

Precarious Multiculturalism: The Racialized Experience of Asian In/Exclusion in Australia

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Abstract

Within Australia's reputation as a successful multicultural nation, we explore what it means to be Asian in Australia. We trace how this racialized group has been socially excluded under the White Australia Policy that existed for much of the 20th Century, included in the Asian Century adopted as government policy in 2012, re-excluded during the COVID-19 pandemic, and tentatively re-included in its aftermath. We examine the cursory and contingent nature of racial inclusion in Australia in light of the contention that surrounds the concept and practice of multiculturalism as a political program. The racialized experience of Asians in Australia demonstrates the pernicious nature of white supremacy, even while this settler-nation seeks to consolidate a glowing image of diversity to redeem its racist past. We conclude by proposing that Australia go beyond multiculturalism to adopt systemic inclusion as a basis for a more equitable and sustainable future.

Keywords

multiculturalism, inclusion, anti-Asian sentiments, Asian Australians, systemic racism

Introduction

Australia is one of the world's most prominent nation of immigrants. It enjoys a reputation as a successful multicultural society, often lauded alongside other nations such

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as Canada as an exemplar of social cohesion amidst racial, ethnic, and religious diversity (Ng & Metz, 2015). Despite Australia's glowing multicultural image (Ahmed, 2008), sociocultural renderings of inclusion are shaped by the settler-nation's legacy of the White Australia Policy that existed for much of the 20th century. Since colonization, Australia's insistence on a *white* national identity, which the White Australia Policy exemplified, has been particularly strange given its geographical positioning in Asia. While Australia celebrates its present-day diversity as redemption of its virulently exclusionary history, scholars have demonstrated that White Australia as an ideology continues to haunt contemporary society (Ang, 1996, 2014; Hage, 1998; Lentin, 2014; Liu, 2017; Stratton & Ang, 2013). Multiculturalism has been critiqued both by those who accuse it of being a radical minority movement that sows division and breeds terrorism and those who believe it to be a tool of white power that cannot enable true inclusion (Ercan, 2015; Gozdecka et al., 2014; Lentin, 2014).

In this conceptual article, we develop "precarious multiculturalism" to analyze the cursory and contingent nature of racial inclusion under white supremacy. We employ a multidisciplinary analysis of Australian multicultural history and draw together scholarship from history, sociology, cultural studies, political science, organization studies, and media studies. We focus on the Asian diaspora in Australia as one racialized group who has been excluded, included, re-excluded, and now tentatively re-included throughout the nation's history. We begin by tracing the development of multiculturalism as a political program in the Western world and establish our conceptual framing of white supremacy as a lens to understand the precarious nature of multiculturalism in Australia. We subsequently explore the pendulous journey of what it has meant to be Asian through Australia's past and present to illustrate the challenges and contradictions of multicultural tolerance. We conclude by integrating and extending the theorizing around inclusion from development, democracy, and organizational studies to propose possibilities for Asian inclusion in white settler-nations such as Australia.

Multiculturalism as a Political Program

Multiculturalism invokes several different understandings that loosely converge on the recognition (Taylor, 1992) and accommodation (Kymlicka & Norman, 2000) of cultural differences. Hall (2000) distinguished between "multi-cultural" and "multi-culturalism," where the former refers to the phenomenon of distinct cultures simultaneously coexisting in a society and the latter designates a political program promoting recognition and accommodation between co-existing cultures. In this article, we define multiculturalism as a policy tenet that seeks to recognize and accommodate different cultures in the public sphere and in civil society (Kymlicka, 1995; Taylor, 1992). Our focus relates to the fact that while multi-culturalism as a phenomenon is here to stay, multiculturalism as a political program is increasingly under threat.

The contention surrounding multiculturalism has roots in different ideological aspirations. A recent review by Johansson (2022) identified at least three tenets guiding multiculturalism: (1) conservative, focusing on assimilation into a mainstream culture;

(2) liberal, focusing on integration and respect for particular cultures; and (3) critical multiculturalism, emphasizing power and resistance. One key tension in its interpretation is between universalism and particularism (Nemetz & Christensen, 1996, p. 442; Soysal, 1994)—that is, whether multiculturalism premises the primacy of Western liberalism, or whether it represents a change agenda for Western societies based on respect for cultural relativism and particularism (Dobbernack, 2022).

