

### Exposing Inequity in Australian Society: Are we all in it Together?

*Richard Barber*<sup>1</sup>

Free Theatre Company

*Siew Fang Law*

University of Melbourne

#### ABSTRACT

*The COVID-19 pandemic does not discriminate, and the Australian government has sought to embrace a sense of universality, adopting the slogan ‘we are all in it together’. However, the pandemic has also exposed layers of systemic, structural and cultural inequities, challenging this notion of a common good. The authors, based in Victoria in Australia, have experienced two periods of lockdown, observing the tensions between individualist, libertarian tendencies and civil society perspectives within the context of Australian multiculturalism and latent colonialism. In this paper, the authors discuss the ways in which whiteness and colonialism are embedded in the government’s public health and social policies whilst being subject to emergent contested spaces. Drawing on media reporting between January and August 2020, the authors analyse the intransigence of white, often xenophobic, privilege and the disruptive, countervailing forces, from the Black Lives Matter movement to localised acts of community solidarity. The COVID-19 virus has exposed layers of social inequity and their entrenched everyday structural and cultural violence in Australia and, in so doing, has provided both opportunities and challenges to people who are striving for social justice and the notion of the common good.*

**Keywords:** Pandemic; inequity; racism; migrants; international students

#### INTRODUCTION

As the COVID-19 virus emerged as a global pandemic, ‘we are all in it together’ became a popular call for solidarity in Australia, first brought to prominence at a press conference on March 27 by Prime Minister Scott Morrison (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020a, para. 1). In epidemiological terms, the tiny virus does not discriminate, and this statement embraces similar inclusivity. However, the civil

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<sup>1</sup> Please direct all correspondence to: Prof Siew Fang Law, University of Melbourne; Email: [siewfang.law@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:siewfang.law@unimelb.edu.au)

society ethos of this slogan has also been exposed as utopian, at best, or a form of mythmaking, as the impacts of the pandemic expose layers of socio-political and economic inequities. In this paper, we focus on the concept of equity which refers to just and fair implementation of public policy and distribution of public services, and the ways of responding to an event and perceived fairness of the event (Frederickson, 2010). In particular, the paper explores the ways inequality links with race and racism.

As Arundhati Roy eloquently wrote, “the tragedy is immediate, real, epic and unfolding before our eyes. But it isn’t new. It is the wreckage of a train that has been careening down the track for years” (Roy, 2020, para. 8). Indeed, the pandemic has exposed multilayers and multiplicities of systemic, structural and cultural inequities, challenging the notion of a common good. The impacts of the pandemic are significantly different from individual to individual, depending on one’s socio-economic background, age, gender, race, geographical location, marital status, employment status, visa status, and the list could go on.

We are in the midst of a second wave of infection and ‘Stage 4’ lockdown in Melbourne, Australia as we write this article. Our analysis is therefore time and space sensitive and is imbued with reflections and observations on various tensions and inequities unfolding around us. The tensions transcend the intrapersonal, interpersonal, family and community, spanning local, national and international domains. The issues relating to inequities cut across races, gender, age and socio-economy. They criss-cross political ideologies, different worldviews and versions of histories. These entanglements are not limited to individualist, libertarian tendencies and civil society perspectives, having disrupted left-right paradigms on many levels. They extend into the context of Australian multiculturalism and coloniality and the patterns of Othering migrants and people of colour across the Australian political spectrum.

The magnitude of the pandemic’s disruptions at every level is profound. This paper focuses on the ways in which the Australian government and mainstream media have responded to COVID-19 and its effects on international students and migrants in Australia. In particular, we focus on the notions of whiteness and coloniality in our analysis.

## WHITENESS AND COLONIALITY

Whiteness is associated with the history of slavery and colonialism, “devised to create a deliberate hierarchy, to define who was privileged and who was property or a second-class citizen” (Williams, 2020, p. 3). Class and race are part of the dominant narratives of colonialism and are reflected in various public health and social policies in Australia. Historically, the White Australia policy, emerging in the wake of the dispossession of indigenous nations in 1788 and exclusion of non-European migrants, defined Australian coloniality until official policies of multiculturalism were proclaimed in the 1970s, particularly with the passing of the *Racial Discrimination Act* in 1975. The legal, political and cultural mechanisms of the White Australia policy were tied to a widespread belief in the superiority of British civilisation and the white race generally during this era (Jones, 2017).

