective relations with the "Other" in academia occur through research or teaching. Here the power relations between student and lecturer, or researcher and researched, centre white dominance through the social organisation of the academic structure and the learning and exercising of western knowledges. These feminists have no imperative to step outside the beliefs, values and behaviours embodied in the subject position middle-

class white woman. They live in a country where cities have been developed around invisible conveniences that give social preferences to whiteness in the location of municipal and other services. The design of suburbs and the naming of streets have been planned to serve white neighbourhoods and preserve their whiteness.⁶ As one feminist noted:

I live in — which is middle-class, white, orthodox, affluent, comfortable ... So I meet absolutely nobody in my suburban community who is anything other than myself. The place where I meet the "Other" is in my research.

The engagement with the "Other" remains predominantly, for these women, a dimension of their work practice — their public world — where their academic knowledges engage with difference to varying degrees. This reduces the opportunity for their experiential knowledges about the "Other" to be interrogated and disrupted, although their academic knowledge allows an empathetic appreciation of difference. Although these feminists advocate an anti-racist politics in academic contexts this appears to have little impact on their construction of subjectivity outside of academia. Their anti-racist politics are restricted to ensuring that they teach about the "race" of the "Other" in some manner, do not condone racial hatred in their classrooms, and make class and sex oppression explicit as social justice issues. In most cases the subject position middle-class white woman is not deployed in any social or political activity with "Other" outside the confines of academia.

When asked the question "Do you see yourself as belonging to an ethnic or cultural group?", all the feminists were confident and certain that they were white and middle-class, but they were ambiguous about different ethnicities. The mixed ethnicities identified by the women were Anglo/Celtic/Saxon or Scottish or Irish or English; one stated that she was of Jewish heritage and another Prussian. Their self-presentation as white implies that they recognise their racial assignment. The ambiguity of their ethnicities suggests that they unconsciously acknowledge the power that they possess because their race privilege is connected to a white cultural system that exists as omnipresent and natural. However, such a consciousness did not lead these feminists to

discuss or mention what being white meant in terms of their ethnicity, identity and their anti-racist politics. It was taken for granted that they had options: they could claim a specific ethnicity, or be just white, and they could choose which of their European ancestry to include in their description of their identities. They were able to exercise their race privilege to choose or not choose an ethnic identity because as white feminist academics they are part of the white majority centre in Australian society. As Waters argues; "The option of choosing among different ethnicities in their family backgrounds exists because the degree of discrimination and social distance attached to specific European backgrounds has diminished over time" (1998:404). Ethnicity is a choice because there is no social cost involved in what are predominantly symbolic ethnicities. That is, the ethnicities of these feminists do not influence their lives unless they want them to; in effect their ethnicities are individualistic in nature. The problem with such a positioning on ethnicity is that it is easy to assume that all ethnic identities are in some sense interchangeable. Most of these white feminists, when consciously deploying the subject position middle-class white woman, did not recognise that their race privilege meant they were accorded choices about their ethnicities.

For some feminists, whiteness as a racial identity that confers dominance and privilege remains unmarked and unnamed in a different way. One feminist who comes from South Africa sees herself as white but not belonging to an ethnic or cultural group; rather she positions herself as an outsider. Another said she just did not see any ethnic differences. These feminists want to deny their racially assigned power. Both feminists want to remove themselves from white race privilege, one by individualising difference, and the other by invoking the notion of sameness. As one feminist said:

I tend to bounce off my feelings of otherness as a woman and a particular sort of outsider woman because of breaking the rules of being a mother but not married, bright but not ugly, heterosexual but single [inaudible], so racism in its crude sense is of the greatest debate; it helps fuel my desire to press for more to be a transformative instrument and it also really does tend to isolate [inaudible] what we define as my feminist ethics.