A second tension has revolved around whether individuals or groups are the unit in question when speaking of recognition (Hartmann & Gerteis, 2005). Young's (1989, p. 265; 1992) critique of individualism and universalism highlights the risks inherent in multiculturalist policies that often serve the interests of dominant groups. She points out that universalist principles for multicultural organizing typically reflect the cultural constructions of upper-class white men. Similarly, she argues that groups and their collective identities and priorities should be represented because the election of individuals based on their group characteristics often reproduces existing structural inequities.

Notwithstanding these tensions (Johansson, 2022), the move away from multiculturalism in favor of a social cohesion agenda in many Western countries in recent decades has presented new concerns. Gozdecka et al. (2014, p. 57) noted that Western states have shifted from traditional expressions of racism to a new ethnocentrism based on the "protection of the state and its laws from illiberal subjects." In France, for example, emphasis on liberal democracy and republicanism in the face of challenges from ethnic and religious minorities have reduced the space for recognizing differences (Dobbernack, 2022).

Precarious Multiculturalism and Conditional Inclusion

Underpinning Australia's uneasy relationship with multiculturalism is a white supremacist ideology rooted in the nation's colonial history and sustained through contemporary race relations (Bargallie et al., 2023). Hence, white supremacy is a useful critical framework through which the racialized experience of Asian in/exclusion in Australia can be understood. In the context of critical race theory, "white supremacy" refers to the normalized and naturalized system comprising the totality of public policies, social relations, and mundane practices that reproduce white power and privilege (Liu, 2021). White supremacy's subtle and widespread forces have shaped the prevailing political, economic, and social systems to serve the interests of white people and maintain their control over material and cultural resources throughout countries rooted in this ideology (Bargallie, 2020).

Over the decades, white supremacy has become a more poignant descriptor of race relations than "racism." Where overt racism has become less socially acceptable in much of public life, white supremacy is covert enough to persist, even while its proponents insist that race is irrelevant and racism is obsolete (Liu, 2021). A recent example is the backlash against critical race theory itself, which has been accused of sowing division and discontent. Critics of critical race theory perpetuate the myth of white victimhood, claiming that anti-racist ideas and interventions harm white people by

triggering their shame (DiAngelo, 2018). For example, the Attorney-General's Department halted a tender by the Australian Human Rights Commission to enhance its anti-racism program in 2021, citing the concern that the program promoted critical race theory (Bargallie et al., 2023).

The persistence of white supremacy has frustrated efforts toward racial justice in white settler-nations. Multiculturalism under white supremacy primarily becomes a mechanism to enrich white institutions and nations (Liu, 2021). Australia presents a typical case where racial difference is tolerated through domesticated and commodified expressions of cultural identity so long as individuals maintain "an overriding and unifying commitment to Australia" (Department of Home Affairs, 2000, p. 8). Multiculturalism in turn serves as an alibi against racism while keeping the racial hierarchy intact. As Hage (1998) puts it, multiculturalism is something that Australia *has* rather than something that Australia *is*. White supremacy as a conceptual framework helps illuminate how even ostensibly inclusive policies and practices may preclude true inclusion by preserving existing power relations.

Disambiguation of Racial Labels

Racial categorizations and identifications are socially constructed in different ways in Australia than other parts of the world so we need to clarify the terms we use in this article. Unlike in the United States where Asian American and Pacific Islander has been constructed as a combined category (though not without criticism, e.g., Teves & Arvin, 2018), the Asian diaspora in Australia has not historically seen political activism and community organization inspire a unified construction of 'Asian Australian' identity (Ang, 2014). Many people of Asian descent in Australia are more likely to identify with a national identity (e.g., Vietnamese or Korean) rather than a racial one (i.e., Asian).

In practice, racial/ethnic identifications are highly complex, dynamic, and contradictory. For instance, multigenerational Asian migrants are more likely to describe "Asian Australian" being a label imposed on them by the dominant culture, a marker of one's racial Otherness (Ang, 2014; Tan, 2006). The designation of Asianness here tends to reflect the dominant culture's inability to distinguish between Asian people and cultures yet fixing them wholesale as an alien and abject group (Gardner et al., 2022). In contrast, more recent Asian migrants are likely to self-identify as "Asian Australian," finding social and political advantages in choosing a collective racial identity (Ang, 2010).