Australia in 2020 is a prosperous nation with an increasingly multicultural society, within an entrenched system of white privilege that is both structural and cultural. According to 2016 census data, one in four of Australia’s 22 million people were born overseas and nearly half of the Australian population have at least one parent who was born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016b). The government, or more specifically, the Australian parliament, is strikingly homogenous and white. As of 2018, fewer than 20 of the 226 federal parliamentarians have a non-English speaking background (Tasevski, 2018).

Whiteness in senior leadership prevails in numerous prominent sectors and industries, including Australia’s media and broadcasting (Rogers, 2020) and the higher education sectors (Croucher, Wen, Coates, & Goedegebuure, 2019). The lack of diversity in the media sector is increasingly being called out, along with the lack of representation which stimulates systemic bias (Rodell, 2020). It has been notable that, whilst the federal and state public health responses to COVID-19 in Australia have been lauded domestically and internationally as an effective containment model, there has been scant recognition of Asian expertise in public health management in Australia’s mainstream media coverage, creating conditions for stigmatisation and discrimination around issues such as mask-wearing and China’s role in the pandemic.

As borders close and economies increasingly emphasise domestic characteristics, national and provincial identities are being reinforced leading to the re-assertion of Australian nationalism, invoking models of coloniality. The affirmation of whiteness in the construction of Australian identity has been

commonplace in Australia's mainstream media, as evident in the recent report, *Who Gets to Tell Australian Stories?* (Arvanitakis et al., 2020). In detailing systemic cultural bias throughout the media landscape, the report provides insights into the weaknesses facing public health communication in Victoria.

At first glance, the statement by the Victorian Chief Health Officer, Brett Sutton, referring to the risks associated with drawing on “social media from their country of origin or amongst their network of friends as their primary source” of information is primarily concerned with addressing problems of public health misinformation (Davey & Boseley, 2020, para. 2). The chicken-and-egg problem of the lack of diverse representation in audiences alongside the lack of diversity in Australia's media production have been exposed by the failures of national public health communication with migrant communities. However, this statement also reveals the lack of awareness of the realities of diasporic modes of communication, manifested in intra-community information sharing and the emergence of multilingual, international digital media networks.

The systemic policy failures in public health responses in migrant communities also have parallels in the political and media discourse around the scope and value of diasporic knowledge. This has been most noticeable in regard to the use of face masks for protection against the transmission of COVID-19. The face mask, now a symbol of libertarian and conspiratorial debate in many western countries, was initially defined by a racialised response in Australia with mask-wearing prominent within Asian communities, consistent with common pandemic health responses in other countries.

In the early months of the pandemic, Australian government officials often questioned the efficacy of face masks. This coincided with a period of systemic and episodic discrimination against Asians in Australia, prompting some community organisations to advise against wearing masks. This implied an insular, parochial approach to pandemic control, effectively negating or discrediting Asian knowledge and expertise. Furthermore, when the Victorian state government implemented laws enforcing the wearing of face masks from July, this occurred without public self-correction, despite media articles having appeared commenting that “Asia may have been right all along” after “weeks of public health authorities, politicians and media figures confidently claiming masks do not help” (Griffith, 2020, para. 4).

## MIGRANTS AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS UNDER COVID-19 IN AUSTRALIA

The impact of both systemic and episodic white privilege on migrants and international students can be traced back to the early stages of the virus outbreak. The first crack in the notion of being “all in it together” emerged with the March 30 announcement of the JobKeeper government assistance package complemented by unemployment and other welfare programmes (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020b). The JobKeeper and JobSeeker programmes, representing the primary government financial assistance measures, were broadly supported and embraced across Australia (Hamilton, Preston, & Edmond, 2020), despite excluding temporary visa workers and international students.

More than half a million international students and hundreds and thousands of people on temporary visas in Australia faced financial hardship and potential deportation within days and weeks (Martin, 2020). The education sector in Australia was the third largest exporter, amounting to a \$38 billion dollars industry (Babones, 2019; Hurley, 2020), with China being the largest source of international students in Australia. Students from other non-western countries, such as India, Malaysia, Nepal and Brazil constitute the top sources of revenue through higher education (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2019).

