Intimate Oral Histories: Intercultural Romantic Relationships in Postwar Australia

Rachel Stevens & Seamus O'Hanlon

To cite this article: Rachel Stevens & Seamus O'Hanlon (2018) Intimate Oral Histories: Intercultural Romantic Relationships in Postwar Australia, Australian Historical Studies, 49:3, 359-377

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2018.1486444

Published online: 13 Aug 2018.
This article examines the experiences of individuals in romantic relationships that crossed ethnic, religious or racial lines in post-World War II Australia. Using interviews from the Australian Generations Oral History Project, supplemented by archival and newspaper material, this article examines how broader changes in immigration and the cultural make-up of Australia in the second half of the twentieth century impacted individual Australians, influencing who they could desire, court and love. Through the narration of intimate life stories, this article attempts to capture the emotional experience of individuals whose relationships, while made possible by national policy decisions, still tested and breached social norms and cultural expectations at the personal and familial level.

In contemporary Australia there is widespread acceptance of the right to choose one’s romantic partner without racial barriers or other social restrictions. However, this acceptance is a relatively recent phenomenon, largely an outcome of the move to a more secular society in recent decades. As such, and as Alecia Symonds has observed, love is ‘a historically and socially contingent emotion’ that, while ostensibly a private matter, often involves public acts in which individuals choose to conform or challenge social norms.1 The ability to challenge these norms is also contingent on access to potential partners from different social and cultural backgrounds, and thus reflects changing ideas about who has access to public and social spaces and indeed workplaces, and under what circumstances they can utilise these spaces. Access to such partners is also contingent on wider social and geopolitical issues, including changes in government policies around racially-sanctioned relationships and discriminatory immigration policies. Intercultural intimate relationships are thus intensely personal, but also reflective of broader historical and societal forces. This article presents an account of the increasing prevalence of intercultural intimate relationships within the context of mass migration to Australia in the postwar years, with a focus on the lived experience of those whose love or attraction tested prevailing social conventions. In doing so, this article challenges both

conservative depictions of intermarriage as evidence of assimilation as well as socially progressive interpretations of intercultural intimacy as an unproblematic example of the triumph of multiculturalism over ethnocentrism.

This article has multiple aims. First, to demonstrate that these relationships were and are historically contingent, only made possible by the adoption of a policy of mass immigration to Australia after World War II. Second, to examine how the acceptability or otherwise of such relationships has changed over time. It asks: what relationship categories (racial, religious and cultural) have been normalised, and in turn, how have these changes enabled or accommodated cross-cultural partnering? By looking at specific historical moments over seventy years, we present a history of intimacy that considers the shifting parameters of socially acceptable desire. We seek to explore the lived experience of being in an intercultural relationship and draw attention to forms of agency and power in operation. At times, intimate interpersonal dynamics challenged gendered and racialised stereotypes; at other times, cultural expectations shaped desire and influenced who was considered a suitable partner.

There are inherent difficulties in writing histories of intimate relationships. Although marriages are officially recorded by the state, marriage certificates offer basic information, such as the date and place of the wedding, and names, age, occupation, religious affiliation and residence of the wedded couple. Marriage registration identifies the starting point of the marriage, rather than the experience – and possibly dissolution – of it. Similarly, while historical census data record the incidence of cross-cultural marriage and cohabitation, and this information can be analysed over time and across place, as with any macro data, individual aspects remain hidden. Census data and marriage registration records fail to capture unmarried couples who are not cohabiting, same-sex couples, casual romantic encounters and desires unfulfilled or unreciprocated. Furthermore, the emotional experience is hard to trace as desire lives in one’s imagination and is rarely documented in public records.²

To overcome these obstacles, this article uses interviews from the Australian Generations Oral History Project (2011–14) to understand relationships from the perspectives of those who have lived them, whether successfully or otherwise.³ In the Australian Generations project, 300 people were interviewed about their life histories. The selected participants were broadly representative of Australian society in 2011 in terms of age (with an even spread of people born between 1920 and 1989), gender (slightly over half were women) and place of residence (urban, regional and remote areas, and by state). Just over a quarter of interviewees were born overseas, although most participants were of European ethnic background, and therefore interracial, although not necessarily intercultural,

---

relationships were perhaps under-represented. Nevertheless, with 1,221 hours of digitised interviews, this repository stores a rich catalogue of twentieth-century life histories of a broadly representative sample of Australians. With such a large bank of digitised material, we utilised timed summaries to identify interviews in which intercultural romance and relationships were discussed. From here, we listened to interviews and transcribed relevant passages for analysis. Because we listened to the interviews (as opposed to relying solely on reading transcriptions), we could deduce affect by hearing fluctuations in rhythm and tone, quivering, hesitations in speech and utterances. Through careful listening and reading, the Australian Generations interviews provide valuable access to the private world of individuals who loved across racial, religious and cultural divides.

