Australian Human Rights Commission

National Anti-Racism Framework

Introduction

Key concepts, frameworks, and contexts for understanding anti-Asian racism in Australia

Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Human Rights Commission acknowledges all First Nations peoples across the continent and their continuing connection to land, waters, culture, and communities. We recognise the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which these resources are compiled, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise the long history and ongoing leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in anti-racism and anti-colonialism advocacy on this continent.

This resource contains descriptions of experiences of racism that could be distressing and traumatic for some people, particularly people with lived experience of racism. If needed, you may want to seek support from formal support services **here**. Please note that we have occasionally reproduced language from research sources that describe people in derogatory and offensive ways that are recognised as unacceptable today. We included such terms to demonstrate and dissect the language and thinking of the time, and we apologise for any offence or distress that reading such language might cause.

This resource was developed based on the commissioned advisory work of the Griffith University research team consisting of Dr Ubayasiri, Dr Willing, Dr Teo, Dr Anacin, and Ms Chew.[i] Designs by Bree Buttenshaw for Saltwater People (2024). Layout by Bree Buttenshaw for Saltwater People and Miranda Douglas.



Throughout the National Anti-Racism Framework development process, the leading piece of feedback that the Australian Human Rights Commission ('the Commission') received from both First Nations and other negatively racialised individuals and organisations, was that First Nations sovereignty and truth-telling must be central to any anti-racism action. Anti-racism efforts must acknowledge the ongoing violence and unique impacts of settler colonialism on First Nations peoples. Actions must also take a systemic, nuanced, intersectional, and community centric approach to understanding and defining racism. Truth telling about Australia's settler colonial history, and enhancing understanding about Australia's migration history and the ongoing impacts of discriminatory policies, are therefore foundational to any effective anti-racism action.

To support deeper understanding about Australia's migration history and its continuing impacts, and in response to surges in anti-Asian racism since the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commission sought advice from a team of Asian Australian Studies researchers at Griffith University in June 2023. The expert advisory work looked at the historical emergence and changing manifestations of anti-Asian racism in Australia, and highlighted existing community-led research, advocacy, and education efforts in countering anti-Asian racism.

The Commission developed a set of eight resources based on the expert advice. This introductory piece explains some key concepts, terminology, and frameworks for understanding anti-Asian racism in Australia. The other resources comprise a historical events timeline and six focused pieces that look at more contemporary examples of anti-Asian racism in the media, politics, and workplaces, and explore anti-racism solutions through support services and education. These resources, along with other Commission anti-racism educational materials, will support stronger understanding about Australia's settler colonial and migration history, and offer insights on how systemic racism operates in Australia.

This set of resources centres the lived experiences and perspectives of Asian and Asian Australian communities through a contextual and conceptual lens. The Commission hopes that these resources can offer a systemic and conceptual framework for understanding the experiences of Asian and Asian Australian communities, while also exploring further solutions to anti-Asian racism in the context of settler colonialism. For policymakers, service providers, and other practitioners who work with Asian and Asian Australian communities, these resources will hopefully improve understanding about how racism manifests in the systems and institutions where people work, and highlight the urgency of and pathways to tackling anti-Asian racism in systemic, strengths based, and community centred ways.

> Before getting into this resource, it might be helpful to revisit some Key Terms relevant to anti-racism.

Understanding anti-Asian racism in the context of settler colonialism

On this continent, settler colonisation began with the arrival of British settler colonisers in 1788 and continues with the subsequent arrival of other settler colonisers. This includes groups who are now racialised as white, and people who are negatively racialised, including various Asian and Asian Australian communities. Ongoing **settler colonisation** is rooted in the dispossession, displacement, and genocide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and it has been met with continued and active resistance by First Nations peoples.

Goenpul academic Distinguished Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson's seminal research on Indigenous sovereignty reveals that settler colonialism underpins Australia's development as a nation.[ii] Settler colonisation is an ongoing process that disrupts and seeks to possess the sovereignty that Indigenous peoples exercise over their lands, including through laws and policies that privilege white possession and ownership of lands.[iii] This process manifests in symbolic, legal, cultural, economic, and other ways that seek to displace Indigenous peoples' rights to and ownership of their land, as seen through land theft, the myth of *terra nullius*, and child removals. Despite colonial attempts to occupy Aboriginal lands, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples maintain ongoing and unceded sovereignty over the continent.