In comparison with other countries, Australia has the highest number of international students per capita. Indeed, international students made up a significant population in many Australian suburbs, such as 44% in Canberra and 39% in Carlton, Melbourne (Hurley, 2020). These students are important parts of the Australian community, extending beyond the economic impact into the social fabric.

Australia also has one of the highest temporary worker migration rates of any of the world’s democracies – between eight and ten per cent of the labour force (Badham, 2020). Over 900,000 temporary migrant workers are involved in building the nation from the ground level (Tham, 2020). China has emerged as the largest source jurisdiction of temporary visa holders with a work right in Australia, with India close behind, undertaking work in sectors with labour force deficits (Department of Home Affairs, 2020). However, many of them have reported experiencing systemic exploitation, unfair work conditions and job insecurity (Fels & Cousins, 2019).

On 3 April 2020, the Prime Minister announced that international students and people on temporary migrant visas should make their way home (Gibson & Moran, 2020). The announcement was made in the midst of border closures and international flight cancellations. Many of these affected students and workers and their families were stranded in Australia, facing employment and accommodation pressures. In the context of ‘we are all in it together’, it was effectively a declaration that the ‘we’ here referred explicitly to a defined group of Australian citizens and residents. The Prime Minister also announced that there would be opportunities for visa holders who had critical skills and who would be able to assist in the coronavirus crisis (Gibson & Moran, 2020). Implicitly, this qualifies those temporary visa holders with the ambivalent construct of ‘essential’ skills (such as cleaning, aged care, health care, and education) useful in fighting the coronavirus. This also suggests that the cohort is of ‘lesser’ value than citizens and could be spared, if willing, to care for the citizens while they were asked to be responsible for their own health risks.

The systemic exclusion of groups of temporary visa holders, refugees, and international students invoked a racialised form of nationalism, legitimised by the conditions of the public health emergency. Episodic racism initially emerged in the form of anti-Chinese sentiment in February, and quickly multiplied, impacting many Asian-looking Australians and international students. A community survey conducted by the Asian Australian Alliance between April and June 2020 found over 377 incidents of racism against Asians in Australia, an average of 47 reported cases a week, particularly involving strangers targeting women. Asians were reported being physically harassed, threatened with weapons, spat at and told they couldn’t enter premises “because Asians need to stay indoors” (Chiu, 2020).

For international students, the government’s calls to live off savings or return home appeared as a betrayal of their contribution to the Australian economy through the lucrative tertiary education sector and their labour participation in essential industries (Lehmann & Sriram, 2020). By 31 August 2020, over 70% of international students were estimated to be stranded in Australia. Many reported that they could not go home due to various travel and financial constraints (Lehmann & Sriram, 2020).

Significantly, another recent study of international university students has indicated that 59% of the survey participants would not recommend anyone to come and study in Australia (Roe, 2020). This sentiment suggests a sense of betrayal. It is symptomatic of the consequences of the whiteness of policymaking in Australia, manifested in discriminatory pandemic responses. Worse, this increasing

distrust and dismay signifies an imprint in the visitors' psyche that little change would occur in the future (Roe, 2020).

## **RACIAL PROFILING IN AUSTRALIA'S PANDEMIC RESPONSE**

The issue of racial profiling has been a recurrent theme in Australia for decades (Police Stop Data Working Group, 2017), particularly in regard to several media agencies fomenting the notion of 'Asian gang' and 'African gang' crime problems (Donovan, 2013). More specifically, racial profiling has been identified by a 'a practice whereby police, consciously or otherwise, systemically stop and search racial minorities on the basis of stereotypes rather than reasonable grounds to believe an offence has taken place' (Police Stop Data Working Group, 2017). In the Australian context, for example, individuals of African/Middle Eastern appearance are found to be stopped and searched 2.53 times more frequently than the general Australia population. While it is not the express purpose of the intentional individual practices or overt organisational policies to target racial minorities, it is the effect that matters (Police Stop Data Working Group, 2017). Racial profiling contributes to alienation, worsening health outcomes, and perpetration of racial underclasses, amongst the various impacts (Police Stop Data Working Group, 2017).