Meanwhile, the dominant culture has maintained the use of generalizing labels such as "ethnic minority" to refer to all Australians not of Anglo-Celtic descent. People of the Pacific diaspora are not demographically conflated with Asians in Australia, but are more likely associated with Indigenous peoples, specifically Australian South Sea Islanders and Torres Strait Islanders (McGavin, 2014). As our analysis will continue to show, what it means to be Asian has taken on uniquely localized meanings throughout Australia's history and the multiple and conflicting categorizations shape and are shaped by changing race relations.

Asian Australians in White Australia

For the first 70 years after the federation of the Commonwealth in 1901, Australia was White Australia. The principle of white racial superiority was expressed through the Immigration Restriction Act, the first ever legislative bill passed by the Commonwealth parliament, which enshrined discriminatory practices that limited the arrival of non-white people (Fitzgerald, 2007). The architects of federation saw these practices as means to creating a cultural foundation for national unity based on white supremacist notions of homogeneity and racialized exclusion (Jupp, 2007).

Although the Immigration Restriction Act did not explicitly mention race, public discourse at the time clearly specified Asians as inimical to Australia and believed that a race war between Australia and its Asian neighbors was imminent. As early as 1888, labor activist William Lane published a dystopian narrative, which imagined that the relaxation of immigration restriction meant the Chinese “over-ran everything,” “monopolized a score of important industries,” and “sat in Parliament, directed State departments” until Australia became “more and more distasteful to the Caucasian peoples” (Affeldt, 2017, p. 451). Lane believed that this future would only be curtailed if Australia won the fight of “white against yellow” and expelled Asians “northwards like great droves of cattle” (Affeldt, 2017, p. 451). Prime Minister Billy Hughes shared such views and in 1916 similarly characterized Australia as a “tiny drop in a colored ocean,” an island nation cast adrift from its British motherland and forced to defend itself against alien threats (Walker & Sobocinska, 2012, p. 4).

Ultimately, the Immigration Restriction Act achieved its desired outcome (Jupp, 2007). In the years leading up to the White Australia Policy, Asian migrants in Australia amounted to approximately 68,000 people or 2.1% of the population, with Chinese migrants representing the largest subgroup comprising over three-quarters of all migrants from Asia. By 1947, the proportion of Asians in Australia would fall to 0.5% (Mackie, 1987, p. 106).

Anti-Asian sentiments were shared around the Pacific Rim settler-nations, with the United States, Canada, and New Zealand all introducing comparable legislation to that established in Australia (Fitzgerald, 2007). Australia “defined itself explicitly away from its regional Asian context, clinging desperately to its status as a far-flung outpost of Europe” (Ang et al., 2000, p. xiii). Meanwhile, an “Asian invasion” remained a looming threat in the Australian imagination throughout the 20th century (Walker & Sobocinska, 2012).

Yet non-white migrants and communities played a vital role in the construction of Australia’s national identity. “White Australia” was made possible only by the specter of the non-white Other—the “yellow peril”—who helped define and reify whiteness (Ommundsen, 1998). Indeed, Asian migrants were largely constructed as inherently incompatible with “Australian values” throughout Australian history. White Australian leaders across business, labor, political, and religious spheres characterized Asians as slavish indentured servants, incapable of appreciating the “hearty individualism, egalitarianism, and spiritual values of New Britannia” (Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 7). These discourses were highly gendered as Asian migrants were feminized in contrast to the

idealized white masculinity intrinsic to the Australian identity (Ang, 1996). Asian migrants were also seen as contaminated (Stephenson, 2009) as they were dependent on carrying out dirty, dangerous, and difficult work. This stereotype especially extended to Asian women who were often assumed to be mail-order brides and cast as miscegenetic threats to Australian racial purity (Robinson, 1996).

Despite their dwindling numbers under the White Australia Policy, the Asian diaspora in Australia resisted white supremacist narratives about their difference and deviance. Kuo (2013) demonstrated how between 1892 and 1912, Chinese community leaders sought to challenge racism by mobilizing civic associations. They proved their capacity and willingness to adopt Australian values through political activism and philanthropy. In Melbourne, community groups were more radical, petitioning Sydney merchants for the establishment of a Chinese Consul-General, with some factions even calling for revolution. Indian Australians similarly campaigned for their rights during the White Australia Policy with merchants sending petitions to the local press and to the Government of India to challenge the Immigration Restriction Act (Allen, 2005). Asian Australian people and communities have thus always claimed their agency in reconstructing their identities and belonging while resisting white supremacy.

