Men, difference and racism

If we pay attention to race and ethnicity, what does this mean for the men's movement, for the development of communities of men, and for our understandings of masculinity? Michael Flood offers an outline.

THE time is ripe for a recognition of diversity among men, by activists in the men's movement and by theorists of masculinity. Let us learn from, rather than repeat the early mistakes of, the women's movements, so that we can develop an inclusive and anti-racist pro-feminism.

Second-wave feminism began in Western countries in the late 1960s. Although different strands of feminism asserted differing explanations for women's situation, all agreed that women shared a common oppression.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the claims of feminism to represent equally all women, to speak for a common 'sisterhood', were being challenged. The writings and actions of working-class women, women of colour, lesbians and older women proposed a feminist critique of feminism—a critique that was both *within* and *against* feminism.

White Western feminism was criticised for attempting to universalise the experiences of white (and often middle-class) women in advanced capitalist countries, and for failing to engage with questions of racism. Black, non-Anglo and Third World feminists argued against the idea that gender was necessarily the most fundamental oppression. They proclaimed that race and ethnicity, racism and colonialism were at least as important in shaping women's (and men's) lives.

Race is gendered, and gender is raced. Sexism and racism overlap and intersect, and this intersection is now the subject of a rich and fertile feminist literature.

The insights gained from this shift in feminist theory have profound implications for our vision of men and masculinity. At the simplest level, we must recognise that men of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds have different experiences of masculinity. 'Being a man' means different things in different cultures and among different ethnic groups.

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This simple fact means that that we can not talk or write about 'the male role', as if there were only one model in Australian society of how to be a man. Instead, there are multiple masculinities, with some dominant and some subordinate or marginalised. There are different ways of 'doing masculinity', and different masculinities stand in different relations to power.

The dominant image of masculinity with which we in Australia are presented, is of a *white* masculinity. Popular culture places the lives of white, Anglo-Celtic men at centre stage, while those of men from non-English-speaking backgrounds and men of colour are marginalised or made invisible.

This white (and heterosexual and usually middle-class) masculinity is often what people mean when they talk about 'the male role'.

"Look Mr Smith, about the question on your skin colour, 'pink' is *not* a recognised answer."

White is a colour

FOR men, our gender has long been invisible to us. We look in the mirror and see a 'human being', a generic person. But with the emergence of the women's movement nearly three decades ago, this gender-blind vision became more difficult. Masculinity was re-imagined as socially produced and historically specific, and as a social problem rather than 'just the way things are'.

This same process must also happen with race and ethnicity. Michael Kimmel in *Men, masculinities and social theory* describes a confrontation in a feminist seminar between a white woman and a black woman, over whether ➤

The dominant perspectives in the movement and the literature explain only dominant white masculinity while representing it as universal.

➤ their similarities as women were greater than their racial differences.

"The white woman asserted that the fact that they were both women bonded them, despite racial differences. They shared a common oppression as women, and were both 'sisters under the skin'. The black woman disagreed.

"'When you wake up in the morning and look in the mirror, what do you see?' she asked.

"'I see a woman', replied the white woman hopefully.

"'That's precisely the problem', replied the black woman. 'I see a black woman. For me race is visible every minute of every day, because it is how I am *not* privileged in this culture. Race is invisible to you which is why our alliance will always feel false and strained to me.'"

White people have a personal stake in anti-racism. White people do not experience ourselves as unique, specific or valuable. We are 'whitewashed' out of our specific cultural, ethnic and national identities, and we lose our particular cultural heritages. As Harry Brod writes in *Changing Men*'s special issue on black masculinity, "This perpetuates the illusion that a monolithic, homogenous "white" culture exists, in contrast to which third world cultures appear as deviations—either disdained as inferior or romanticized as exotic."

The taken-for-granted and dominant character of 'whiteness' is crucial to racism. Here is Brod again: "The delusion that we are simply "white" is part of what keeps racism so firmly rooted, as it allows the perpetuation of whiteness as the dominant, normative culture."