As an approach, oral history has the capacity to illuminate the varied experiences of being in intercultural relationships, and how this may change across time. Anisa Puri and Alistair Thomson wrote that oral history is especially effective at capturing intimate aspects of everyday life such as love, migration and faith. In addition to narrating life experiences, oral history has the potential to allow participants to reflect on meanings and feelings about significant life experiences, which, in turn, offers the historian insight into the inner world of the interviewee. With histories of romantic love often restricted to text-based analyses (for instance, studies of romantic fiction, love letters, court proceedings), oral history and spoken life narratives offer new perspectives on the nature of intimate relationships.4

Oral history is not without its limitations, however. Given the deeply personal and sensitive nature of narrating one’s life history, historians must be conscious of the social production of memories. Interviewees may inadvertently subsume broader collective memories as part of their individual recollections; contemporary political and social attitudes may similarly influence how past events are told.5 It is acknowledged that recollecting the past is an active, interpretative and creative process, and that memory is partial and selective, particularly if an event had lasting emotional impact. Yet these characteristics of oral history need not restrict our ability to understand the past; rather, it is the uniqueness of this method that provides the opportunity to explore how individuals


made sense of the past, created meaning from events and integrated the past with their present-day world and identities.6

**Intercultural romance in Australian history**

In Australian history, research on intercultural relationships has primarily focused on four related fields: one, Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships; two, European and Chinese encounters; three, Catholic and Protestant intermarriages; and four, relationships between African-American servicemen and white Australian women during World War II. As Ann McGrath observed, Indigenous and non-Indigenous sexual relationships enable historians to explore the ways in which gender, race and sexuality interacted during the colonial period.7 McGrath also argued that because the division between private and public life was blurry, interracial relationships reveal how power structures were in operation at the personal, domestic level. Other scholars have similarly explored the symbolism of interracial sex between Indigenous women and white men in which both parties enacted metaphors of conquest, penetration and violation ‘so that racism and sexism reinforce each other as tools of colonisation’.8 Meanwhile, Katherine Ellinghaus reminded us that until recently marriage was principally an economic arrangement, focused on the transfer of property and inheritance of wealth between families. Thus, class played an important role in understanding the implications of colonial intermarriage, especially between white women and Indigenous men.9 Lynette Russell, however, cautioned against ‘binaristic terminology’ such as coloniser/colonised, European/Aboriginal, as these categories limit our understandings of the negotiated encounters between ethnically diverse groups. Russell argued that boundaries between native and newcomer were, at times, vague, context-specific and unstable, and advocated a theoretical model which is sufficiently fluid to account for ethnic blending and ‘creolisation’.10

Historians have also examined cross-cultural intimate relationships between Asian and Indigenous groups in northern Australia, and in doing so have demonstrated the nuances of racial mixing.11 Regina Ganter’s *Mixed Relations* (2006) charted the development of a polyethnic northern Australia over centuries,

---

documenting relations between Indigenous women and Muslim and Chinese traders and seamen in Queensland, Northern Territory and Western Australia. Along the same lines, Ruth Balint studied relationships within the pearling communities around Broome. Although officially prohibited in state law, Balint found the racial mixing in northern Australia created a ‘creole’ identity, which has in recent years become a source of pride and cultural production, for example, in music, plays, cabaret and history writing. Similarly Peta Stephenson examined marriages between Indigenous women and Japanese men, which triggered a particularly paranoid response during World War II. Perceived as a significant security threat, these mixed-race families faced internment, removal of children to convents and, in the case of Japanese husbands and fathers, forced repatriation after the war.

Anglo-Chinese relationships have also been extensively studied by Australian historians. These couples came together for a range of reasons, including comfort, security, sexual fulfilment and the creation of families. Kate Bagnall has extensively researched Chinese-Australian intimate relationships and family formation, especially in colonial, southern Australia. Her research explored the domestic sphere of those in Chinese-Australian relationships and how these couples lived transnationally. Bagnall examined the experiences and agency of women (Chinese or Australian) and, in turn, made a valuable contribution to histories where female voices are marginalised, for example, goldfields histories. Dinah Hales similarly provided nuance to histories of Chinese-Australian relationships by challenging the stereotype that the European women in these relationships were immoral, prostitutes or drug addicts. Hales’ research demonstrated that Anglo-Chinese relationships were generally stable and successful.