This settler colonial context is critical for understanding how **systemic racism** operates and affects Asian and Asian Australian communities. White supremacy and racial violence are entrenched in Australian institutions and systems to enforce colonisation. Lebanese Australian academic Professor Ghassan Hage points out that **white nation-building narratives**, which seek to maintain Australia as a white centric society, are fundamental to settler colonialism.[iv] Professor Hage further argues that white supremacy continues to shape Australia's national outlook and discourses about national identity and Australianness.[v]

White nation building is challenged by the ongoing resistance and the solidarity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. For instance, Munanjahli and South Sea Islander academic Professor Chelsea Watego contests the settler colonial ideas of Australia and Australian national identity with terms such as 'so-called Australia' and 'the colony'.[vi] These efforts challenge the colony's claims over the continent and colonial attempts to erase the presence of First Nations peoples.[vii] As explored below and in the rest of the resources, white nation building narratives have historically been and remain central to the creation of harmful discourses about Asian and Asian Australian communities.

Settler colonialism also shapes how Asian and Asian Australian communities relate to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities on this continent. All non-Indigenous people, as settler colonisers, structurally benefit from ongoing colonisation at the expense of First Nations people.[viii] This is regardless of whether they are descended from immigrants from many generations ago, have recently arrived in Australia, or also experience racism.[ix] Recognising negatively racialised migrants as settlers, however, does not imply that they have the same experiences as white communities. In contrast, white communities continue to maintain dominance in systems, structures, and institutions in Australia, which privilege whiteness.

Understanding negatively racialised migrants, including Asian and Asian Australian communities, as settlers also does not dismiss the fact that they have diverse experiences of racism. Rather, it allows us to understand the intricate links between settler colonialism and systemic racism, as well as understand how Asian and Asian Australian communities have been racialised negatively to serve white supremacy. These insights will be crucial to help challenge racism at its systemic roots and in ways that centre First Nations sovereignty, self-determination, and truth telling.

Asian and Asian Australian communities have long been negatively racialised as an **Other** in colonial and Eurocentric discourses. They are often portrayed as inferior, undesirable, and incompatible with the self-proclaimed "superior" West. These stereotypes stem from Orientalist ideology. Palestinian American academic Professor Edward Said's seminal work on **Orientalism** reveals that, in the West's discourses, European people and cultures are portrayed as the universal human experience. The West then developed their understandings of non-Western people by comparing them to Eurocentric and dehumanising standards, which led to stereotypes that depict non-Western people as subhuman or non-human "Others".[x]

As we will see in the rest of the resources, the portrayal of negatively racialised people in Australia as "Others" continues today in different forms across political, media, educational, and other discourses. This portrayal is also embedded and enforced through policies and institutional practices. The "othering" of Asian and Asian Australian communities often results in Asians being racialised in contradictory ways. Depending on what benefits the dominant narratives at the time, people of Asian heritage can be depicted as immoral, uncivilised, and invasive, or fetishised and sexualised as submissive, passive, weak, and exotic. These different portrayals operate to reinforce and justify the colonial imaginations of Australia as a white-dominant society.

As discussed in the historical events timeline resource, these Orientalist fears and labels provided many of the foundations for **yellow peril** stereotypes and tropes. These tropes first marginalised Chinese people in the early Goldfields era, and later continued to be reproduced in various contemporary expressions of anti-Asian racism.

For instance, underlying "yellow peril" fears still dominate media and political discourses today. This includes the moral panics about Asian and Asian Australian communities, particularly people who are refugees or seeking asylum. At various points in history, people of Asian backgrounds are either stereotyped as "good" immigrants who can assimilate, or labelled as "bad" immigrants who threaten a white dominant society. In particular, people who are also refugees or are seeking asylum have regularly been labelled as "queue jumpers" and lawbreakers, even though they are not breaking the law when seeking refuge. This shows how labels can shift blame onto negatively racialised communities, including people of Asian heritage, and divert public attention away from the structural issues that caused the crises at hand.[xi]

Similar logics can also be seen in **moral panics** in the media. Moral panics stereotype groups of systemically marginalised young people, such as Vietnamese youths in the 1980s, as gangs and delinquents, and then use sensationalist headlines and news stories to generate exaggerated outbursts of public concern.[xii] Contemporary moral panics are also seen in discourses on "stopping the boats" and claims about being "swamped" by refugees and people seeking asylum who are not white. These episodes of moral panics demonstrate how similar marginalising tactics and rhetoric are used on different groups over time to reinforce ideas of a white centric nation. These ideas and narratives show a constant desire to possess Aboriginal lands, including through enforcing white control over borders and who is deemed worthy of entering Australia.

Rooted in settler colonialism, "yellow peril" and similar fears in Australia will require anti-racism solutions that are systemic in nature. These solutions will also need to centre First Nations sovereignty and self-determination, particularly as **multiculturalism** as a policy has already been criticised for its inadequacy in addressing colonial and racist rhetoric and narratives.