Diversity and racism

"CULTURAL diversity" is the title of this *XY*'s special feature. But the word *diversity* doesn't necessarily suggest a key aspect of the relations between men of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. That key aspect is power. Men of different backgrounds have differential access to social resources and social status.

The experience of Aboriginal men is a brutal example of this. Aboriginal men's high rates of imprisonment, deaths in custody, poor health and education, poverty and unemployment are a testimony to the legacy of dispossession and racism.

Black American men are excluded from employment and therefore cannot assume a traditional masculine role as provider. Poverty and racism have a profound effect on the lives of indigenous and non-English-speaking-background (NESB) men in Australia too. As Kenneth Clatterbaugh writes in his book *Contemporary perspectives on masculinity*, "The message to black men from patriarchy is to "be a man"; the message from capitalism is "no chance.""

Men of colour have criticised the dominant perspectives in the men's movement and the masculinity literature, for explaining only dominant white masculinity while representing it as universal. Kenneth Clatterbaugh summarises the black American critique: "just as the dominant masculinity is shaped by privilege and antiblack racism, black masculinity is shaped by poverty and oppression."

White men's black man

IDEAS about masculinity are central to the history of Western colonialism. Lynne Segal's book *Slow motion: changing masculinities, changing men* describes mid-nineteenth-century ideas of the white English gentleman as superior being, bringing civilisation to the world's inferior races. Black men were imagined to be 'primitive' and highly sexualised beasts, savage and sexual.

Similar notions of black men were central to the lynching of thousands of black men in the United States. These executions were justified in terms of the protection of white womanhood, but in fact it was black womanhood that was being systematically violated by white men.

The legacy of colonialism in Western countries is obvious. The mid-1970s witnessed a resurgence of racism for example in North America and Britain, according to Lynne Segal. Bush's re-election as President depended in part on the criminalisation of the image of black men. Youth crime and black youth were made synonymous in the UK, in the context of increasing poverty, police brutality and state racism. Stereotypes of black men as studs and rapists persist in popular culture.

Fighting racism is therefore also about fighting dominant images of men and masculinity, such as racist fantasies of black sexuality which are oppressive to women and men alike.

Racism informs our images and treatment of women. As Jan Pettman writes in *Living in the margins: racism, sexism and feminism in Australia*, Aboriginal women may be portrayed as loose and easy, and Asian women as sexually exotic, passive and used to male domination. These and other minority women are subject to sexualised racial harassment and public intrusions.

Race, power, theory

THE recognition of differences and divisions among men complicates and unsettles our analyses of men's power. Gendered power is intersected by race power and class power.

If men are to build brotherhood, we must come to terms with our diversity.

Men of colour and from NESB backgrounds are clearly not the beneficiaries of patriarchal capitalism in the same way as other men. Several US writers describe young black men as an "endangered species", pointing to their chronic unemployment, poor educational achievement, participation in crime, poor health and high rates of homicide. On the other hand, in focusing only on diversity, we run the risk of losing sight of men's power as a gender.

The acknowledgement of race and ethnicity also unsettles earlier feminist analyses and strategies to do with the labour market, families and violence. Pettman describes for example the complex political issues surrounding violence in Aboriginal

communities. Naming Aboriginal men's violence may reinforce racist images, and seeking the protection of the state is problematic especially for Aboriginal women—state intrusion in their communities is chronic already, and imprisonment is dangerous. While feminism has enabled the breaking of silences about family violence, Aboriginal women are aware of the care which must be taken in naming the violence.

In a more profound way, the 'discovery' in feminist theory of difference has led to the questioning of the category "Woman". Poststructuralist and postmodern feminisms have risen to prominence in feminist theory, asserting alternative ways of understanding truth, identity, power and gender. I will leave a discussion of this development for another day, but let me say that postmodern feminism offers rich resources for theorists of men and masculinity.

A men's politics?

THERE are relatively few men of colour and NESB men in the Australian men's movement. I could be totally wrong about this; ethnicity and cultural difference can remain invisible if they are not openly named, and I may be doing the classic ethnocentric trick of assuming that everyone is from an English-speaking background.