The third major area of research has been marriages that crossed the Catholic-Protestant divide. As Siobhan McHugh has shown, until the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), mixed marriages typically resulted in excommunication from the Catholic Church. Family responses were similarly harsh, with disinheritance and estrangement common.

---


14 Stephenson, 118–23.


Generation interviewees frequently spoke of these sectarian divisions, and the personal cost of loving across religious lines. In *Australian Lives*, Puri and Thomson included a lengthy extract from the interview with Trish Barrkman (b. 1933), a Protestant who fell in love with an Irish Catholic, Des. When they approached the local priest about marriage, Trish was told she would need to convert. Unwilling to do so, Trish ended the relationship and migrated to New Zealand, feeling a need to ‘put the ocean between us and that’s what I did’.18

World War II was destabilising in immeasurable ways, including changing Australian attitudes towards female sexuality and racial barriers. With American armed forces stationed in Australia from 1942, young Australian women embraced the opportunity to socialise with these supposedly well-mannered servicemen, many of whom were descendants of immigrants and thus represented multiple ethnicities. While some women sought short-term pleasure, seeking excitement amidst an uncertain future, other women were more committed. During the war, there were 15,000 marriages between Australian women and American servicemen, including many who migrated to the US after the war to be with their husbands.19 These relationships provoked the ire of Australian men who saw the presence of white American servicemen as a threat to their masculinity.

However, it was the relationships between white Australian women and African-American servicemen that proved beyond the pale. From the arrival of American troops in Melbourne in March 1942, the presence of African-American GIs was widely felt. By 1944, over 1,000 African-American servicemen were based in Brisbane, which was home to only 1,614 US troops in total.20 Both Australian and American authorities at the highest levels worried about racial intermingling. To maintain racial purity, three policies were introduced to limit interracial sex between African-American servicemen and white Australian women: African-American GIs were geographically isolated and based in remote locations, such as Mt Isa and Cape York in far north Queensland; when stationed in towns, residential segregation was implemented as was recreational segregation.21 For example, African-American troops were banned from dances and had their own brothels in Sydney’s King’s Cross. Despite these measures, interracial relationships did occur but were discouraged. African-American/white Australian couples required permission to marry, a request only approved by officials in extreme circumstances. During the war years, only fifty such marriages were approved, and often the decision-making involved top military

18 Puri and Thomson, 164.
leaders, such as General Douglas MacArthur, indicating the seriousness afforded to this issue.\textsuperscript{22}

**Oral histories of postwar romance**

The postwar years marked a turning point in the demographic make-up of Australia, and with it, the instance of intercultural relationships.\textsuperscript{23} As Australia embarked on a policy of mass immigration, the arrival of large numbers of non-British migrants in the early postwar years meant that for the first time young people born in Australia, and indeed many immigrants from monocultural societies overseas, had access to an ethnically and religiously diverse dating pool. At the policy level, the Australian Government enthused over marriages between British/Australian men and female Displaced Persons (DPs), believing that such unions would foster assimilation. However, this acceptance was contingent on DP women marrying local men and therefore they would lose ‘their unpronounceable surnames’, according to the *Australian Women’s Weekly*.\textsuperscript{24} There was less support for local women marrying male DPs and it was assumed that Australian women would ‘baulk’ at the notion of a foreign husband.\textsuperscript{25} Furthermore, the female DPs deemed suitable for marriage to Australian men were largely from the Baltic states; southern European men and women, particularly Italians, were for many still outside the bounds of acceptability.

Australian Generations interviewees reflected on anti-Italian sentiment during this period. Melbourne nurse Judy Martin (b. 1934) remembered meeting an Italian doctor, ‘who was a really nice bloke’, yet she did not pursue a relationship with him as he was ‘a little bit short’ and ‘he was Italian and it was so soon after the war and we had been fighting the Italians’. Judy concluded that ‘he just wasn’t my ideal, whatever that was in my head’, and in the end, she married Les who was taller and blonde.\textsuperscript{26} Although Judy was unable to specify her romantic ideal in the interview, it is evident that southern Europeans who had fought with the Axis powers in World War II were deemed unsuitable, even if they belonged to a high social class, such as this doctor. As such it is clear here that race was more important than class in influencing desire. For


\textsuperscript{24} Mary Coles, ‘Romance in Air at Bonegilla Migrants’ Camp’, *Australian Women’s Weekly*, 3 January 1948, 9.


