

Why white Australia has an empathy problem



By Reena Gupta
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When I lived in London, I found myself witness to the unsolicited opinions of my British housemate who had no qualms telling me exactly what he thought about Australia.

“I’m not interested in going to Australia. It’s so backwards,” he mumbled in his Devonshire accent. “Aren’t people really racist?”

While I’ve never personally shied away from criticising Australia, I fired back in protest.

“How would you know? You’ve never even been there! I think I’d know more about it given that I’m a minority who’s actually from that country.” He nodded politely while I sat there, warm with rage.

A part of me was fuming because of his British arrogance. But another part of me knew he was right. He was right, and that racist country is mine.

It is no coincidence that within the period of a fortnight, two highly-esteemed black American writers, Roxane Gay and Paul Beatty, have had to endure problematic interviewers during the Australian leg of their respective book tours.

It is also no coincidence that both of these problematic interviewers are white.

While both Australia and the US are white-dominant societies, white supremacy boasts a tighter grip on its antipodean constituents. So much so that a large portion of the white people that make up the nation of the 'fair go' are not only unable to relate to perspectives other than their own, they are completely oblivious to the starkness of those limitations.

The past few weeks in Australian broadcasting have raised a lot of questions. Why do interviewers like Michael Cathcart and Mia Freedman think they can claim any sort of intellectual parity with giants of American literature like Beatty and Gay? Why, when they receive criticism, are they so reluctant to see the error of their ways and offer a proper apology? It's 2017 and Cathcart casually used the N-word twice to open his interview with Paul Beatty. Freedman thought it appropriate to make humiliating remarks about Roxane Gay's body, violating a confidentiality clause in the process. Most recently, Red Symons thought it apt to ask Beverly Wang if she's "yellow".

I am starting to suspect that the majority of white Australians, regardless of how much cultural capital they've managed to accumulate at the ABC, are ill-equipped to communicate in a respectful and empathetic way with people of colour.

This can be at least partly attributed to the profound lack of empathy that living in Australia inculcates.

Many white Australians have lived and continue to live their lives shielded from the perspectives of people of colour.

As American scholar Robin DiAngelo points out, much of this segregation is representational. Australian history has been whitewashed. Our government is almost exclusively made up of old white men. Our televisual landscape appears to mainly involve Asher Keddie. The result is that white Australians receive very little insight into the perspectives of people of colour and almost no complex information about racism. White perspectives are constantly being broadcast and reinforced over all others, again and again and again.

One consequence of this is that white Australians who talk about race (assuming they've done no independent research into the topic, and let's face it, they probably haven't) are at once very confident and very ill-informed.

The segregated nature of Australian public culture creates the perfect conditions to produce the shit storm that Freedman, Cathcart and Symons found themselves in – an utter failure and inability to put themselves in the shoes of their non-white guests.

Roxane Gay herself recently spoke of the crisis of empathy that can result when people of colour are not adequately represented in public culture:

...here in Australia, people of colour do not see themselves. So it's almost as if you're erased from discourse and from the public sphere. And it creates this void of empathy because if nobody sees you, and sees something of what your life may be like, they don't really believe that you exist or that your existence matters... that's why it matters that people should be equally represented not only in pop culture but in government and in education, and everywhere. It does really matter.

This void of empathy produced by our white cultural and political landscape means that Australia is ripe breeding ground for what Adrienne Rich called “white solipsism”, which she describes as the tendency “to think, imagine, and speak as if whiteness described the world”. Rich describes white solipsism as a form of “tunnel-vision which simply does not see non-white experience or existence as precious or significant”.

This solipsism gives rise to a blindness which insulates white Australians from non-white ways of seeing the world. While this blindness can be related to the oft-cited concept of “white privilege”, I struggle to refer to the inability to relate to the vast majority of humanity as privilege. As American comedian Hari Kondabalu suggests, white solipsism is one way that white people lose from racism too; how white people must “give up a degree of their humanity in order to be white” because of a segregation that alienates them from people of colour. White people – here’s an opportunity for you to claim a piece of victimhood – only being able to put yourselves in the shoes of other white people is a very sad state of affairs indeed.

I should add that Australians of colour rarely live in segregation from our white counterparts. We grow up with white people as our classmates, our colleagues, our teachers, our friends, our politicians, the people on TV. That’s why we’re able to feel empathy for ethnicities other than our own. That’s why we don’t tend to talk to white folks like they’re fucking *aliens* – in the way that Red Symons asked Beverley Wang if she was “yellow”; or how Michael Cathcart asked Paul Beatty if he learned to “become black”; in the way I’ve seen many white Australians, particularly older ones, speak to me.

This is why Cathcart wasn’t able to acknowledge the specificity of his vantage point as an older white man. Cathcart, by his own admission, has spent his whole life shielded from the perspectives of people of colour. The result is that he sees his spectacularly white point of view as objective, universal and right. When Cathcart said to Paul Beatty that he had “learned not to be white”, and that he sees himself as “just a person”, the profundity of his limitations as an older white man was on full display.

Cathcart even went on to invoke Australia as some sort of post-racial utopia, “an example to the world of what is possible”. When many started to fear that Cathcart’s whiter-than-white monologue would never end, a Gamilaroi lawyer shouted from the audience, berating Cathcart for making such comments when Aboriginal children are still being taken from their parents. “I want white Australia to *look at itself!*” he said. The disruption was sorely needed. There are times when white blindness becomes too much to bear.

As long as Australia’s government and cultural output, parliamentary representatives and historical perspectives continue to be whiter than our multiracial demographics demand, the blindness promulgated by the likes of Michael Cathcart, Mia Freedman and Red Symons will continue to reproduce itself, and Australia will continue to confirm its reputation as the cultural backwater that the world thinks we are, the drunk uncle to the Western world.

White Australia is blind. But it’s a blindness that can be corrected. The first step to recovery is admitting that you have a problem. It’s time for white Australia to look at itself.