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Migrant women and discrimination in Australia: a tiered narrative study

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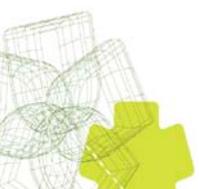
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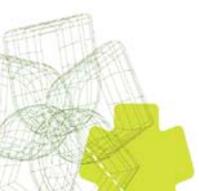


Whilst media representations of race relations in Australia depict a tolerant multicultural society, official records of discrimination, together with public events concerning migrant women, have combined to unsettle this egalitarian view. This article reports on a tiered study which uses the methods of critical race theory to provide insights into the nature and extent of race and gender discrimination experienced by migrant women in Australia. These insights are derived from a first hand narrative account of one migrant woman's experiences of the rental housing market and legal system, and a comparison of her narrative with those told of the same event by one social work and two legal professionals. The study reveals that, although the migrant woman's legal challenges were successful, she experienced serious reprisals related to these challenges, and was involved in a cycle of housing related difficulties which her legal challenges did not address. The comparison of the accounts shows that the professionals' accounts took either a 'telescopic' or 'panoramic' view of these issues. Whilst the panoramic view resulted in a greater awareness of the social context of the migrant woman's housing and legal difficulties, race and gender discrimination were not always identified. The study concludes that the professional and institutional filtration of discrimination means that the view of multicultural tolerance in Australia remains unchallenged.

Introduction

A recent edition of *The Economist* magazine, in a special edition on Australian social and political life, argued that, although immigration in Australia was 'a constant source of controversy', 'generally, race relations are harmonious' and 'Australia seems rather free of xenophobia' (Grimond 2011 p.10-11). The evidence cited is the relative absence of serious race disturbances. Whilst the 2005 Cronulla riots and the attacks on Indian students in Melbourne in 2010 were mentioned in the article, these were regarded as exceptional incidents in an otherwise calm and uneventful multicultural history.

This study draws on poststructuralist theories of representation, and the documentary methods of critical race theory, to present a different view of race relations in Australia. This view challenges the ideal of social unity, and of the neutrality of institutional practices, by telling the story of a migrant woman who experienced serious discrimination-related difficulties in Australia. In so doing, this study, which is drawn from a wider group of nine migrant women, exposes the differences between the public script of Australia as a race tolerant society and the daily, lived experiences of migrant women.



The paper links the story of Binou, an Ethiopian woman, and her difficulties in the housing market in Melbourne, with the story of Vivian Solon, the Philipino-born Australian citizen wrongly deported from Australia in 2001. Although Ms Solon's story was a well-publicised event, and Binou's was not known to the wider public, both accounts tell of serial discriminatory actions experienced by migrant women. In both cases the women were the victims of cultural stereotypes and assumptions, and both suffered severe hardship resulting from these beliefs. In this paper I suggest that the assumptions underlying Ms Solon's deportation are not unusual in the lives of migrant women.

The paper begins with the difficulty of recognizing covert discrimination, and recounts the story of Vivian Solon. This story introduces the themes of the study and contextualizes the discussion of the critical race methods used to document instances of race and gender exclusion. After an account of this research method, I give Binou's account of her experiences in the rental housing market in Melbourne.

Binou's story is followed by the reactions of the legal and social work professionals who read her story. Taken together, these accounts provide a view of the event told from four perspectives. The analysis of these responses shows that they can be classified as either 'panoramic' or 'telescopic', according to their contextualization of events in Binou's life within wider cultural narratives of race and gender. The professionals' views, which appear to be highly influenced by their workplace locations, therefore provide significant insights into the ways in which institutions construct their knowledge claims. Its conclusion is that discrimination is a systemic social practice, which is generally unrecognized at professional and institutional levels.

The invisibility of discrimination

The nature and extent of race and gender discrimination experienced by migrant women in Australia is not easy to assess or to quantify. Although some evidence is to be found in the register of complaints about race discrimination made to the Victorian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (VHREOC) in Melbourne, this information gives only a partial account of the problem. Whilst we do know that, in 2008-9, 87 women made complaints about race discrimination, and 14 about race vilification (2009 p.17), we do not know how many women experienced discrimination in the areas of housing, employment, and goods and services provision, as the figures provided refer to



both men and women. Whilst the available figures are unacceptably high, the lack of gender-specific statistics in the VHREOC records means that information about discrimination in the life of migrant women in Australia cannot readily be obtained from this source.