If there are few men of colour and NESB men in the movement, why is this? I have a few guesses. It could be that the issues with which much of the men's movement is concerned—personal healing and emotional expressiveness—are secondary concerns for men dealing with poverty, unemployment and cultural dislocation. It could be that the movement is relatively young, and like many social movements it has begun with white, middle-class and educated people. It could be that the ethnocentric perspectives on men in the movement make men from other backgrounds feel excluded and unwelcome.

However, there are several promising signs among men's groups around Australia. 'Anti-racism' is likely to become Men Against Sexual Assault's fourth guiding principle in the next few months. (The other three are 'male-positive', 'pro-feminist' and 'gay-affirmative'. See my discussion of these in *XY*, Summer 1993–1994). 'Anti-racism' was recently adopted by America's main progressive men's organisation, the National Organisation of Men Against Sexism (NOMAS).

Some men's groups around Australia draw on the indigenous wisdom of Aboriginal cultures, often through the participation of Aboriginal elders. For example, a three-day retreat titled "Creativity, indigenous wisdom and the masculine spirit" was just held near Lismore. Native American and Eastern spiritual perspectives are also used.

We can learn much from men of other cultures, and from the indigenous perspectives of non-western societies. I think of my friendship with Schuman, an Indonesian and Muslim man, who taught me plenty about the representation in western media of Muslims as terrorists and fanatics, and the way this construction of a dangerous 'Other' is used to justify military imperialism.

I want to sound a note of caution too. We need to avoid speaking for other cultures, romanticising them or being uncritical of those aspects of other cultures or masculinities that are oppressive to women or other groups.

Intimacy and difference

ONE of the most important goals of the men's movement is to break down men's isolation. Our task is to create coalitions and communities that support and nourish men, without doing so at the expense of women or men of diverse ethnicities, sexualities and classes.

If men are to build brotherhood, we must come to terms with our diversity. As Harry Brod writes, "A truer intimacy comes from recognizing rather than ignoring differences. The themes of our commonalities as men must be interwoven with, not abstracted from, our differences."

I will leave the final words to a man of colour, Michael-David Gordon: "Can you make knowing who I am desperately vital to your life? Can you live and act as though my freedom and yours are intrinsically linked? Can you join me in raging at a system that is in place basically for your comfort? Are you willing to give up your seat of power to see me, this "other man", and call my name? *Can you trust me with your life?"* ●

Suggested further reading

Albrecht, Lisa and Brewer, Rose M. (eds) *Bridges of power: women's multicultural alliances.*

Beam, Joseph (ed) *In the life: a black gay anthology.*

Brod, Harry (ed) *A mensch among men: explorations in Jewish masculinity.*

Bulkin, Elly et.al *Yours in struggle: feminist perspectives on racism and anti-semitism.*

Changing Men, Special issue: Masculinity and Multiculturalism, No. 26, Summer/Fall 1993.

Collins, Patricia Hill *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment.*

Duneier, Mitchell *Slim's table: race, respectability and masculinity.*

Hooks, Bell *Talking back: thinking feminist/thinking black.*

James, Stanlie M. *Theorising black feminisms: the visionary pragmatism of black women.*

Lester, Joan Steinau *The future of white men, and other diversity dilemmas.*

Madhubuti, Haki R. *Black men: obsolete, single, dangerous?.*

Majors, Richard and Mancinin, Janet *Cool pose: the dilemmas of black manhood in America.*

Mercer, Kobena and Julien, Isaac "Race, sexual politics and black masculinity: a dossier", in Chapman, Rowena and Rutherford, Jonathan (eds) *Male order—unwrapping masculinity.*

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, Russo, Ann and Torres, Lourdes *Third world women and the politics of feminism.*

Moraga, Cherrie and Anzaldua, Gloria (eds) *This bridge called my back: writings by radical women of colour.*

Pettman, Jan J. *Living in the margins: racism, sexism and feminism in Australia.*

Smith, Barbara (ed) *Home girls: a black feminist anthology.*