As Professor Hage argues, Australia's multiculturalism policies remain rooted in the logic of white supremacy.[xiii] Under multiculturalism policies, communities that are not racialised as white are only conditionally tolerated and accepted under unrealistic expectations, such as being crime-free, or being able to demonstrate "value" and "good" traits that benefit and do not threaten white dominance in society.[xiv] Without challenging the settler colonial structures and white supremacy that shape society, Professor Watego argues that the multicultural inclusion approach only "makes space" for Asian communities at the expense of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. This includes the diversion of limited resources, services, and funding away from First Nations communities, and the continued failure to centre First Nations sovereignty and ways of knowing, being, and doing in anti-racism responses.[xv]

Resisting "Othering" through centring community voices and experiences

Challenging colonial portrayals of Asian and Asian Australian communities requires us to avoid monolithic understandings of communities and instead recognise the inherent diversity of communities' experiences, identities, and perspectives.

When using terms such as 'Asian and Asian Australian', it is important to understand that they can point to a wide range of experiences living, working, and being in Australia. For instance, the continent of Asia spans a vast region with many cultures, traditions, languages, religions, cuisines, and histories of migration. Whereas 'Asian Australian' can refer to the experiences of people with Asian heritage in all its complexities, including being born, raised, moving to, or temporarily living in Australia, and many other forms of migration journeys.

As such, rather than defining a universal experience of being Asian in Australia, identities like 'Asian and Asian Australian' are fluid and evolving, and can have both personal and political meanings. For example, when people interact with different communities and institutions in Australia, how they are perceived by others can in turn change how people choose to self-identify. Similarly, people's identities can be influenced by social and political developments around the world, such as social movements giving rise to new political or cultural identities that then affect how communities in Australia might self-identify.

In their early work on Asian Australian identities, Professor Jacqueline Lo, Dr Tseen Khoo, and Professor Helen Gilbert suggest that identities like 'Asian Australian' are not natural or biologically fixed terms and can be racialised differently over time with changing policies and public attitudes. Asian Australian identities are therefore diverse and fluid, because they reflect how people understand and negotiate between different parts of their lived experiences.[xvi] For instance, geographical categories like "Asian" and "South/Southeast/East Asian" originated in European imperialism and had been used to describe diverse groups in ways that are dismissive of differences and rather meaningless to communities. But in contemporary usage, terms like Asian Australian had been reclaimed by some community members, who use it to express the **hybridity** and complexity of their lived experiences, as well as create a sense of solidarity with other communities who experience racism in Australia. This act of communities reclaiming terms imposed onto them can therefore be seen as an act of reclaiming control over their own narratives.[xvii]

Beyond these nuances, people's experiences are also shaped by multiple forces and forms of social categorisation, such as gender, sexuality, class, disability, age, and visa/citizenship status. These combine to create experiences and identities that are lived and perceived in unique ways, and can at times result in distinct and compounding harms and traumas.[xviii] For instance, some Asian communities may carry past trauma from the racism that they experienced in their migration journey, or from the region that they migrated from, which can compound the harms that they experience when they again face systemic racism in Australia.

These social forces and different contexts intersect and inform people's lives. As such, there is no single way that a person exists in the world, nor is there only one single mechanism that produces institutional and systemic inequalities and inequities.[xix] **Intersectionality**, as a conceptual framework conceived by African American academic Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, proposes that the intersections of these social categories reflect broader structural patterns of power and privilege.[xx] In Australia, these systemic patterns of power and privilege are inevitably rooted in settler colonialism.

For example, an intersectional lens is crucial for us to understand the gendered dimensions of anti-Asian racism. Rather than biologically determined, gender is experienced, expressed, and shaped through discourses. It encompasses a wide spectrum of identities that goes beyond the binary categories of men and women.[xxi] Yet, colonial structures and institutions in Australia are developed based on a binary and rigid view of gender and sexual orientation. This approach to understanding gender means that the policies and services offered by these institutions tend to centre the experiences of people who are cisgender and heterosexual. In effect, these

practices actively seek to erase and repress the existence of people of diverse genders and sexual orientations, including people who are non-binary, transgender, agender, gender non-conforming, and gender diverse.

Wiradjuri transgender/non-binary academic Professor Sandy O'Sullivan argues that this narrow framework of gender was forcibly imposed onto Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as part of settler colonialism. It seeks to control and manage First Nations people under a colonial order that reduces inherent human differences into binary categories.[xxii] This colonial order disrupts various Indigenous societal structures, which are built around diverse and unique Indigenous identities.[xxiii] Colonial control over genders has been met with the ongoing resistance of transgender rights activists and scholars, whose tireless advocacy has, for example, led institutions to begin acknowledging the diverse spectrum of genders.