An additional difficulty in obtaining this information is that many discriminatory events will not be reported to the VHREOC. Perhaps the event is regarded as 'too trivial' to be the subject of complaint (Krayem 2003 p. 14), or that the women are unaware of the legal prohibitions against race and/or gender discrimination. It is also possible that the women lack confidence in their English skills or their ability to approach public complaints services. They might also fear reprisals, or believe that making complaints will compromise their residency status.

It is also possible that migrant women do not recognise unfair practices as discrimination. Migrant women who are overcharged by trades people, or who have difficulty in finding work, do not necessarily regard these problems as forms of covert discrimination. Instead, they may be ascribed to issues between individuals, such as personality conflict or cultural difference (McDonald 2005). However, this paper argues for a different stance towards incidents of harassment or unfairness towards migrant women in which such events are interpreted as covert but systemic forms of race and/or gender discrimination.

To introduce these themes, and to provide a context for the study, I begin with the story of Vivian Solon's deportation from Australia to the Philippines in 2001.

Vivian Alvarez Solon was deported on July 18th 2001, following an accident in which she sustained severe head and spine injuries. After the accident, she gave the Philippine honorary consul-general the date of her arrival in Australia and of her marriage to an Australian citizen. Despite this personal identification, and the fact that she appeared on official lists of missing persons, the immigration authorities assumed she was an illegal immigrant and acted decisively. Only three months after the accident, and despite her severe injuries, she was escorted by Australian police to Manila. Representatives of the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration then took her to a Mother Teresa hospice in a regional town. Ms Solon spent the next four years in this hospice, and was discovered only by chance, when her photo on satellite television was recognised by the hospice priest. Without this coincidence she might not have been found.

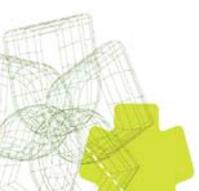
Ms Solon had lived in Australia for thirteen years before her deportation. She was married to an Australian citizen and had two sons. After her expatriation her younger son was raised by foster parents (Jackson 2005).

One notable feature of Vivian Solon's extraordinary story is that the professionals 'erase' her legitimate version of events, even when there is evidence to support them. In this case, the immigration department, the police and the diplomat appear to be acting in accordance with a set of deeply held cultural narratives concerning migrant women. These views include the anti-immigrant attitudes of the time expressed by the Liberal coalition government of Prime Minister John Howard. As a result, Ms Solon's true story is not believed, and she is treated without regard for her welfare. Whilst it is the role of agencies such as the police, the diplomatic service and the immigration department to protect Ms Solon, they all seemed to have acted against her interests.

Similar themes can be found in the story of Binou, and in the stories told by the migrant women in the wider study on which this paper is based. (Bamforth 2008) Whilst they occur in very different contexts, there are similar experiences of erasure, of the denial of police assistance, and of severe and lasting consequences resulting from these actions. However Binou's story, as told in this paper, differs from the previous recount of Vivian Solon's experience. Binou's story is a firsthand account which provides material and personal detail to the outline of events, contextualized within the circumstances of her life at the time. Moreover, it takes a wider time frame to include events beyond the legal outcomes of the case. The effect of this wide-angled account is to give a greater sense of the impact of discriminatory actions on her life.

Documenting racial exclusions with 'counter narratives'

The difficulty of understanding and interpreting the everyday harassment or ill treatment of minority groups has been a subject of interest and concern to academics in the area of critical race theory. These interests, which I share, focus on the difficulties experienced by minority groups in daily life, particularly in their dealings with institutions such as education and the law. According to Zeus Leonardo



Race is an organizing principle that cuts across class, gender and other imaginable social identities...(2004 p.3)

Minority groups therefore face obstacles in areas which people from the majority white culture do not encounter and cannot readily understand (Ross 1996). This discrimination is not visible to the white majority in countries such as the USA and Australia, nor is it named or recognized as discrimination by those who suffer its effects. One reason cited is that, whilst legislation has brought an end to the overt expression of race and/or gender exclusions, these expressions now take a less recognisable, or covert form.