Another feminist also denied her racially conferred privilege and dominance but in a different way. She identified as being white and stated that she could claim she had "Welsh blood" and "Irish blood" but they were not significant parts of her identity; she was "straight down the line, boring Anglo". It was interesting that this woman was the only feminist interviewed who used the metaphor of blood in terms of culture and ethnicity. Frankenberg (1998:144) argues: "The blood metaphor ... used is crucial, for it located sameness in the body — precisely the location of *difference* in genetic or biological theories of white superiority. Further, of course, blood is under the skin, and skin has been and remains the foremost signifier of racial difference". Sameness is a way of rejecting the idea of white racial superiority and distancing "race" and "racism" from the subject position middle-class white woman.

Identifying cultural difference in practice

In answering the questions "What does cultural difference mean for you in practice?" and "How are you conscious of it?", a variety of responses were given which indicated that cultural difference meant different things to different feminists. I expected to find that feminists who think that cultural difference means a different way of thinking, acting and behaving would be conscious of how these differences impact on their own behaviour in practice. I anticipated that they were conscious of how subjectivity is shaped by white culture, because they had knowledge about, and challenged, patriarchy — which would require deploying different subject positions.

The feminists who were most conscious of cultural differences had experienced the disruption of their subjectivity when socialising with the "Other" or they were raised in a household in which their mother's mental illness dominated daily life. They understood that living with such differences in practice meant living with uncertainty and sometimes denial in uncomfortable and liminal spaces. For example, the feminist who spent a good deal of time as a child with the Chinese family next door, because of her mother's mental illness, learnt an appreciation of cultural difference from the Chinese family, which she viewed as the

antithesis, in many respects, of her own family. She learnt that there was a different way of dealing with conflict which contrasted with her white middle-class family's pretension and denial. The scope for deploying a different subject position was broadened. Another feminist was also raised in a household with a mother who suffered from mental illness:

Her madness couldn't be fixed or ignored so you learn a new sense of tolerance and diversity where you are not in control as a kid [inaudible]. Because of this experience of being utterly powerless at the hands of a woman I find some of the feminist stuff a bit "twee" about all women being good. My feelings about difference and diversity are more complex and cynical and more aware of the real limits and frustrations. It left me with a different view of the world that you cannot change and managing living with that kind of uncomfortableness and madness. Life is about learning tolerance that's basically intolerably different, discomfited and there is a level at which you have to learn to live with incommensurate difference and discomfort and my mother taught me that. Although I grew up a white in many ways and privileged in many ways I think that [it] was the difference that made me think about oppression and power.

A disrupted childhood provided an awareness of cultural differences and tolerance, and this early training gave insights about living with difference that were drawn on when sharing houses with women from different cultures. However, her experience of living with the "Other" in different relations of power was that "in reality real tolerance of incommensurable difference is very hard to achieve ... who dominates matters a lot". Living with cultural difference means one has to deploy and negotiate different subject positions in order to function within an environment where a variety of power relations exist. In these contexts it matters who has the power to dominate; if one wants to work at minimising the oppression of others from a subject position of white privilege, one has to alter one's behaviour and attitude. Another feminist also lived with cultural difference through a childhood of family discord between a Dutch mother and an Australian father, but as soon as she left home "difference" became outside and beyond her experiences. Her ability to experience otherness disappearing off her horizon meant that cultural difference only mattered in her life when it was unavoidable. She was able to feel culturally safe in her new context at

university because her white race privilege gave her the power to be able to choose whether or not she interacted with the cultural difference of the "Other". Despite the fact that all three feminists have an awareness of changing their subject positions in relation to cultural difference, they speak from a dominant subject position located within the centre of white Australian society. Cultural difference made an impact on their formative years, but its impact on their subjectivity was reduced when they left home and were able to exercise choice about their sociality in Australian society.

Another feminist's experience of living in France and China meant that she deployed different subject positions but retained her white race privilege in these contexts:

I spent a lot of time in France and I feel very comfortable there, but I'm also very conscious of the way in which when you become part of a different cultural context different things become possible. There are different things you can say and different things you can do [inaudible]. In China it was a very different culture — we were honoured guests — [inaudible]. I had a badge that said I was [a] foreign expert so I was treated with great deference and people made a fuss of me, which was wonderful. [inaudible]. I am very much aware of the sort of things that what cultural differences consist of, but I think it's important to say that I have always been able to participate from a position of privilege which I think really does make a difference.