Asian Australians Under Multiculturalism

A conservative Liberal/Country government effectively ended the White Australia Policy in 1966 by loosening immigration restrictions for non-European nationals (Tavan, 2004). European immigration had reduced to a trickle and Australia had started receiving migrants from Turkey, Latin America, and Lebanon (Poynting & Mason, 2008). However, the White Australia Policy was not formally abandoned due to the government's fears of a possible electoral backlash from white voters (Castles, 1988). When the Whitlam Labor government formally repealed the White Australia Policy in 1973, increased demands for racial equality from burgeoning social movements partly motivated this decision. But it was also driven by pragmatic responses to international pressure. Although Australia had hitherto sought to exclude itself from Asia, foreign policy realism and enticing trade opportunities with the flourishing regional economies saw a shift toward engagement. However, countries such as Japan and Singapore were not willing to reciprocate, whereas Australia explicitly discriminated against Asian nationals in immigration policy (Tavan, 2004). Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam's announcement of this shift was justified primarily in pragmatic geopolitical terms (Crock, 1998, p. 34): "As an island nation of predominantly European inhabitants situated on the edge of Asia, we cannot afford the stigma of racialism."

Over the following decades, over one-quarter of new migrants would come from Asia each year (Jones, 1997). As of 2020, 29.8% of the Australian population are born overseas although it is notable that English-born migrants remain the largest demographic of migrants, comprising 12.9% of all overseas-born Australians (Australian

Bureau of Statistics, 2021b). According to the 2021 census, 12% of the population are born in Asia and 17.6% claim Asian heritage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a).

Despite its previous commitment to racial homogeneity, Australia transformed its reputation as an exclusionary nation founded on the principle of white supremacy into a redemptive narrative of inclusion (Ang, 1996). The adoption of multiculturalism as official migrant settlement policy involved Commonwealth and state government funding to encourage the formation of migrant community organizations, increased representation of migrant community members on government advisory bodies, and the establishment of multilingual broadcasters (Jupp, 2007). Where the U.S. multicultural programs were largely advanced from the bottom up by people of color, Australian multiculturalism (as with Canada) was promoted top-down by government. State-sanctioned multiculturalism signaled a rejection of the homogenizing ideal of the past, adopting the belief that cultural diversity is positive for the nation (Ng & Metz, 2015). Where non-British residents, including Indigenous peoples, were previously expected to assimilate into (or be eradicated from) white Australian society, multicultural Australia supported residents in preserving and expressing their cultural heritage (Stratton & Ang, 2013).

Critical observers suggest that white supremacy continues to shape how multiculturalism is understood and practiced in everyday Australian life. Unlike the grassroots movements in the United States that have often centered their resistance against white racial oppression (Scott, 2005), Australian multiculturalism has deflected serious considerations of systemic racism (Lentin, 2014). A survey undertaken in 2021 suggested that while 76% of Australians agree there is “still a lot of racism in Australia these days,” 44% did not believe that “white supremacy is ingrained in most aspects of Australian society” (Crabb, 2021).

The redemptive narrative of multiculturalism allows Australia, like other white-dominated countries, to come to terms with its racist history, rebranding itself as a fundamentally tolerant society despite cases of discrimination (Ang, 1996). Discourses of Australian multiculturalism are often self-congratulatory constructions of the settler-nation as democratic, progressive, and inclusive (Scott, 2005), whereas suppressing considerations of the constitutive role of systemic racism and white supremacy. The seemingly widespread acceptance of multiculturalism in Australia is thus perhaps an expression of inclusionary inclination with limited real stakes compared to the legacy of U.S. civil rights movement, which has resulted in legislated protection from discrimination based on race and other characteristics in access to education, health, employment, and other social services. For example, Australia does not mandate the collection of data on the race and ethnicity of employees (with exceptions on Indigenous heritage) (Syed & Kramar, 2010), and hence does not possess the means of enforcing equal opportunity, even if this was a priority. We are aware that the legacy of social movement-based affirmative action in the U.S. is being threatened on multiple fronts as this article goes to print, and that multiculturalism driven by political expedience is indeed more widespread than one prioritizing genuine inclusion.