In order to promote recognition of discrimination, critical race theorists have developed the use of 'counter narratives' which describe the everyday exclusions which, they argue, derive from invisible cultural narratives operating throughout public and private life. These counter narratives, which are characterized by their personal, immediate and embodied nature, challenge dominant and accepted patterns of thought. One belief called into question by critical race documentation is the view that societies such as Australia and the USA are race-tolerant, and that institutions are objective and neutral in their dealings across social groups. According to critical race theorists, these views are made possible by the omission of contrary views and opinions (Parker 1998; Parker and Stovall 2004; Stovall 2005; McDonald 2005).

An example of counter narrative documentation is provided by black African American law professor, Taunya Lovell Banks (1995). She described an occasion when she and three other black women entered a lift in a luxury apartment block. As the lift descended it stopped twice, and each time a white woman refused to enter it. Banks describes the incident and her reactions as follows:

Following the first incident, we looked at each other somewhat puzzled; after the second incident we laughed in disbelief, belatedly realising that two women seemed afraid to get into an elevator in a luxury condominium with five well-dressed black women in their thirties and forties. Our laughter, the nervous laugh blacks often express when faced with the blatant or unconscious racism of white America, masked our shock and hurt (1995 p. 331).

In another instance of critical race documentation, Camille Gear Rich (2004) wrote of a legal



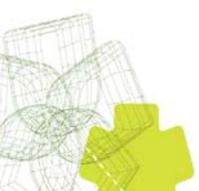
challenge to a staffing agency's practice of excluding applicants with braided hairstyles. Although this regulation effectively excluded black Americans, the race discrimination case against the firm was dismissed, as hairstyles were '...not part of the definition of racial status protected under Title VII' (2004 p. 1137). Rich shows how seemingly innocent choices such as hairstyles can be factors in racial exclusions, and how the law fails to address this exclusion.

By focusing on everyday events, critical race documentation shows the ways in which discrimination is woven invisibly into the social world and potentially affects minority groups in all aspects of their lives. Also, by focusing on the physical and emotional reality of the participants, the stories communicate the material effects of the discrimination they experience. The feelings of 'shock and hurt' included in Banks' elevator story are deliberate reminders of the emotional effects of such exclusion.

Whilst I follow critical race theorists in documenting incidents of racial exclusion, my work differs from theirs in describing, not single acts of discriminatory experience, but a longer-term series of events in the life of Binou, an Ethiopian woman in Australia. In doing so, the story shows the cycle of discrimination to which Binou was subjected, and its effects. A further difference is that I add the commentaries of legal and mediating professionals to Binou's story to allow comparisons to be made between their different perceptions and reactions.

In doing so, I draw upon analytic concepts derived from poststructuralist theories of language: representation, discourse and subjectivity (Weedon 1987). The concept of representation means all narratives, including those of institutions, are representations of experience, rather than direct expressions of a knowable and single reality (Kamler 2001). These representations are themselves constituted by and within larger social discourses, or influential bodies of knowledge. Embedded within these discourses are invisible but powerful attitudes towards race and gender, which materially affect the lives and subjectivity of women in everyday life, and in their encounters with institutions such as the law. This research develops these concepts by using a tiered narrative method providing multiple perspectives on the housing and legal experiences of one migrant woman.

Research method



The study described in this paper is taken from a larger research project (Bamforth 2008) which involved nine migrant women, all non-native speakers of English, who related stories about their legal experiences in hour-long interviews held in their homes or workplaces. The audio taped interviews were later transcribed, using a notation system taken from the work of John Gumpertz and Norine Berenz (1993). This system was chosen as it allowed for the documentation of non-verbal reactions, including expressions of the women's emotional responses.

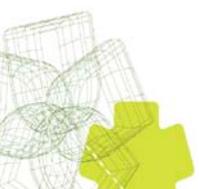
The text of Binou's story in this paper is an edited account taken from these transcripts, augmented with contextual information from the field notes. This final version of this text is designed to provide an embodied and material account of her experiences, in keeping with the beliefs and practices of critical race narratives.

The texts presented to each professional respondent provided a summary of the main events in Binou's story, re-written in narrative form. In order to retain a sense of her presence, quotations from the transcripts were included. These summaries were presented to representatives of both professional groups a week before the interviews in which they provided their responses. The interviews were audio taped, and their main themes noted. The professionals' interviews were carefully documented but were not transcribed in the same detailed way as Binou's; the intention was to foreground the story which is generally less heard.