other Australian women, Catholicism was a decisive factor. Patricia Stillman (b. 1946) recalled the European migrants who arrived in their town to work on the Murray River irrigation system. At social dances, Patricia ‘was frequently asked to dance by young Italian boys’ who ‘were very romantic and very good dancers’. But like Judy, Patricia declined offers for future dates with these Italian men. ‘Of course, I’d have to say no all the time because there’s no way I could take an Italian boy home, my dad would have had a fit! He was bad enough about Catholics, let alone Italian Catholics’, she said. Historian Zora Simic has argued that such anti-Italian sentiment was rooted in racial and gender stereotypes about ethnic masculinity and femininity, and about the supposed sexually predatory nature of Italian men, seeking to sully the purity of Australian women. Yet despite such portrayals, 12,000 Italian ‘proxy brides’ migrated to Australia between 1945 and 1976 as Italian men seemed to prefer Italian women who shared their language, religion and cultural tradition. Anti-Italian attitudes would soften within a generation, leading to intermarriage rates across all southern European nationalities increasing sharply by the second generation, especially among men (see Table 1).

The arrival of large numbers of DPs and non-British migrants was an important first step in normalising intercultural relationships, a trend that would continue, albeit more hesitantly with Asian migrants. While, as we have seen, Anglo-Asian relationships have existed in small numbers in Australia since at least the mid-nineteenth century, World War II and its aftermath introduced new groups of Asian spouses to Australians through two streams. First, approximately 800 Asian evacuees were admitted to Australia during the war to escape Japanese occupation, particularly from Indonesia. Most repatriated in 1946, but for those with spouses and children in Australia, some refused to return to their country of origin. Wanting to uphold the integrity of the White Australia policy, in 1947 Immigration Minister Arthur Calwell sought to repatriate forcibly these obstinate refugees, a policy that was fiercely contested by the migrants, their families and the broader community. The most well-known case of protest was that of Annie O’Keefe. This widowed Indonesian married her Anglo-Australian landlord John O’Keefe in 1947, residing together in the Melbourne seaside suburb of Bonbeach. Threatened with deportation in 1949, Annie O’Keefe challenged the legality of forced repatriation, taking the matter to the Australian High Court, a case which became a public relations disaster for the Federal Government. During the trial, the O’Keefe family received favourable press coverage and widespread public support. The Court ruled in favour of the O’Keefe appeal, declaring that refugees who had been resident in Australia for over five years were not subject to the infamous dictation test, and

28 Simic, 167, 173.
therefore could not be deported.\textsuperscript{30} Undeterred by the ruling, the Government sought an alternative route for forced deportation by passing the War-time Refugees Removal Act 1949 through Parliament, a measure which granted the Minister authority to repatriate Asian war evacuees.

This legislation triggered much anxiety among Asian refugees and their families. Continuing the activist spirit of the O’Keefe case, Australian women established the ‘Australian Wives of Chinese Citizens Association’ to advocate for the protection of their husbands to both the Australian Government and the United Nations. In a letter on 20 September 1949, the organisation appealed to the UN Secretary General, pleading that he prevent the imminent deportation of Chinese residents in Australia. In this letter, Norma Han, the Honorary Secretary of the Association, revealed:

\begin{quote}
We have chosen to marry our Chinese husbands and have been happy in our Sino-Australian marriages in the belief that the prejudices of past years against such unions were swept away by the developing understanding which finds expression in Articles 2 (clause 1) and 16 of the Declaration of Human Rights.\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

Their activism proved redundant as within two months of this letter the incumbent Chifley Government was voted out of office, and the incoming Liberal/Country parties rarely used the War-time Refugees Removal Act and most of the war evacuees remained in Australia.\textsuperscript{32} Nevertheless, the extract above

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Ancestry} & \textbf{1st generation} & & \textbf{2nd generation} & & \textbf{3rd generation} \\
 & \textbf{Male} & \textbf{Female} & \textbf{Male} & \textbf{Female} & \textbf{Male} & \textbf{Female} \\
\hline
Macedonian & 11.1 & 8.7 & 40.4 & 33.8 & * & 54.2 \\
Greek & 15.7 & 11.4 & 42.3 & 34.5 & 73.9 & 67.6 \\
Serbian & 32.3 & 22.7 & 73.4 & 67.4 & 95.2 & 89.6 \\
Croatian & 30 & 23.1 & 63.7 & 59.9 & 84.2 & 77.7 \\
Italian & 26.6 & 14.9 & 57.4 & 47.4 & 82.5 & 77.8 \\
Maltese & 38.6 & 32 & 71.2 & 67.6 & 82.5 & 80.1 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Percentage of individuals with spouse of a different ancestry, by sex and generation.}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{*}Fewer than 100 people.


illustrates that Anglo-Asian couples were politically conscious, lobbying not just for the protection of their spouses but also for wider social acceptance of biracial relationships.