This form of biased and discriminatory policing has been similarly evident in the implementation of public health policy during the COVID-19 pandemic response. This began with the systemic discrimination in the implementation of quarantine procedures. In the early days of the pandemic, in late January 2020, the Australian government announced that Chinese Australians returning from Wuhan would be sent to Christmas island, the site of a prominent detention centre in Australia's asylum seeker detention programme (Xiao, 2020). The symbolism of Chinese Australians quarantining in a detention centre was in contrast to the preferential hotel quarantine measures introduced to accommodate emerging populations of predominantly white Australian tourists returning on cruise ships.

Although returned Chinese travellers in quarantine reportedly expressed few complaints and showed their appreciation for the assistance (Xiao & Broke, 2020), some asked whether white Australians would be treated the same way (British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC], 2020). Perceptions of similar modes of bias were also raised in regard to the initial implementation of travel bans targeting countries

such as China, Iran, and South Korea, with Italy only added later to the list despite “facing the largest outbreak outside China” (Hitch, 2020. np). Questions were asked as to why travel within the US remained open despite “the majority of Victoria's new cases [being] connected to those who have travelled from the United States” (Towell, 2020, para. 1).

Emerging geo-political tensions between Australia and China surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic prompted increased anti-China rhetoric, prompting perceptions that being anti-China or anti-Chinese is no longer considered as being racist (Baker, 2020a). By 6 June 2020, China had issued a travel warning to prevent their citizens from travelling to Australia amid increased racism due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The Australian Tourism Minister Simon Birmingham rejected China's assertions of Australian racism, reverting to the populist doctrine that “Australia is the most successful multicultural society in the world” (Department of Home Affairs, 2018, p. 7).

Racial profiling has also been a common, recurring theme in several Australian media agencies. In a series of events in July regarding several young women breaking isolation and quarantine rules to travel to Brisbane, the issue of racial profiling again emerged when they were identified, with their African backgrounds highlighted in tabloid media (News, 2020). Whilst community leaders acknowledged their conduct in putting “the whole community at risk”, they, alongside the affected families, reported a strong racist element within the public reaction. A relative of one of the young women commented to a journalist that “if someone else did this yeah, that wasn't of colour, you'd be f\*\*king protecting them” (News, 2020, para. 18). This emerging tendency for elements of the public and media to use public health culpability, perceived or real, to legitimise racial profiling and justify discrimination carries a similar sentiment to the anti-Chinese prejudice.

## **THE MATTER OF BLACK LIVES**

The implications of racial profiling have been most evident in relation to the recent Black Lives Matter protests arising in the US. Protests in Australia, which focused on the disproportionately high rates of imprisonment and deaths in custody of Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander Australians, were politicised within the pandemic context. Thousands of protesters joined rallies in each of Australia's state capital cities amidst threats of sanction and claims of social irresponsibility in regard to public health risks.

Protest organisers acknowledged the dilemmas in trying to “balance perceived risk with real risk” in holding mass public action under pandemic conditions whilst raising awareness of the implications of police violence and incarceration on black lives and the success of the indigenous health response. For many Indigenous Australians, the protests were seen as necessary to address the systemic racism that pervades the police and the criminal justice system (Langton, 2020). However, the popular discourse surrounding these events subsumed racial politics within the pandemic context, exemplified by the headlines such as “Did Australia's Black Lives Matter protests cause a spike in COVID-19 cases?” (Baker, 2020b, p. 1).

Ideological polarities emerged, playing out in public debate, manifested in the view of Australia’s chief medical officer, Prof Brendan Murphy, that “these sort of events really are dangerous” which was countered by Professor of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health at Western Sydney University, Aunty Kerrie Doyle’s argument of negligible community infection whilst “there’s not a day when Indigenous people aren’t targeted” (Davey, 2020, para. 7). The debate escalated due to an article in *The Australian*, claiming a public housing cluster of COVID-19 infections could be linked to the Black Lives Matter protest in Melbourne, referencing comments by a police commissioner of a heightened health risk of protesters from public housing towers (Visontay, 2020).

Despite the claims of transmission links to the Black Lives Matter protests being refuted by health officials (RMIT ABC Fact Check, 2020), the stigmatisation of the BLM movement as irresponsible and anti-social became consistent with the racial polarisation trends under the pandemic. In promulgating a linkage between protest and public housing towers, the labels of risk, criminal act, and social irresponsibility were assigned to some of the most vulnerable, marginalised communities, predominantly identified in Australia by the term culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD).