Her experiences reveal that she not only has a consciousness of her structural location in a different cultural context, but that she is also conscious of the need to deploy different subject positions to accommodate and enable cultural difference. She tries to resist the power of her structural location as a middle-class white woman at the inter-subjective level by having a consciousness of its privileges.

Other feminists interviewed had an awareness of structural inequality. However, this consciousness did not inform changes to their subject positioning on cultural difference. For some feminists cultural differences meant class and race differences:

Now with Aboriginal cultural difference — at that stage there was more of a tension around that because this Purfleet township was poor. We used to drive through it on the way to Sydney or if we were going to the beach and I used to feel a little bit frightened because

the houses were run down compared to most of them in the town. And I do not know, but we might have stopped and bought something from the shop a couple of times, but mostly we just drove through it and I was sort of aware of a kind of tension. That might not be the right word, a sort of a stress or something with my mother and father that this was something that they were not neutral about, you know, and the children were wandering around a bit.

Poverty here is equated with cultural difference and is perceived negatively because of the value held for material things in the white system. The fear of the "Other" is derived from associating poverty with badness. What is missing from this gaze is that Indigenous people might not have the same values about these conditions because they share a different system of values. Within this narrative there is an awareness that cultural differences can manifest through behaviour and language, but the Indigenous social world imbued with meaning grounded in knowledges of different realities remains unknown. Several of the remaining feminists acknowledged that cultural differences exist within the landscape of the university, but they do not alter their subjectivity to accommodate it in their engagement with students and colleagues. That is, they do not position themselves through the eyes of the "Other" to change their behaviour and attitude, nor are any strategies in place for a reflexive anti-racist practice within their classrooms and the university landscape. In the words of Frye (1983: 115), "The concept of whiteness is not just used, in these cases, it is *wielded*". In deployment of the subject position middle-class white woman these feminists are able to exercise their race privilege to make choices about how and when they engage with, have an awareness of, or ignore the cultural difference of "Others".

Racism as a relationship

Racism is often represented and taught in universities throughout Australia as a problem associated with people of colour, and the study of Indigenous Australians has been informed by anthropological knowledge (Cowlshaw 1986a). Five of the feminists interviewed teach from the position that racism is not a white problem; they are not personally implicated in it and the gaze is fixed firmly on the "Other". As one feminist said:

I do not like it but obviously I am someone who is not directly affected by it. I might get offended by it but it is not as though I am an Asian or a black person except for this Jewish thing ... So my relationship to racism then in terms of being a political person of one kind or another and my academic work, my intellectual work, is to try and work against that.

The positioning here is contradictory in that she denies a personal relationship to racism because white women are not affected by racism, but she forms one in her pedagogical practice because this is the politically correct thing to do as a white feminist. She does not perceive herself as a racialised being who operates in racialised contexts; instead, her deployment of the subject position middle-class white woman allows her to exercise the privilege of racial invisibility. She is able to have an intellectual relationship to racism that is not personal and does not inform any altering of her subjectivity. "Racism" is thus relegated to something that operates in the public sphere but not the private.

Another feminist located her relationship to racism through her academic engagement. She says that her relationship to racism revolves around the word "racism" and what is associated with that label:

I am very interested in the way in which our understanding of the language reflects a large part of our mental construct of who and what we are. My interest in psychoanalysis comes about through understanding our psychic relationship to language that I think gives us a transformative potential. Racism and racism in its crude sense of delivering the [inaudible] of cultural otherness as an [inaudible] for criticism is a place of great academic inspiration to work.