The Allied occupation of Japan also offered Australian troops the opportunity to engage in sexual relationships with local women, who, because of a ‘man drought’ in Japan, sought relationships with foreign troops. While military command prohibited interactions between the armed forces and Japanese women, dictated by the ‘six-inch rule’, sexual encounters between Australian men and Japanese women abounded. These liaisons created moral panic in which newspapers printed alarmist stories on the spread of venereal disease among Australian soldiers in Japan. In one week from 25 to 29 November 1946, nine newspapers, mostly in Queensland, published such articles. For example, the Brisbane Courier-Mail ran the headline, ‘V.D. Shows Morals of Army Low’.

In many cases, relationships between Japanese women and Australian men proved more than merely sexual or fleeting. In his interviews with occupation forces veterans, Robin Gerster found that many Australians ‘turned Japanese’ and became immersed in local culture, customs and language. The experience of living and falling in love in Japan fundamentally changed the men. One veteran wrote that it ‘altered’ his ‘way of seeing’. Two Australian Generation interviewees similarly discussed Japanese-Australian relationships during the occupation, but these two relationships had very different outcomes. A retired member of the Royal Australian Air Force, 84-year-old Arthur Comer (b. 1929) recalled falling in love with a ‘sweet’ Japanese woman named ‘Bunny’ while serving in the occupation forces. Despite being ‘deeply enamoured’ with Bunny, Arthur did not act on his feelings, nonchalantly stating that ‘nothing came of that because God prevented something coming of it’. Although Arthur did not speak at length about this budding romance cut short by external forces, the fact that he raised the brief liaison at all (unprompted by the interviewer) reveals its significance in the broader scheme of Arthur’s life. Given his choice of words, there is little doubt over Arthur’s feelings for Bunny, emotions that may only have intensified over time and on reflection late in his life. The fact that he attributed the abrupt cessation of the romance to God suggests a

33 This rule required Australian soldiers to remain six inches in distance away from Japanese women.
35 Gerster, 42.11.
desire to create a coherent narrative of one’s life and accept a life-changing decision that induced sadness and regret in his voice. Lost loves, particularly when caused by social pressures, create a palpable anguish that, in the case of Arthur at least, had not eased with time or subsequent romantic relationships.

Despite all the efforts of the military establishment to prevent such fraternisation, by the end of the occupation there were an estimated 50,000 Japanese war brides, 650 of whom married Australian men. Driven by pragmatic considerations, Minister for Immigration Harold Holt declared in March 1952 that Japanese women who were engaged or married to Australian servicemen would henceforth be permitted to enter. Kathleen Burr’s (b. 1930) brother, who served in the occupation forces, was one of the beneficiaries of this change in policy, though not at first. Burr’s brother applied to marry ‘a beautiful Japanese woman’ and bring her out to Australia, but his application was rejected. Not taking no for a final answer, Kathleen’s brother re-enlisted in the armed forces so he could be stationed in Korea, from where he visited Japan and married his Japanese girlfriend. Kathleen recalled, ‘He was determined, he was going to bring his girl home’. She migrated to Tasmania and Kathleen recounted her sister-in-law’s impressions of Australia:

By the time they got home, it was pitch dark and she had come from Hiroshima, which was crowded and lots of people, and um, opened her eyes and she saw cows in paddocks and paddocks and paddocks, and she said to herself, what have I done? She just couldn’t believe, because there was nothing there, really! One shop and a post office! [Laughs]

This culture shock was not entirely unexpected. In 1952, members of the Australian Army Education Service – with the assistance of interpreters from the Japanese Young Women’s Christian Association – provided information about Australia to Japanese war brides (see Figure 1).

Kathleen’s sister-in-law overcame the initial cultural challenges and was welcomed into the Burr family: my ‘parents loved her right from the word go. My mother taught her to cook, my father taught her English. She was just a beautiful, beautiful person’.