## COMMUNITY DISENGAGEMENT

On July 4, the Victorian government placed nine public housing towers in Melbourne under ‘hard lockdown’. This punitive approach, implemented in the form of a rapid police intervention, was questioned in its efficacy as public health policy. The public housing residents spoke of the traumatising effect of the police presence, inappropriate dietary provisions, poor communication, and the prevailing conditions of overcrowding, under-resourcing, poor hygiene, and inadequate maintenance (Carrasco, Faleh, & Dangol, 2020). According to a resident, the enforced lockdown is “a direct reflection of the

systemic inequalities in public housing” (Carrasco et al., 2020, para. 7).

The police intervention has undermined the social fabric and the sense of agency of the community living in the towers (Kenny, 2020). For decades, communities living in the public housing towers have been taking responsibility for their own well-being, often predicated on government neglect and the lack of service provision (Levin, Arthurson, & Ziersch, 2014). Whilst there are different ways in which they do this, the communities are involved in diverse and widespread efforts to provide material and non-material support and social connectedness.

The public housing lockdown represented an emerging pattern of state paternalism and xenophobia, disproportionately targeting migrant communities. The public housing towers were included in a grouping of local government areas designated as hotspots of virus incidence and transmission which were collectively also recognised as lower socio-economic and culturally diverse regions of Melbourne (Evershed, 2020). Whilst the testing blitz in these ‘problem suburbs’ in June sought justification as an appropriate health response to high rates of infection (ABC, 2020), it also perpetuated forms of stigmatisation. Furthermore, a report in August that police fines for non-compliance to pandemic regulations replicated these inequalities (Cooper, 2020) by disproportionately impacting CALD communities.

State government discourse, whilst maintaining the ‘we are all in it together’ slogan and acknowledging the challenges faced by vulnerable communities, has increasingly adopted a carrot-and-stick strategy. This has emphasised adherence to state rules and regulations to reduce infections towards the goal of removing lockdown restrictions. Targeted approaches in contact tracing, enforcing quarantine, and testing have reinforced notions of paternalism and, by stigmatising migrant communities has similarly invoked notions of coloniality.

The problem of coloniality is most evident in government neglect of engaged community-driven responses. Certainly, politicians and bureaucrats would be aware of the success of the indigenous community-controlled health approach. This raises questions as to why this model has not been replicated in vulnerable migrant communities. In the same way, indigenous self-determination has been described as vital to First Nation communities “beat[ing] COVID-19”, public housing residents and other migrant communities have identified a deficit in community agency (Walsh & Rademaker, 2020, headline). In perpetuating patterns of systemic racism, Australia’s governments have also undermined

the public health of these vulnerable communities.

## **SOLIDARITY IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD**

The impacts of government policy on international students, temporary migrant workers and those of less privileged background have been profound. Research has found that 65% of international students lost their jobs; 39% of the survey students did not have enough money to cover basic living expenses; 43% were skipping meals on a regular basis; 34% were already homeless or anticipated imminent eviction because they could not pay rent. Furthermore, there has been an increase in mental health issues, and health risks arising from being forced into overcrowded accommodation due to rent stresses (Berg & Farbenblum, 2020).

However, the combination of government neglect and survival imperative has prompted responses as acts of local and diasporic solidarity. There has been an upsurge of migrant communities (e.g. Sikh community) and restaurants (e.g. Thai restaurants) providing free food and community groups offering welfare support for international students in addition to food packages being provided by Australian charity organisations (Henriques-Gomes, 2020). Driven by local migrant-based information channels, whether online or by word-of-mouth, this support has provided an important form of community agency in contrast to the paternalistic pandemic response by government authorities. During the hard lockdown of the public housing towers, community groups similarly mobilised to provide halal food and other culturally appropriate food and support, while subject to the strict health controls imposed by authorities (Kenny, 2020).

## **ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM**

Despite the call that 'we are all in it together', political decisions have clearly not benefited 'all', influenced by the coloniality and whiteness of Australian governments. The lack of lived experience and diverse representation within Australia's parliament has been magnified by the crisis nature of the pandemic. The inability to fully grasp the issues associated with racial discrimination, casualised work and the mental health pressures surrounding migration create a deficit in the understanding of and policy implementation towards multicultural communities.