Here the person's relationship to racism is one through which she enhances her transformative potential as a feminist. Her intellectual engagement with racism inspires her and enhances her personal development. However, racism here too is treated as something public and external to the subject position middle-class white woman; it is something that one gets involved in by *choice*. Other feminists also implied that they had a choice about being involved in racism for moral as well as intellectual reasons:

I suppose, in a sense to talk about it in terms of a relationship, it is something that on one level I suspect I see, this goes into a whole set of tensions about ideology and about where I position myself ideologically. I see racism in part, on an intellectual level at least, as a sign

that we have not yet buried what I refer to in some of the things I have written as the old loyalties of hearth and clan in the universal subject which liberalism was supposed to herald, because racism is a way of harping back to ways of defining citizenship [inaudible]. On another level there is another set of things going on which I suspect, on a much more contemporary level, this is true. I believe in Australia [inaudible] racism is one way of enabling members of the dominant group, who perhaps are unemployed or not making it or unsuccessful in a range of ways, to deflect away from themselves any possibility of accepting any responsibility for the fact that they have stuffed up. By laying that responsibility on a group, and it is easy to do it with a racial or ethnic group because there is the definition by visibility. Now so in those two, my understandings of what is going on with responses that are racist, which makes them somewhat less simple than they might otherwise be. The other element I suppose on a moral level is an understanding of it as evil and I have no trouble using the vocabulary of evil myself. I am certainly not a religious person but there is evil and there is good and they are thoroughly clear and distinct. The other thing, of course, it is a learned response.

At an ideological level this feminist understands that the practice of racism is connected to loyalty to the dominant group and allows for the scapegoating of "Others". Morally it is something evil and it is learned. However, white people as the dominant racial group remain invisible. Only the "Other" is visible; white race privilege is not perceived as being inscribed on white bodies. Here one's personal relationship with racism is through a moral position that allows one to put distance between oneself and other members of the dominant group who are evil and racist. By implication one is not an evil person, therefore one is not racist. One can deploy the subject position middle-class white woman to signify virtue and purity, because racism is perceived as racial hatred, not as racial supremacy in which all members of the dominant group are systemically implicated. As another feminist acknowledged:

I spend a lot of my career thinking about it and writing about it and trying to understand. I probably feel that racism is so pervasive in our culture that we never really escape it. It's there. You can consciously overcome a lot of it, you can academically understand it, but I think at some subterranean level it is always there in your psyche and what I am doing as a person who wants to promote social change and to have an Australia where we can have had separate histories but we [inaudible] what we did together and try and take it on from there.

I've overcome it more perhaps than a lot of people. But I think if you are honest there are bits and pieces [inaudible] but you are brought up to think that European culture is superior and that other cultures are exotic and that for various reasons Westerners should have been dominant. It's unfortunate, but what the subterranean things are we don't know, because we want to academicise to a certain degree and in that sense maybe you are not as honest. Maybe the person who just comes out with the abuse is more honest than the highly educated self-aware academic.

This feminist recognises that she has a personal and political relationship with racism that occurs on several levels. She registers discomfort at being in the subject position middle-class white woman because she perceives racism as integral to white culture and recognises the difficulties in struggling to forge out an anti-racist practice. She implies that an intellectual engagement with racism allows one to distance oneself from being personally located within racist practice while she acknowledges that she cannot escape it. Her relationship to racism reveals that, despite her consciousness of the pervasiveness of racism, she chooses to locate her anti-racist practice in an environment where her subject position will be safe, secure and invisible to her students. Her ability to make such a choice is part of her privilege as a middle-class white woman.

Most of these feminists positioned themselves as having an intellectual relationship with racism. It is positioned as an ideological and academic engagement by the subject position middle-class white woman academic and remains something that shapes the lives of "Others" rather than white experiences and choices. The reason one does not have to connect with racism in all aspects of one's life is the inability to see race as shaping one's life, and, as Frye (1983) argues this is part of the privilege of being white. Teaching racism as a people of colour issue fails to interrogate and locate white complicity. Intellectualising about racism allows the subject position middle-class white woman academic to be professionally, but not personally, engaged and is predicated on a mind/body split that works to allow the white female body to be separated from the mind. In other words, the mind creates a virtual non-racialised disembodied subject that knows and practises racism but does not experience it.