The Australian government’s attempts to legitimize multiculturalism have focused on framing multiculturalism as valuable for white people and institutions. Throughout

the 1970s, Australia became acutely aware of its flagging international reputation, both among Asian neighbors and Western allied nations. When the government began to question its intake of Southeast Asian migrants and threatened to turn away asylum seekers in the late 1970s, journalists warned that the decision to turn back refugee boats “would raise a chorus of protests from neighbors whose friendship Australia wants to retain” (Neumann, 2015, p. 281). The commitment to multiculturalism was thus more about preserving political and economic alliances than inclusion.

Indeed, *tolerance* at the heart of Australian multiculturalism arguably maintains the attendant racial hierarchy under white supremacy (Bauman, 1991; Hage, 1998; Liu, 2021). The discourse of tolerance upholds the power of white Australians to condone those marked as Others. Asian Australians, along with other non-white Australians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, are largely dehumanized as objects to be tolerated until they become too radical, too angry, too dangerous, etc. and are considered “beyond the realm of the tolerable, deemed unworthy of being tolerated” (Ang, 1996, p. 40). Who is tolerable and who is not have been dynamic and debated categories throughout Australia’s history, compelling non-white Australians to engage in a wide variety of assimilatory (and resistive) identity work to secure a sense of worth, dignity, and belonging (Ang, 2014; Liu, 2017; Yu, 2019).

Despite the white supremacist and state-controlled nature of Australian multiculturalism, populist backlash against multiculturalism has also been prominent as in other Western societies. In 1988, the Hawke Labor government commissioned a report which argued there was increasing public “confusion and mistrust of multiculturalism, focusing on the suspicion that it drove immigration policy” (Committee to Advise on Australia’s Immigration Policies, 1988, p. xii). In responding to the report, then Liberal Party leader John Howard criticized the official policy of multiculturalism, supported changing the racial composition of the immigration intake if it endangered social harmony, and advocated reduced immigration from Asian nations. These events contributed to Howard’s removal as Liberal Party leader in 1989, but his views would shape the direction of immigration and multicultural policies and discourse when he became prime minister 7 years later (Jupp, 2007; Wright, 2014).

In her maiden speech as a newly elected Member of Parliament in 1996, Pauline Hanson pronounced to the House of Representatives that multiculturalism needed to be abolished as Australia was “in danger of being swamped by Asians” (Martino, 2016). Hanson’s speech portended a new era of conservative politics that capitalized on fears among white people, which the Howard Liberal/National Coalition government legitimized through increasingly restrictive policies for asylum seekers and migrants seeking to obtain family visas (Wright, 2014). Refugee communities from Southeast Asia received the most anti-Asian hostility (Tan, 2006), with accusations that they had formed ghettos in Western Sydney and were competing for jobs with unskilled white workers (Mackie, 1987). Southeast Asian refugees were derogatorily monikered “boat people” in reference to the negligible number of asylum seekers who arrived “unauthorized” by sea (Neumann, 2015). In recent decades, pundits have ascertained that new immigrants were tolerated by Australian voters based on a social contract between the government and the Australian public that hinged on the

government allowing in only the “right” kind of migrants (The Australian Financial Review, 2016). Both Labor and Coalition governments have justified restrictive immigration policies by emphasizing the need for migrant integration into Australian society over multiculturalism.

In the wake of widespread Islamophobia and panic surrounding extremist Islamic terrorism, Pauline Hanson revived her political career in 2016 with a speech to parliament that invoked her anti-Asian views 20 years earlier, claiming now that Australia was “being swamped by Muslims” (Murphy, 2016). At the heart of these anti-multiculturalist arguments was a white victimhood logic that asserted racial and ethnic minorities’ needs had been prioritized over the white majority. Media examples of “‘home grown’ terrorists” and “ungrateful dissenters” were constructed as evidence that migrants who benefited from the generosity of benevolent whites were nevertheless using it against their “naïve hosts” (Lentin, 2014, p. 1271).