Although the Australian state and federal government responses have been popularly supported, the neglect and marginalisation of vulnerable communities has been subsumed within the discourse, stigmatising these communities for their higher incidence of COVID-19 cases. State-federal government policy initiatives providing financial support in Victoria in early August, through a pandemic leave disaster payment, included casual workers and temporary visa holders (Karp, 2020). However, it represented a belated acknowledgment of the health risks associated with unprotected casual work that is disproportionately performed by migrant communities. Similarly, efforts to translate public health information into different first languages recognised the need for appropriate responses to community contexts. However, this was in response to an acknowledgement that using the English language as the medium of public health communication was inadequate, despite government statistics identifying that one in five Australians speak a language that is not English at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016a).

The hard lockdowns across Melbourne, and state-wide throughout Victoria, in response to significant community transmission were consistent with the punitive approach taken in the public housing towers. However, in placing the onus on public behaviour associated with the areas designated as ‘problematic’ hotspots, governments were ignoring or deflecting from the ‘elephant in the room’ – the health and safety implications of economic inequities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the public health implications of systemic neoliberal inequities, with an Australian economist suggesting “the spread of coronavirus in Australia is not the fault of individuals but a result of neoliberalism” (Dennis, 2020, headline). For migrant workers and temporary visa holders, the combination of low income, inconsistencies in regulation, job insecurity, and working in multiple workplaces are commonplace (Fels & Cousins, 2019). With the risk of COVID-19 transmission heightened in workplaces designated as essential, such as age care, the financial insecurity of temporary visa holders has accentuated the status of migrant workers as at-risk.

The exclusion of temporary migrant workers from national income support programmes is not only perceived as contrary to the notion of being ‘all in it together’ but also being fundamentally unfair. According to Professor Tham, the Deputy Chair of Migrant Workers Centre, the matter even breaches a number of fundamental rights:

“Equal rights at work - regardless of migrant status - is a key principle of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant of Economic and Social Rights, the International Labour Organisation standards on labour migration, and the UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families. This principle underpins Australia’s Fair Work Act which treats migrant workers as within its scope” (Tham, 2020, para. 9).

Whiteness and coloniality, manifested in cultures of privilege, power, and the sense of entitlement, frame this notion of the ‘elephant in the room’ as representing the intersection of racial discrimination and insecure work. However, the ‘elephant’ is nuanced for many, best explained by a spectrum of racism, traversing casual to systemic racism. In the pandemic context, it spans the wilful ignorance associated with the systems and structures exposing the White Australia legacy to the unconscious bias evident in reactive public health policies.

## **CONCLUSION - SYMPTOMS OF ILLNESS, SYMPTOMS OF CHANGE**

As the pandemic has entered the phase of second and third waves around the world, the prevailing discourse is that of sustaining a balance between limiting virus transmission, minimising economic impacts, and maintaining political stability whilst awaiting an effective vaccine. The language and imagery surrounding the ‘war’ against the viral ‘enemy’ underscores the scale of global disruption and transformation. However, the pandemic can also be viewed through the paradoxical lens of disaster and opportunity and its future implications for society at all levels.

The geo-political order is already repositioning in response to perceptions of the culpability of China, the dysfunctional pandemic containment responses of powers such as the USA, India, and Brazil, and the emergence of smaller countries with effective models of pandemic management. Similarly, the neo-liberal system has not simply been exposed for creating inequity but also unsustainable on public health grounds. Can the pandemic represent both a crisis for modern society and a circuit breaker in challenging such inequity?

The paradox can be seen in the humanist, civil society sentiment of ‘all being in it together’ contrasting with the disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups in society. In Australia, the acknowledgment of

the link between the transmission of COVID-19 and the insecure, casualised workforces in essential industries – such as aged care, security, and food distribution – poses questions regarding future workplace laws and regulations. It remains to be seen whether the post-pandemic era will be transformed by this scale of disruption or whether the evident inequities will become further entrenched. Returning to Arundhati Roy’s words, this will be defined by how we salvage the wreckage of the train.

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