Some feminists were more overt than others in distancing

themselves from their white race privilege when describing their relationship to racism; inadvertently whiteness was recentred in their discussions. As one feminist stated:

It's clear to me from the engagements I've had — I've gone out to having engagements about being a white woman — let me just say this straight — you get beaten up a lot — because you get it wrong all the time — you get beaten up for being racist — not in the physical sense — but verbally beaten up and of course you get pissed off because, you know, I am really trying — why won't they accept that I am really trying! Of course, it [is] just like when men were trying to be pro-feminist and they suffered all the time and the women would slap them around and they would think well bugger this for a joke [inaudible] and I won't be a pro-feminist any more. I thought for a long time that I would try harder and get better and better and stop making these mistakes and I'm really learning something in this book about [inaudible] called *Racism and the Lives of Women*. It was written by mainly women working in the counselling type area. This woman described this racial incident where there were two [black] women in the office and one of the white women came in and called her Della for example; in fact the other woman was Della and said it's just an example of racism, we all look the same to them. I was thinking — I've done that — maybe it is! Maybe it is an example of racism and they all look the same, but you sometimes mix all sorts of people up with all sorts — oh God, we will never get it right; it doesn't matter what we do. You know what I mean?

The relationship to racism here is not perceived as being informed by the legacy of white colonisation in Australia, and one is able to distance oneself from white domination by adhering to a liberal position of universal sameness that evades power and erases race. She perceives herself to be a victim of the power relations involved in engaging with the "Other", and by implication the "Other" is not appreciative or grateful for her efforts. Her engagement with the "Other" is something she is doing for them, not for herself; the "Other" is the problem, not white domination. There is a denial of having white race privilege as a middle-class white woman, while being able to exercise it. Despite her intentions to be anti-racist, she preserves the power structure by recentring whiteness, as did others, who said:

I suppose sometimes I wonder whether I am racist — I wonder sometimes whether I don't find myself making allowances for someone because they are from a different race and I must be nice to them and I think that is racist. I think a funny thing about racism — in that

basically I am colour blind, I don't actually notice people's race very much, and yet that's not true as I'm aware that this person is Asian and you're Aboriginal and I'm European, but it doesn't impinge on me somehow; they are just people.

I don't think I have to try — I just won't have any feeling about it at all. I don't notice. Well, for example, one of the things that my relatives commented on, when they came out from the country, that there is a lot more Asians around than there were the last time they were here. I don't know, there are just more people around, but I'm not conscious of their background. Is that strange?

The idea that one does not notice colour is an explanation that allows these feminists to distance themselves from racism by rejecting white racial superiority. Both feminists have a relationship to racism that is power evasive in the sense that, if treating or noticing people of colour as different is racist, by implication treating them the same as members of the dominant group is not racist. As Frankenberg points out, if noticing a person's race is not a good thing to do, then by implication colour, meaning non-white, is seen as being bad in and of itself (1993:145). Whiteness is recentred by rendering it invisible, unnamed and unmarked in their relationship to racism. Another feminist said:

I think racism is the thing inside me I must fear and I think that I've had a lot of resistance to wanting to open it. I shudder to think what's there. I also know that [wallowing] in guilt is not the way to deal with that either. We have to figure out what a non-oppressive whiteness can be like, and I think there is a big fear, in that men must fear [in] relation to women. [inaudible] I think there is a difference to sort of throwing that back in a defensive way — oh, you know you are not the only ones — to sort of being aware that it is [inaudible]. We'll ultimately find ways about being assertive without being oppressive [inaudible]. I think the next millennium will be Asian. Obviously the Pauline Hanson stuff taps into the kinds of fears that we have about that, but people dare not talk about it. Bring back the white Australia or something, that is the context in which whiteness has to be renegotiated. [inaudible] I mean, it does mean that in terms of reconciliation and indeed reading out multiculturally, I mean we do that in a sense of not necessarily drawing boundaries about who we are, but enlarging who we are and creating new identities rather than seeing identity as something that is fixed.

There is an implicit acknowledgment about who has power in this statement: white people have to learn to be assertive without being oppressive. What underpins her idea of some form of

resolution of racism is to create new identities, which implies that ethnicity is individualistic, voluntary and therefore changeable. Symbolic ethnicities are confined to white Australians, who, as Waters points out, "have a lot more choice and room for manoeuvre than they themselves think they do" (1998:405). Having a place in the centre of white culture confers privilege and the capacity to be able to make choices about one's identity that is not accorded those positioned in the margins.