The Asian Century

Rhetoric around the dawn of an “Asian Century” emerged with the release of a 2012 White Paper by the Gillard Labor government. Dominant discourses suggested a renewal of Australia’s celebratory commitment to multiculturalism, yet as with previous iterations, one that advocated a need for Australia to become “Asia ready” and develop “a clear plan to seize the economic opportunities that will flow” from the rise of Asian trade partners (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012, p. ii). Prime Minister Julia Gillard affirmed that “I want our nation to be a winner as our region changes and I want every Australian to be a winner too” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2012, p. iii). Alex Oliver (2021), research director of the Lowy Institute, reminisced how during that period, “Australians felt warmly toward China, enhanced by the glow of the increasing prosperity it afforded us.” Excitement over the “Asian Century” would prove to be short-lived, with many of the White Paper’s objectives abandoned within 2 years (Steinwall, 2022). In a study of how Asia and Asians are constructed in the white Australian imagination, Fozdar (2016) found that they ordinarily remained invisible and unnoteworthy to Australians. Yet when white Australians do talk about Asia, it is in relation to a perceived threat involving its economic power, large population, military capacity, and resource consumption.

Growing numbers of migrants in Australia have begun to identify with dual and hybrid national and racial identities (Lee, 2006). However, political and business discourses have seen a shift from racialized or ethnicized labels toward more general descriptors of difference. Specifically, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) has been introduced as a new categorization, which often serves to euphemistically refer to non-Indigenous non-white groups. Although CALD has become widely adopted across many institutions, emerging critiques have pointed out how the label reduces a “glaringly heterogenous” group of people into an analogous population who continue to be deemed deviant from the white norm (Adusei-Asante & Adibi, 2018, p. 75). The term CALD also has the effect of rendering race invisible, diluting racial differences into a nebulous and benign notion of “culture.” Yet culture has always been

about race, and as the anti-multiculturalist arguments show, race is also inherited in culture (Lentin, 2014). In this way, CALD shifts racial discourse away from any attention to power, and in effect, dilutes diversity so that almost anyone, even racially privileged migrants in Australia, could stake a claim to being “culturally diverse.”

“Chinese Virus”

The COVID-19 pandemic further illustrated the precarity of multicultural inclusion in Australia and elsewhere. The virus first broke out in Wuhan, China in late 2019 before spreading overseas with the first case identified in Australia on January 25, 2020 (Department of Health, 2020). COVID-19 cases proliferated around the world alongside cases of anti-Asian racism (Abidin & Zeng, 2020). As with many historical pandemics and epidemics, Asian people and their habits were blamed for the spread of infectious disease (Tan et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2021). These fears appeared to signal a return of “yellow peril” stereotypes of Asians as unclean and unhealthy and quickly led to the stigmatization of Asian diaspora around the Western world (Tan et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2021).

Asian communities in white-dominated nations reported shared experiences of racial violence, with anti-Chinese sentiments expressed generally toward all people presenting as Asian (Gardner et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2021). Anti-Asian hate was incited by political rhetoric and misleading media coverage. For example, the Australian tabloid media used provocative racist headlines with the *Herald Sun* printing “Chinese Virus Panda-monium,” with “panda” highlighted (Sun, 2021).

The Lowy Institute found one in five Chinese Australians were threatened or attacked in the first year of the COVID-19 outbreak (Kassam & Hsu, 2021), whereas the Scanlon Foundation found 39% of Asian-born Australians indicated increased experiences of discrimination (Markus, 2021, p. 7). Many instances of these racialized behaviors were subtle but persistent acts of microaggression, where Asians reported coworkers making jokes about them as COVID-19 carriers, non-Asians appearing to avoid them in public, or receiving hostile stares, particularly when they decided to wear masks early in the outbreak (Abidin & Zeng, 2020; Gardner et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2021; Walker & Anders, 2022). The emergence of the Delta variant, first identified in India in mid-2021, further fueled hate against Australians who presented as South Asian, often accompanied by anti-Islamic slurs and insults (Yang, 2021).

Despite their paradoxical natures, the “yellow peril” stereotype was revived alongside that of the model minority (Walker & Anders, 2022). Asians across white-dominated nations were regarded as the source of the virus, as dangerous sites of disease, “as an alien and repugnant people who eat bats” (Sun, 2021, p. 35). Yet entrenched feminized stereotypes of Asian Australians as docile, quiet, and slavish (Fitzgerald, 2007) also singled them out as easy targets of racial violence. COVID-19 viscerally revealed the white supremacist fantasies that had lurked not far beneath the surface of “tolerant” Australian multiculturalism. It highlighted how Asian Australians largely continue to occupy the peripheries of society as an entity from whom white Australia can claim value (e.g., ethnic food, festivals, economic partnerships with Asia) and to

whom inclusion is bestowed on a contingent basis. As soon as Asian Australians are seen as entailing something unwanted (e.g., a virus), they are once again rendered the forever foreign Other.

