

**CENTRE FOR WOMEN'S STUDIES & GENDER RESEARCH
RESEARCH SEMINAR**

WED 29 APRIL 2.15PM – 4.15PM

PSI School Library, Menzies Building Rm W1010, Clayton Campus.

Reproducing the White Nation: The Politics of Gender and Sexuality During the Howard Years

Barbara Baird, Department of Women's Studies, Flinders University.

This paper is drawn from the introduction to a book which I am writing, the outcome of an ARC funded research project. The project began as an investigation of current ways in which discourses of race and nation were shaping gender and sexuality politics. It has now morphed into a book that looks back to a time just passed, from the vantage point of a time which has not yet become knowable, yet nevertheless feels different. The paper sets out my proposition that the Howard years were a time when our sense of ourselves with respect to gender and sexuality was significantly rewritten. Debate and cultural anxiety about motherhood, fatherhood, the care of children and the rights of sexual minorities occupied significant public space during this period. Further, racial meanings, and their relation to national identity, are crucial in understanding the stakes of these changes. This is not to say debates about abortion, or the recognition of same sex relationships, or the politics of gang rape, as examples, can be reduced to the politics of race and nation but that our understanding of gender and sexuality issues is diminished if we do not consider their interweaving with ideas about race and nation. Similarly, the insistence on race and nation as discourses through which gender and sexuality were understood is not to say that all shifts in these politics were to the right - although many certainly were. The politics of race play across the tensions between neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism in multiple ways. Investigating the meanings of and investments in whiteness as a personal and national identity are central in unpacking the directions present in gender and sexuality political battles.

“Women's Objective—A Perfect Race”: The Women's Movement and the Making of White Australia, 1900-1930s

Jane Carey, Monash Fellow within the Centre for Women's Studies & Gender Research and the Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies.

This paper emerges from a nearly completed ARC project which explores how ideas about race operated in the Australian women's movement, and informed constructions of white womanhood, from 1880-1940. My central argument is that, while exhibiting remarkably little interest in the 'Aboriginal problem', or the 'peril' of Asian immigration, racial foundations of the movement were primarily reflected in their

investments in 'whiteness'. The major causes they took up in social welfare, education and public health all promoted the importance of white racial improvement for national progress. They equally revolved around desires to increase both the quantity and quality of white Australians, and enforce bodily controls in the intimate domains of sexuality, reproduction, and child rearing. These (vigorous) campaigns around the 'problems' confronting the white population reveal how racialised thinking in fact permeated the movement and animated many of its endeavours. Indeed, their reforming campaigns revolved almost entirely around anxieties internal to whiteness. And women's work was presented as essential to implementing these racial programs. To illustrate these points, my paper will draw on examples from the National Council of Women, Australia's largest women's group of this period, and its campaigns around 'mental deficiency' and white/British immigration; the Child Study Association founded in Sydney in 1906 and the School for Mothers founded in Adelaide in 1909 (which were concerned with the production of healthy white children); and the Racial Hygiene Association founded in Sydney in 1926, a female-dominated group with a broad eugenic agenda. More broadly, I hope to shed light on the particular investment in whiteness which was, and is, foundational to the settler societies produced by British imperialism.