Race does matter in shaping the meaning and experiences of white feminist academics, for political, historical, economic and cultural reasons. White feminist academics who participated in this study utilise "race" as a marker of difference that is deployed in modes of thinking on race, gender and cultural difference. This illuminates the contradictory and inconsistent, complex deployment of the subject position middle-class white woman. In discursive practices the subject position middle-class white woman remains centred, but is unmarked, unnamed and structurally invisible. White feminist academics perceive themselves as autonomous independent individuals, whose anti-racist practice is orchestrated through an intellectual engagement based on objective rational thinking and behaviour. They speak with certainty and confidence from a subject position structurally located in a white cultural system that exists as omnipresent and natural yet invisible — a cultural system that confers on white people certain privileges and dominance.

The complex and contradictory positioning of white feminist academics on "race" demonstrates that their consciousness of structural inequality, without an interrogation of, and change in, the subject position middle-class white woman, results in inter-subjective practice that centres whiteness and reproduces inequality. Teaching "race" in terms of structural inequality more often than not results in reducing it to a biological category that has social consequences only for the "Other". By not naming and interrogating white race privilege in such analyses "race" remains extrinsic to white subjects whose complicity in racial oppression is intentional and unintentional. "Race" remains extraneous to whites and its relevance and meaning is depoliticised for those positioned as "Other".

In their social lives, sociality is restricted to mixing predominantly with one's own race, thereby reducing the chances of evaluating one's anti-racist practice. The lack of sociality with "Others" reinforces the disparity in experience and meaning between women who are "Other" and white feminists in relation to systems of domination and the depth of cultural differences. The knowledge these feminists have about "race" in relation to women who are "Other" is predominantly derived from texts; they have academic knowledge. If there is limited or no inter-subjectivity between women who are "Other" and white feminists, then knowledge of the "Other" is restricted to imagination and theory.

In imagining someone there is never resistance from the image:

... for you never find anything in an image except what you put there. You don't investigate or interrogate an image to find out about it; there is nothing to learn from it because it only contains what you posit as being in it. Objects of the imagination only exist insofar as they are thought of, and they can be destroyed by the simple act of turning away from them in consciousness (Spelman 1990:180).

Social distance between white feminist academics and women who are "Other" reduces the risk of disruption to and interrogation of the subject position middle-class white woman. Their white race privilege means that there is no imperative for these feminists to change their sociality. For most of the white feminists, teaching race difference within academic institutions means including the literature of women who are "Other" in the curriculum without challenging the subject position middle-class white woman in either theory or practice. Any inter-subjectivity in the cultural borderland of the university between white feminist academics and the "Other" is always circumscribed by the way in which white normality and otherness is invisibly retained. In effect, the cultural values, norms and beliefs of "Others" are subordinated to those of the institution.

In academic institutions, race privilege accords white feminist academics choices about altering their subject positions to accommodate the "Other's" cultural difference. There is no imperative for them to acknowledge, own and change their complicity in racial domination, because the mind/body split

allows them to position "race" as extrinsic. Their anti-racist practice, as an intellectual engagement, is evidence of their compassion, but racism is not experienced as part of their interiority. Their extrinsic and almost extraneous relationship to "race" is evidence of why the subject position middle-class white woman, as a site of dominance, needs to be interrogated.

Making the subject position middle-class white woman visible in white feminist academic discourse can only displace it from the unmarked and unnamed status that is itself an effect of its domination. The dominance of this subject position diminishes the inclusiveness of a politics of difference in Australian feminism. White feminists who teach about "race" leave whiteness uninterrogated and centred but invisible. "Race" and "racism" in relation to the "Other" are important intellectually to the politics of the subject position middle-class white woman academic. However, her anti-racist practice is reduced to teaching within a limited paradigm that has little impact on her subject position both outside and within the university context. Finding ways to put a politics of difference into practice will require more than including Indigenous women in Australian feminism and allowing us to speak. It requires white race privilege to be owned and challenged by feminists engaged in anti-racist pedagogy and politics.