Asian Australian workers have long reported experiencing distrust, fear, and hostility from white colleagues, managers, customers, and clients (Kosny et al., 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic heightened the kinds of organizational violence Asian Australians faced prior to 2020, often microaggressions rather than overt acts of discrimination and hate (Gardner et al., 2022). Microaggressions are “attributionally ambiguous” and can often make it more difficult for the target to identify, let alone formally report, as an act of racial hatred (Kosny et al., 2017, p. 495). Widespread experiences with everyday racism reported by Asian Australian workers had a deleterious impact on their health and well-being (Kosny et al., 2017).

Beyond Multiculturalism, Toward Systemic Inclusion

In what many sociologists have termed the “post-multicultural” era (Gozdecka et al., 2014; Lentin, 2014), the ongoing formation of Multicultural Australia is more fragile and uneven than much of its celebratory discourse would suggest. Our multidisciplinary analysis has traced the pendulous journey of Asian migrants in Australia to highlight how fantasies of a diverse and tolerant Australia belie the complex influences of White Australia and the persistent effects of systemic racism and white supremacy. A summary of this journey can be seen in Figure 1 below.

Australian multiculturalism is currently caught between the forces that critique its political conservatism and its political radicalism. Progressives assert that multiculturalism is defined on white terms, constructing non-white people, cultures, and nations as objects of consumption to enrich White Australia, while masking the power of white people and institutions to bestow tolerance on the Other. Conservatives suspect that multiculturalism is a radical minority agenda that threatens to realize long-standing fears of an Asian invasion. Balancing upon the fault line, Australian multiculturalism clings to ideals of inclusion that are increasingly diluted in everyday life.

The precariousness of multiculturalism owes in part to its original inception focusing on culture, suggesting that all cultures are equal in their right to be recognized. In contrast to grassroots political movements in the United States that shaped diversity as an enforceable mandate and a civil right, state-sanctioned multiculturalism in Australia was predicated on a palatably benign interpretation of inclusion. Focusing on culture draws attention away from structural sources of inequity, such as systemic racism and socioeconomic disparities (Joppke, 2004). Because cultures comprise values that distinguish between right and wrong, and true and false, it is impossible to recognize all cultures as equal (Barry, 2001). Indeed, although white-dominated nations have adopted many anti-discrimination reforms since the 1945 UN Charter, policymakers are left to interpret reforms within prevailing racial frames (Hage, 1998). As such, countries like Australia can be a UN Charter signatory while dictating the terms of racial inclusion (e.g., assimilation, state-sanctioned multiculturalism, economic enrichment, etc.) and maintaining systemic racism.

Impetus for exclusion	Historic event	Impetus for inclusion
	Pre-1788 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander custodianship	
	1788 British invasion and colonization	
Asians as 'yellow peril', fundamentally inimical to 'White Australia'	1901 Federation of Commonwealth and the White Australia Policy	
Backlash to Asian 'invasion'	1974 Multiculturalism Policy	Promotion of tolerance towards non- white migrants
	2012 Asian Century	Economic value of Asian business partnerships
Revival of 'yellow peril' stereotypes, Asians as carriers of disease	2020 COVID-19 outbreak in Australia	
	Post-2020 Post-multiculturalism	Opportunities for systemic inclusion

Figure 1. The racialized experience of Asian in/exclusion in Australia.

The recent backlash against multiculturalism demonstrates the practical limitations in realizing its ideals. A way forward in a “post-multicultural” society may be to build pathways to systemic inclusion where minority groups in conversation with majority entities, rather than the state, set the terms and conditions of inclusion. Even in the United States, minority-led movements play a vital role in defining the measures and aims of racial justice (Liu, 2021) amidst a conservative backlash that insists anti-racism is the source of social division, not racism itself (DiAngelo, 2018). As we have seen throughout Australian history, communities of color have long played active roles in shaping their own identities and asserting their belonging. Minority communities are due a meaningful opportunity to contribute to the making and offering clear and specific guidelines for what true inclusion could entail.¹

Inclusion as a concept has gained increasing resonance in recent decades across the fields of social and economic development (Gupta et al., 2015), democratic theory (Dryzek, 1996), and organizational diversity (Nishii, 2013; Roberson, 2006). Within development theory, inclusive development has focused on the material, relational, and psychological well-being of groups impacted by short-term development goals (Gough & McGregor, 2007). For example, the LGBTI inclusion index of the United Nations Development Program encompasses measures across education, political and civic participation, economic well-being, health, and personal safety and violence (Daly et al., 2022). We propose that inclusive development draws on the knowledge of

local people and their participation in defining the goals to co-create an inclusive society. This process requires analyzing the factors and actors that create and perpetuate inequities and working to transform social relations (Gupta et al., 2015).