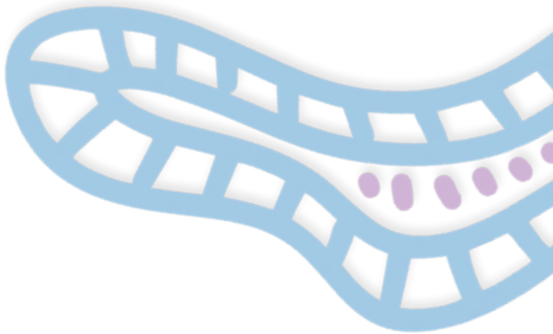
Researchers like Austin Tseng noted that this binary understanding of genders, as a product of colonialism, is entrenched in Australian society and perpetuates transphobia and homophobia. They further observed that the gender hierarchy in Australia is racialised, in that white men and white women are positioned in the most dominant and secondary positions respectively, while expressions of Asian masculinities and femininities are portrayed as inferior.[xxiv] For example, in colonial white imaginations, such as those reflected in movies and other creative works, Asian women are often looked upon as objects of pity or desire, and Asian men stigmatised as either lacking desire or being full of it in a perverse way.[xxv] These Orientalist portrayals of communities show how narratives about Asian and Asian Australian communities are often shaped by a combination of racism, sexism, and colonialism.

A person's experiences and identities might therefore be influenced by the complex interactions between different social forces, narratives, and contexts. Making generalisations or assumptions about people's experiences prevents us from taking a community centric approach to anti-racism. It is also crucial to recognise that communities have long been articulating, exploring, and expressing their diverse identities and perspectives through different forms of storytelling. Centring the voices and experiences of Asian and Asian Australian communities would therefore require us to honour individuals' self-identification, amplify community-led storytelling and efforts that resist harmful and racist narratives, and represent peoples' experiences with care and sensitivity.

Anti-racism and solidarity

Anti-Asian discourses and systemic racism are products of settler colonialism and white supremacy, and racism functions to maintain white control and dominance over Aboriginal lands. It is therefore crucial that anti-racism action supports community efforts in reclaiming control over narratives about them. This includes centring the lived experiences, perspectives, resistance, and strength of Asian and Asian Australian communities in any anti-racism efforts.

It is also important to note that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' strength, leadership, and ongoing resistance against settler colonialism and racism have long been guiding anti-racism action by non-Indigenous negatively racialised communities. Given the settler position of Asian and Asian Australian communities, any work to tackle anti-Asian racism, and anti-racism efforts more broadly, must also centre First Nations sovereignty, self-determination, and truth-telling with a commitment to anti-colonial action.



References

[i] For the purpose of this project, the scope of 'Asia' discussed is limited to the regions of East, Southeast, and South Asia, and did not substantively cover other regions of Asia that are conventionally studied in fields including Middle Eastern Studies and Central Asian Studies.

[ii] Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

[iii] Ibid.

[iv] Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (Routledge, 1998).

[v] Ibid.

[vi] Chelsea Watego, *Another Day in the Colony* (University of Queensland Press, 2021).

[vii] Ibid.

[viii] Andonis Piperoglou and Zora Simic, 'Their Own Perceptions: Non-Anglo Migrants and Aboriginal Australia' (2022) 53(4) *Australian Historical Studies* 519.

[ix] Chelsea Watego (n 6).

[x] Edward W. Said, Orientalism (Penguin Random House, 1978).

[xi] Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (Free Press, 1963).

[xii] Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Routledge, 1972).

[xiii] Ghassan Hage (n 4).

[xiv] Ibid.

[xv] Chelsea Watego (n 6).

[xvi] Jacqueline Lo, Tseen Khoo and Helen Gilbert, 'New formations in Asian-Australian cultural politics' (2000) 24(65) *Journal of Australian Studies* 1.

[xvii] Ibid, 2.

[xviii] Australian Human Rights Commission, *National Anti-Racism Framework Scoping Report* (Scoping Report, 6 December 2022) 60 <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/race-discrimination/publications/national-anti-racism-framework-scoping-report>.

[xix] Ibid.

[xx] Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color' (1991) 43(6) *Stanford Law Review* 1241.

[xxi] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990).

[xxii] Sandy O'Sullivan, 'The Colonial Project of Gender (and Everything Else)' (2021) 5(3) *Genealogy* 67. See also, Bronwyn Carlson et al, *The Routledge Handbook of Australian Indigenous Peoples and Futures* (Routledge, 2023).

[xxiii] Ibid.

[xxiv] Austin Tseng, '"Angry Asian Aussies": Asian-Australian Online Masculinities in the Meme Age', *Peril Mag* (online, 12 April 2020) <https://peril.com.au/back-editions/edition-41-aai7/angry-asian-aussies/>.

[xxv] Ibid.