Critical race documentation in practice: Binou's housing market experiences

The following section introduces Binou and provides a narrativised text taken from her account of her experiences in the rental housing market. It is told in three parts. The first part concerns a racially motivated assault in a Ministry of Housing apartment block, and the difficulty Binou faced in proving this event had taken place. The second and third parts concern landlord deception in two separate houses in the private housing market, and recount the story of Binou's two subsequent legal interventions.

Binou, a thirty seven year old Ethiopian woman and TAFE media student, was a single mother with four small daughters. Her modern house in a leafy street had a heavy security door with a complicated lock, and barred windows. The interview took place in the sitting room whilst Binou's



daughters played in the adjoining dining room. The orderly rooms were carefully furnished and decorated: there were large toy lions on the white chairs in the sitting room and family photos over the fireplace.

I. When Binou arrived in Australia she lived in a Ministry of Housing flat where she was the only African and non-Muslim. She was not welcomed by her neighbours who threw rubbish at her door and made threatening gestures. She asked the Ministry of Housing if she could be moved, but was told that she would need to prove eligibility by providing a doctor's certificate as evidence of physical harm. Then, one night, she was abused and assaulted by a neighbour. He screamed 'You are a bloody black bitch...I will kill you'. He kicked her in the stomach. She was eight months pregnant at the time.

Binou's distress as she recalled this scene was palpable:

I was so scared to go back, I didn't want anyone to go back, no, we can't go back there, it's such a scary thing. I couldn't pass through that place but then where should we go, we have to stay until we find something. There is nothing that has been done, truly speaking...

A neighbour called an ambulance and the police. Binou noted the name of one policeman from his badge and the second gave his name to her husband. The next day, in hospital, Binou was visited by a social worker who offered to assist her with an appeal to the Ministry of Housing for a change of flat. She was told that both police and ambulance reports of the incident would be needed by the Ministry to prove her case.

When Binou and the social worker asked the police station for a report, the police denied their attendance: 'There is nothing written. There is no report about that place'. She found that her knowledge of the policemen's names had no effect and responded: 'Do you believe it?' 'What! I have been kicked. What if I had died? There is nothing...'

The social worker did her best with an appeal to the Ministry for a change of flat, but as she was not able to provide the relevant documentation the appeal was refused. However, after Binou's daughter was racially abused in the grounds and thrown from her bike, Binou felt that she had no choice but to move into the private rental market. She lost confidence in the public housing sector after the Ministry's representative said to her: '[It] doesn't matter, you're not paying a cent'.

II. Binou then rented a house from a private estate agent which needed some vital repairs such as a lock on the front door. When Binou rang the agent about these repairs she was often put on hold and fobbed off with excuses. After five months elapsed, Binou consulted the Victorian Tenants Union who assisted her with an appeal against the landlord. The tribunal found in her favour: the landlord was ordered to install a security door and make other repairs.

Despite this court order, no repairs were made. The landlord claimed he was paying 'big money' for school fees and was not able to afford them. Binou found this excuse outrageous: 'I am paying the rent here and secondly it's a court decision'. After three years, repairs had not been carried out and Binou decided to leave. However, the landlord then took *her* to court, claiming a repair bill of \$2,800 for Binou's 'damage' to the property. He claimed that the repairs had been made, but that the 'new' door and other improvements he had supposedly made had been 'broken' by Binou. The bill for these 'repairs' came to \$2,800. Binou said she cried when she realized how she had been doubly cheated by the landlord.

The landlord had manufactured documentary evidence to support his claim as Binou, ignorant of tenancy procedures, had signed a blank condition report at the beginning of her tenancy. The agent/landlord had then filled in a list of supposed damages. Binou's signature appeared to indicate that she concurred with this report. By chance, Binou had kept, and produced in court, her own copy of the condition report, which did not include damages. She had also kept the court's original repair order. The court accepted her evidence and once more found in her favour. Although she was very pleased with the outcome, Binou was distressed during the hearing and she noted that '...instead of talking I am like crying'.

Binou believed that she had little power in this rental situation: 'I am in the hands of the agent and the landlord. I have no rights. I have, I have got no rights'. She felt that she would always need to go to court to recover bond money or to require landlords

to make repairs. Her voice was unsteady and she appeared close to tears as she said this.