In democratic theory, inclusiveness has focused on empowerment for inclusion. That is, it is not enough that political processes are *open* to all groups, but that those who are potentially affected by political decisions should be empowered to speak, vote, represent, and dissent (Fung, 2013; Young, 2000). We suggest that systemic inclusion necessitates the empowerment of historically marginalized immigrant and other minority communities whose participation and resistance are integral to changing the oppressive structures in a white supremacist society.

Finally, in organization theory, inclusion has been conceptualized as a state where organizational members can be fully themselves while contributing to the organization (Ferdman, 2017). Research has shown that mutual learning (Ely & Thomas, 2001), fair treatment and inclusion in decision-making (Nishii, 2013), and establishing a level playing field for diverse groups (Nishii & Rich, 2014) are important in achieving inclusion in organizations. However, the lack of comprehensive data on the race/ethnicity of workers enforces a “colorblind” approach that implies racial justice is irrelevant in a supposed meritocracy (Syed & Kramar, 2010). Critical voices add that meaningful racial inclusion necessitates the interrogation of white supremacy, which has traditionally shaped the definition of inclusion on white terms while maintaining white racial advantage. Inclusion in organizations demands *reorganization*, embracing forms of distributed leadership, democratic decision-making, equity-based understandings of merit, and unionization to redress the prevailing systems of injustice in the wider society (Bargallie, 2020; Liu, 2021).

As we have discussed in this article, the political program of multiculturalism has relied on selecting migrants for their utility to the Australian economy, tolerating their cultural diversity with strict limits, and ensuring that the inclusion of the Other does not jeopardize the vested interests and privileges afforded to white Australians. Amidst superficial and uncritical celebration of cultural diversity (Poynting & Mason, 2008), Australia has formulated stringent requirements for civic belonging (Dubbernack, 2022) as the neoliberal emphasis on migrants as “human resources” attests (Australian Government, 1999). Drawing on the conceptualizations of inclusion from development, democracy, and organizational studies, we propose a model of *systemic* inclusion which has the potential to address the pernicious forces of systemic racism and white supremacy. Systemic inclusion goes beyond multiculturalism in re-assessing and reforming major systems that construct minorities as the Other, including those that govern punitive immigration control, education, socioeconomic status, and workplace mobility.

Systemic inclusion thus begins with a comprehensive assessment of how public policy, social relations, and mundane practices serve to maintain white supremacy, conducted with meaningful participation of those who are impacted. It also involves building alternative structures and methods for effective power sharing (Dwyer et al., 2020). Systemic inclusion privileges collectivities over individual recognition; hence, communities are empowered to represent their own perspectives and dissent against

political structures and processes undermining minority voice (Warren, 2017; Young, 1989, 1992). Finally, under systemic inclusion, the inclusion of minorities in Australian workplaces is no longer conditioned on the “Australian-ness” of their behavior and demeanor (Yu, 2019); minorities are represented across all organizational ranks through a leveling of the playing field and through hiring and promotion processes.

These measures would go some way toward rectifying the limitations and contradictions of the hitherto dominant “top-down” state-imposed multiculturalism model. Our proposition rests on the premise that the conditions for systemic inclusion can only be met by acknowledging the underpinnings of white supremacy in Australian society and by better institutionalizing racial justice. At the same time, our approach recognizes the mounting backlash to critical interrogations of white supremacy that have frustrated efforts toward anti-racism. Although we support the aims of racial justice, our concept of systemic inclusion suggests a pragmatic way forward that accounts for the historical precarity of inclusion. Integrating and extending conceptual ideas on inclusion from various disciplines has allowed us to develop new insights for promoting Asian inclusion more sustainably in a truly diverse Australia, which has potential implications for scholarship and practice regarding multiculturalism and inclusion in other settler-nations. Systemic inclusion, then, provides a more equitable and sustainable basis for the path forward beyond multiculturalism.

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