Kathleen conceded that although her sister-in-law ‘never complained of any racism’, other Japanese war brides in Australia were less fortunate. She commented that, ‘the other girls, the families were not supportive and so therefore they would have been ostracised’ in the country towns of Tasmania. Japanese war brides who migrated to Australia in the 1950s tended to fare worse than their compatriots who married American servicemen, a divergence that may be explained by the fact that there was already a well-established Japanese emigrant

---


39 Kathleen Burr, interviewed by Nicole Curby, Burwood, Victoria, 12 and 17 June 2013, Australian Generations Oral History Project, TRC6300/190, session 1, 00:39:52. Interview not online.
community on the west coast of the US.\textsuperscript{40} In Australia, conversely, Japanese war brides faced an unfamiliar culture and a society that, while polite superficially, remained sceptical of the war-time enemy. In Melbourne on 19 April 1953, Japanese war brides established their own social club to ‘help them get to know Victoria’.\textsuperscript{41} In Tasmania the following year, Mrs F. Coaldrake, the wife of an Anglican missionary, issued a plea to Tasmanians to extend ‘sympathy, understanding and help to Japanese war brides’.\textsuperscript{42}

Despite the persistent challenges facing Anglo-Asian couples, such relationships became increasingly common in the later decades of the twentieth century. A growing cohort of these involved marriages between European-

\textsuperscript{40} See Miki Ward Crawford, Katie Kaori Hayashi and Shizuko Suenaga, \textit{Japanese War Brides in America: An Oral History} (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010).
Australian men and Filipina woman. One Australian Generations interviewee, Filipina Mila Cichello (b. 1956), discussed at length her marriage to Peter, an Australian man of Italian-Irish ancestry, and the various ways in which family and strangers questioned the suitability of their relationship. Along with 300 other Filipinas who migrated to Australia between 1970 and 1978, Mila came to Melbourne as a 19-year-old in 1976 to study nursing and escape the Marcos dictatorship. Although Mila’s family supported her decision to study and work in Australia, they forbade her from dating Australian men. Mila explained that by the early 1970s, ‘there was a very negative image’ of ‘Australian men going to the Philippines looking for brides’. When Mila mentioned Peter in a letter to her mother, she promptly received an interrogatory phone call:

Mila’s mother: Is he Australian?
Mila: Well, technically, yes
Mother: OK, is he a friend?
Mila: Yes
Mother: Are you going out with him?
Mila: Um, not really

Mila was thus torn between appeasing family expectations and following her desires, but eventually confessed to her mother that she was dating Peter. Worried that Mila would ‘end up with one of these Australian guys’ portrayed in the Philippines media, her mother ‘cried on the phone’. Soon after, Mila organised a phone call between Peter and her mother in a hope to allay any concerns. Before the call, Mila warned Peter that her parents ‘really did not want me to go out with an Australian man’.

Peter: But you told them about me, yes?
Mila: Yes, I did, but you’re still an Australian!

Mila and Peter married in March 1980 and, the following year, visited the Philippines so that Peter could meet her family. On this trip, both Mila and Peter encountered shocking and offensive stereotypes. For Peter, Mila’s mother assumed he was uncouth and possibly a sex tourist. Mila recalled that ‘for breakfast my mother presented him with a bottle of beer to go with his fried rice and his meat’. Mila explained that by 1981, ‘beer for breakfast’ and ‘slabs of meat’ was ‘what they had seen Australian men as tourists in the Philippines’. For Mila, Filipinos on the street assumed she was a prostitute: I ‘did get those looks, you know, [that] I was an escort or a bar girl, you know, with a foreigner, and that was in Manila’. At that time, ‘the sight of an Asian woman walking hand-in-hand with an Australian, or a foreigner, gave the impression of a hospitality girl and a client’.

In Australia, Mila did not encounter any overt racism about her relationship with Peter, but she would hear ‘snide remarks’ ‘about Filipino women
taking the opportunity of marrying non-Filipinos for a visa. Although Peter and Mila were legally free to marry and, in the end, received family support, the couple faced a generalised social censure: their relationship was often assumed to be transactional and, by implication, inferior to conventional marriages. Without public validation of their marriage, Peter and Mila lacked assu- redness, which was manifest in their need to justify and legitimise their relationship to others.

In addition to negative stereotypes, Mila noted that some Filipina wives endured domestic violence, an issue that was sensationaly covered by the media in Australia from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. Newspapers reported on Filipinas’ higher rates of domestic violence relative to other ethnic groups, which included violent ‘bashings’ and the murders of at least eleven Filipina brides at the hands of their husbands. The proportionally higher rates of domestic violence among Filipina-Australian couples are suggestive of a gendered and racialised power imbalance in operation. As a response, the Filipino community established a number of advocacy and self-help groups, such as the Centre for Filipino Concerns, and some received funding from the Department of Immigration (see Figure 2).