III. Binou's third rental nightmare occurred when she rented a house from a private landlord. When she left, the landlord retained the bond money and asked for an additional \$200.00 for cleaning the carpet, doing the gardening and replacing items such as light globes. The landlord also claimed that the whole house needed repainting as there were handprints on one wall. He told Binou it would be useless for her to make a legal objection, as the court, knowing she had four children, would expect there to be damage. He said she should pay 'to keep out of trouble'. She did so, because she 'was scared...very confused and angry'. She then contacted the Victorian Tenants Union who instigated a tribunal hearing.

Binou said the house and garden were in perfect order, but at this hearing the landlord brought estimates of the cost of repairs, and backed up his claims with photographs showing dirt and disorder. These photos, Binou said, were undated and probably taken after the previous tenant's departure. The tribunal did not accept the landlord's claims and ordered a repayment of the bond and the additional payment. Binou said she was pleased with the outcome: 'I felt like there is a law'. However, she later received a threatening phone call from the landlord. He said 'You better watch out, Miss, I know you have little ones and you just watch out, take care'.

At the time of the interview Binou had received her bond money but not the overpayment. The Victorian Tenants Union was still assisting her with this claim.

Despite the positive legal outcome to her problems Binou felt that her life had not improved. She suffers anxiety about her future in rented accommodation and the security of her family: 'I was free before...[now] I even scared to open the window because I have got kids'.

Binou contacted me later to say that her children had suffered racist taunts at the local school and that she had brought a complaint to the Victorian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. She herself was suffering from depression and had contemplated suicide.

A critical race interpretation of Binou's story

Binou's story tells of only one overt experience of racist attack – the physical and verbal assault in the Ministry of Housing compound. However, critical race theory enables a reading of other events in her story as related to race and/or gender discrimination. These are manifested, not as overt forms of discrimination, but covertly as erasure, entrapment, stereotyping, and as counter attack.

The women in the wider study also experienced erasure and entrapment as part of their discriminatory treatment, or as a reaction to their legal challenges. It was not uncommon for them to find that material needed for legal proof had simply 'disappeared'. In Binou's case, the absence of police records, and the manipulation of documentary evidence by an estate agent and two landlords, appears as deliberate acts of deception.

The women who experienced these forms of erasure found it deeply frustrating and expressed their sense of injustice in the strongest terms. Gloria Ladson Billings, a critical race theorist, argues that such removal of evidence or the denial of injustice, is a way of maintaining white supremacy (1998 p. 28). When minority groups challenge this supremacy with their own views and narratives, these are 'muted and erased' (1998 p. 30).

Binou also suffered discrimination in the form of threats and entrapment. Whilst it might be expected that making a legal claim brings about the possibility of reprisals, the accusations and threats she received were menacing responses to her justified legal challenges. As she experienced threats related to the safety of her children, she lived in a house with high level security, which she was afraid to leave. Both she and the children led physically and socially restricted lives as a result of their fears.

Another common theme in the women's stories was the assumption by others that, as migrants, the women would or could not claim the law's protection. These views, in which migrant women are seen as 'other' (Bird 1988), render them vulnerable to exploitation. Binou commented:

[they] might think that I am from a different country so I can't speak English or communicate, so they try to trick you and make you scared a bit.

Three women, including Binou, also reported that white Australian males claimed possession of the law, and that migrant women were outside its ambit. Binou's estate agent, for example, told her that 'The law is in our hands'. Whilst Binou did not believe this claim, in other circumstances such statements might be effective in discouraging migrant women from taking legal action.

This longer term account of Binou's legal experiences show that, though she was successful in making her legal claims, her life did not change for the better. Not only did she suffer hardships related to her legal challenges, but she experienced a cycle of discriminatory acts which the law was unable to address. This was a common theme in the stories of the other migrant women in the study¹

The professionals' perspectives on Binou's story

These stories were read and commented on by two legal professionals and one social worker. They were all highly responsive to Binou's story and showed a compassionate interest in her welfare. However, their responses differed markedly. Sarah, a legal expert in housing and consumer affairs, regarded Binou's story as a legal success, whereas Alexandra, a lawyer from a human rights organisation, and Julie, a social worker from a tenants support group found it described the failure of institutions to assist and protect Binou.

¹ Gaia, 73 year old disabled woman, originally from Austria, was dependent on an electric scooter for her everyday needs and to support her brain-damaged son. She took legal action against the scooter company after their mechanic overcharged her for repairs and failed to maintain its safety standards. As a result of inadequate servicing the scooter ceased to work on two occasions, once on train lines and once in traffic. Although Gaia received a new scooter on condition that she abandon the court hearing, her new scooter 'jackknifed' and threw her onto a concrete driveway. She then engaged a 'no win no pay' legal firm to assist her with a new claim against the scooter company.



The magistrate's response

Sarah, who comes from a non-Anglo migrant background and is bi-lingual, has encountered racist attitudes in the legal profession in the past, but believes that such views are now outmoded. She attributes this change to an acceptance of multiculturalism, to the effects of legal feminist studies on the practices of the law, and to the greater proportion of women in the legal profession.

In responding to Binou's story, Sarah focused primarily on the legal successes she achieved. She regarded this as an example of the law's responsiveness to migrant and multicultural issues. She commented: 'This story reflects the fact that a lot of work has gone into marrying up law and cultural awareness'. However, Sarah was not responsive to Binou's continuing difficulties in the housing market, to the erasure of her evidence or to the difficulties of proving her legal claims. Nor was she aware of any discrimination issues. When asked "What race or gender issues do you see in the story" she replied 'There will always be gender issues'. In Sarah's view, given the inevitability of gender discrimination in the world, its presence in Binou's story was unremarkable.

Although Sarah was highly sympathetic to Binou, and felt that those who exploit and deceive others should be 'hit hard in the hip pocket', she believed that individuals are responsible for protecting themselves, as there is little the law can really do about dishonest or discriminatory trading practices.

The lawyer's response

Alexandra is a lawyer with a human rights organisation. Her role is specifically to address systemic discrimination in the wider community through the implementation of social and legal reforms.

Alexandra's views differed from Sarah's insofar as they included the wider context of Binou's story – before, during and after the legal events. From this perspective she viewed Binou's story, not as a legal success, as did Sarah, but as an experience which actually 'made things worse' for Binou. The reason for this is that the legal solutions did not address the issues which caused her housing



problems, as these were related to ‘systemic forms of racial discrimination’. Alexandra was highly aware of the significance of this discrimination and its impact on individual lives:

There is the impact of day to day comments, negative behaviour, treatment that’s based on racism, so the cumulative effect of those small, otherwise not very significant pieces of behaviour towards you, accumulate and have an overall impact – it’s going to have a huge effect on people’s health and well-being.

Whereas Sarah believed that individuals needed to ensure their own protection, Alexandra felt that Binou was powerless to protect herself against people and institutions with greater status and influence. In addition, and in contrast to Sarah, Alexandra felt that the law’s duty was to address discrimination, as it is the role of such institutions to ensure that society is just, and that people feel confident in the law’s protection. In her view, all the institutions which Binou had called on for assistance, including the police, had failed her.

Alexandra also disagreed with Sarah about the satisfactory nature of Binou’s legal challenges. Whilst Sarah felt that her success had shown the law’s responsiveness to migrant women, Alexandra was aware of the difficulties facing migrant women who bring legal actions, and believed it is unfair to expect the weaker, or the injured party, to initiate legal challenges. A further difficulty facing them – one illustrated by Binou’s story - is the difficulty of providing material proof of discrimination in ways that are satisfactory to the law. According to Alexandra, the best approach to this is to bypass the law entirely by changing public attitudes and practices. Anti-discrimination measures, she argues, deserve the same level of exposure and support as public education programs such as the drink driving or the anti-smoking campaigns.

The social worker’s response

The final response to Binou’s story was given by Julie, a social worker with a tenants support group. According to Julie, her work concerns both consumer and tenancy issues, but the latter is an ‘overwhelmingly’ significant part of her role.



Julie related Binou's difficulties primarily to the government's reluctance to regulate the private housing market. This factor, combined with the pressures on public housing, has a serious impact on lower-income tenants such as Binou. An additional influence on perceptions of Binou relate to the role of the media in influencing public opinion. Julie argued that negative representations of tenants affected the perceptions and reactions of magistrates and the law in their dealings with tenants in the courtroom. The result was that the landlords' version of events was favoured over that of the tenants.