Although Asian-Australian relationships became increasingly common in the late twentieth century, it is evident that this remained a very gendered process. Millennial Rosalind Hewett (b. 1988) was engaged to an Indonesian man at the time of her interview and observed a gender double standard in intercultural relationships. She felt that her relationship was a constant source of curiosity for white Australians who wondered, ‘why am I engaged to an Indonesian? What’s wrong with Australians?’ In contrast, Anglo-Australian men faced less scrutiny. Hewett noticed that, ‘while there is still a question of why, why did you choose someone who is not Australian, there is sort of a sense of, “oh well, they’re men. Like, that’s just men”’. This astute observation is supported in academic literature. Renee Romano has argued that while white women are expected to maintain racial purity, white men are given a ‘free pass’.

Australian historians of intercultural relationships during the colonial period have also observed that because women are viewed as transmitters of race and culture,

---


their bodies and sexuality must be regulated. Thus, female bodies are sites in which power imbalances of race and gender interact.47

The fact that East Asian women disproportionately married Anglo-Australians compared to their male compatriots suggests that racialised and gendered stereotypes are in operation. While it remains popular to believe that intercultural relationships demonstrate romance trumping prejudice, it is also important to note that such relationships were not always inherently liberal or progressive, and may have in fact solidified racial hierarchies and reinforced gender inequalities. As Ruth Frankenberg observed in the American context, constructions of gender are imbued with racial overtones, for instance, hyper-feminine and subordinate Asians (particularly women and gay men) and hyper-sexualised African-Americans.48 In Europe, historians Leo Lucassen and Charlotte

Laarman have similarly argued that racial and gender stereotypes explained in part the rise in marriages between western European men and Filipina and Thai women. In their words, ‘These men stated that they preferred a spouse from these countries for they consider them more obedient, caring and traditional than western European women’. It is therefore misleading to celebrate intercultural relationships as evidence of racial harmony and the ascendancy of colour-blindness in society. Indeed, this kind of ‘triumphalist multiculturalism’ may conceal instances of exploitative ‘gender orders and inequalities’ within intercultural relationships. The Australian Generations interviews demonstrate that it is impossible to make generalisations but the case studies do allow historians to move beyond social science analyses and document the diversity of individual experiences.

Navigating family reactions

As with any social change, the increasing prevalence of intercultural relationships can trigger opposition, sometimes even from within individual families. Several interviewees noted that they encountered family opposition to their romantic choices, which they either capitulated to or defied. English migrant Juliet Cobb (b. 1956) dated a Greek man throughout her university years at a time when ‘it was not common for people to marry foreigners’ ‘or be involved with foreigners’. Juliet believed her parents gradually accepted the relationship but ‘were hoping I would marry someone like myself or like the family’. In the end, Juliet did not marry her Greek boyfriend and her current female partner is of English-Australian background like herself.

Irene Lorbergs, a second-generation Latvian migrant, recalled a very close-knit European and Jewish community in the eastern suburbs of Sydney, who, throughout high school and university, would ‘all go out in groups together’ and ‘hang out on Bondi Beach on the steps’, attend parties and meet other young people. Within this active social scene, however, there were restrictions on dating and it was ‘forbidden to basically marry out’. Irene ‘remember[ed] one person in particular that was fairly close in our group, that totally devastated him and probably ruined his entire life so, you know, it was pretty sad’.


For an example of scholarship that treats intermarriage as evidence that ‘race has no impact on marriage’, see June Duncan Owen, Mixed Matches: Interracial Marriage in Australia (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2002), 164.

Nemoto, 160–2.

Juliet Cobb, interviewed by Nicole Curby, Sydney, 4 and 8 October 2012, Australian Generations Oral History Project, TRC6300/102, session 3, 00:08:04. Interview not online.

Irene Lorbergs, interviewed by Mary Hutchison, Canberra, 8 and 15 January 2013, Australian Generations Oral History Project, TRC6300/134, session 2, 00:51:29. Interview not online.
Those who chose to defy family opposition often endured family tension and cultural distance. One Australian Generations interviewee illustrates the careful negotiations and compromises involved when one marries across race, religion and culture. John Christodoulou’s complicated family history reflects the ethnic diversity of modern Australia and warrants extended discussion. Born in Sri Lanka in 1978, he was adopted by a Greek-Australian couple in his infancy. His adopted father is the son of migrants who arrived in the early 1900s and, according to John, ‘is staunchly Greek and Australian’. His adopted mother emigrated from Greece as a teenager and settled in Melbourne in 1956. The parents bore one child, a son who now lives in Singapore with his Indian wife and two children. After the birth of their first child, John’s adopted parents could not bear any more children and so they adopted a girl who was born in Ballarat in country Victoria and now lives in Darwin with her Welsh partner. They also adopted John from Sri Lanka. Both children were raised in the Greek Orthodox faith. John’s wife is a daughter of Vietnamese refugees who arrived in Australia in 1980 after spending about one year in a Malaysian refugee camp. John’s immediate family is therefore comprised of an array of cultures: Greek, Sri Lankan, Vietnamese, Welsh, Indian and Australian.