Julie said that Binou's problems were 'appalling' but not uncommon. The issue with the blank condition report was 'not unusual' and she was familiar with the refusal of landlords to comply with court orders. Julie felt strongly that it was the responsibility of the law to enforce their compliance, and it was a major weakness that it failed to do so.

Like Alexandra, Julie showed interest in Binou's life before and after the event itself and to its physical and emotional effects. Julie also showed understanding of discrimination against lower income tenants, who were exploited by landlords and agents. In turn, these bodies were supported by a legal system which protected private property ownership. It is therefore understandable, she said, that individuals and organizations such as a tenants support group have a limited effect on problems within the larger housing market.

Julie's response was similar to Alexandra's in situating Binou's story within greater systems of power and influence such as the media, government and law. Julie understood that, as a young and unsupported migrant woman, Binou was vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination within this system, and her legal challenges were unlikely to effect long-term change. However, whilst Julie was aware of exclusionary factors in the housing market, she referred to race discrimination only once. When asked why Binou had such difficulties with landlords, Julie said 'She looks different'.

Characteristics of the professionals' responses: panoramic and telescopic views

The differences between the professional views of Binou's housing and legal difficulties may be



described as either ‘panoramic’ or as ‘telescopic’. The responses which provide a social context, together with a longer-term view, may be seen as the more panoramic, and those which focus on a legal outcome alone, may be described as telescopic. In the wider study, the legal professionals mostly took the latter view, and the social workers the former. However, this was not an entirely strict division, as the responses of the human rights lawyer, Alexandra, for example, had more in common with the social worker Julie than with the legal expert Sarah.

The comparison of the professionals’ views shows that their different foci result in quite different interpretations of the events. For Sarah therefore, Binou’s story was a success, and brought credit to the law, whereas both Julie and Alexandra believed that the law had not been able to help Binou, or to halt the cycle of discriminatory events in her life. In their view, the law had failed Binou. And, unlike Sarah, who believed that it was the duty of individuals to protect themselves against exploitation, Alexandra believed it was the duty of the law ‘to address all her concerns’.

Whilst each professional account highlighted and omitted different aspects of Binou’s experiences, the most significant omission in Julie and Sarah’s accounts is that of race and gender discrimination. Whilst Julie located Binou’s difficulties within a social and legal context, and regarded financial discrimination as an important factor in her life, for Alexandra, race and/or gender discrimination were at the heart of Binou’s difficulties. She regarded these as a system of exclusions rather than unrelated and occasional incidents. The panoramic view taken by Julie and Alexandra also allowed them to see the embodied and long-term effects of Binou’s housing and legal experiences. Whilst Sarah was very sympathetic to Binou, this understanding was not part of her ‘telescopic’ viewpoint.

It appears that the professionals’ views are related both to their academic training and to their workplace locations. Whilst both Sarah and Alexandra have legal backgrounds, Alexandra’s position within a human rights organisation has provided her with additional insights into the practices of discrimination.

Conclusion

The documentary practices of critical race theory are utilized in this study to recount and to analyse the experiences of one migrant woman in the housing market in Australia. Her continuing experiences of discriminatory acts, despite the legal successes she achieved, show the serious and on-going effects of these events on her life. Binou's account also shows that the law is not effective in stemming these discriminatory practices. These insights into her housing and legal issues, and their long-term effects on her life, are obtained by foregrounding her own first hand account of these events.

Although critical race theory enables a reading of Binou's story as one of systemic discrimination related to deep cultural narratives of race and gender exclusion, these readings were not available to two of the three professionals who read her account. This article presents their views as either telescopic or panoramic – related closely to the legal outcomes, or related to larger discourses of exclusion. These views appear to be highly related to the professionals' workplace locations.

Whilst all narratives, according to poststructuralist theories of representation, can be seen as partial and selective, those which are more informed by panoramic perspectives are more helpful in understanding and recognizing the underlying issues. The telescopic approach, even when well intentioned, filters out evidence of discrimination and therefore '...contributes to the insidious denial of racism...' (McDonald 2003 p_10.) in Australia.

As a result, there is a limited public understanding of the impact of race and gender discrimination on the lives of migrant women in Australia, and a limited response to their significance in their daily lives.

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