Despite the existing cultural diversity within John’s adopted family, his mother was not at first welcoming of the introduction of Nook, John’s Vietnamese wife. John recognised that the introduction of his wife was challenging for his parents, whom he described as ‘traditional Greeks’. Within the Greek-Australian community, it was established practice to marry other Greeks, even during the 1980s and 1990s, and it was not until ‘the next generation that sort of changed that’. John vividly recalled his mother’s initial reaction to his burgeoning intercultural relationship. She exclaimed, ‘we’ve got so many bloody nationalities in this family, you want go and add another one now?!’ As for Nook, her family also disapproved of her dating across racial and cultural lines. John remained matter-of-fact and did not see this opposition as a personal affront, but, rather, it was simply because ‘I wasn’t Vietnamese’. Notwithstanding this pragmatic approach, family gatherings proved challenging for John, who remains ‘the only non-Vietnamese person of the family’, indicating that he still feels like an outsider. Brushing aside romanticism, John conceded that ‘it’s always hard to intermarry, there’s a lot of things you don’t see. To be mates with people is all great, but when the families come together, it makes life difficult’.54 This incisive comment reveals that intermarriage, in particular, requires compromise and delicate negotiation as the partners and their extended families attempt to bridge cultural divides.

Conclusion

In recent decades, then, romantic relationships that cross ethnic, racial or cultural boundaries have become an increasingly common aspect of Australian society,
yet they are largely absent from understandings of both the past and the present. The rich oral history interviews cited in this article show that while cultural and social norms around such relationships can change over time, such processes can generate considerable personal and wider social tensions: in our examples, some individuals capitulated to family or social pressure while others defied expectations. This article also demonstrates the very public nature of intimacy, especially for those in what are seen as ‘subversive’ relationships. Although government policies aimed at discouraging or preventing such relationships ceased to exist from the mid-twentieth century, interracial and intercultural couples still faced scrutiny about their relationship choices. Several interviewees bemoaned the constant public curiosity about their choice of partner and had the feeling that they had to justify their relationship. Others resented the snide remarks or the stereotypical assumptions about their nationality and motivations for intermarriage. Gendered power dynamics were and are central to many of these stories, as evidenced by the disproportionately high rates of domestic violence among Australian-Filipina couples in the 1980s and 1990s. Gender and racial stereotypes also interacted, which in turn created representations assuming Asian submissiveness and docility.55

While it is erroneous to present the increasing rates of intercultural relationships in postwar Australia as a simple victory of multicultural pluralism and tolerance over older forms of prejudice, it is similarly a mistake to see such relationships as aberrant, outside the norms of the late twentieth-century Australian experience. Because desire is shaped by broader social forces, intimate relationships in Australia have mirrored and continue to mirror contemporary international geopolitical forces, national policy decisions, social norms and taboos. As with all relationships and experiences, intercultural intimacy needs to be subjected to nuanced historical scrutiny not blanket condemnation nor exultant celebration.

Although this article has focused on intimate romantic and sexual relationships, other than in the case of John Christodoulou it has not discussed the formation of intercultural families and thus the intergenerational aspects of these phenomena. When intercultural couples produce children, they inadvertently create many cultural dilemmas: Should the child be bilingual? In which faith should the child be raised, if at all? What names should be used for grandparents? How will the child manage multiple cultural identities? Moreover, this article has exclusively examined heterosexual couples as there was inadequate evidence in the Australian Generations interviews to draw conclusions about the experiences of intercultural same-sex relationships. By exploring the experiences of intercultural same-sex couples and family formation, future research offers the potential for valuable and nuanced insights into the lived experience and intimate lives of Australia’s increasingly multicultural society.

ORCID

Rachel Stevens  http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9580-6733
Seamus O’Hanlon  http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3142-1716

Rachel Stevens  
University of Melbourne
Email: rachel.stevens@unimelb.edu.au

Seamus O’Hanlon  
Monash University
Email: seamus.ohanlon@monash.edu