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Visible Whiteness: Coming to Terms with White Racial Identities

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Abstract: White racial identities are a largely unrecognized identity location. With race having become one of the key defining features of contemporary society, a considerable body of work has recently emerged exploring white dominant racial identity and identification. This paper reports on work undertaken with a group of middle-years high school students in Queensland Australia, and charts a course for understanding and coming to terms with whiteness. Emphasis is placed upon the description and critical analysis of signifiers of race present in the physical environment and how these come to provide reference points for understanding race. Through the application of a visual ethnographic methodology that engaged the research participants as active creators of knowledge, this paper explores some of the implications of race and whiteness and offers ideas for how an emancipatory view of race might be achieved.

Keywords: Race, Ethnicity, Racial Awareness, Anti-Racist Pedagogies, Criticality, Critical Citizenship

Introduction

IN THIS AGE of global terror and the West's re-affirmed awareness that cultural values in other parts of the world do not always readily lend themselves to the logic it applies, it is issues of race and difference that hold a significant place in our global psyche. Unfortunately, race comes to feature in some of the more problematic aspects of our shared and increasingly global experience. We see race regularly connected to themes of violence and social unrest with the idea of difference in these cases standing as the impasse upon which racialised constructions of identity function as the impetus of conflict. Recent examples such as the 2005 'Cronulla Riots' (as they have been popularly titled¹) in Sydney, Australia and longer term conflicts including the various ongoing problems in the (so-called) Middle-East and current 'War on Terror' demonstrate the centrality race and difference have as foundations and sites of conflict.

Race often comes to be applied as an explanation for the *bad* aspects of being identified. Social understandings about what the phenotypical, cultural, linguistic, national and various other features individuals contain when collectively lumped together in the public imagination draw on socially mediated expectations, even though these are often incorrect, contrived or largely stereotypical. Add to this the 'invisibility' of whiteness in this racial logic of naming and knowing what an individual *is and must be* according to the assumptions made about

¹ The article, 'Cronulla Riots', from the *Comparative Studies of Australia* website details the 'Cronulla Riots' and provides background and commentary on the politics of race as they connected to this 'event'.

their race, and the problem of viewing race as something the ‘Other’ embodies conveniently pathologises difference as abnormal (whilst also implicitly re-enforcing a white ‘centre’ of normality by comparison). A long tradition of writing by theorists including Said (1979; 1994), Bhabha (1994), Du Bois (1903) and hooks (1981) explores this process, but for this paper, it is the way racial overtones expressed socially in everything from ‘the media’ to gossip between friends (this is a *total* cultural process expressed in all aspects of the social dynamic) that position race as something other than ‘white’ that will be explored.

With this implicit recognition of race being normalized as something non-white, it is no surprise that problems of race are viewed as something the ‘Other’ possess and perpetuate. Whenever ‘white’ guilt and ownership of racial issues is drawn into the equation, paternalism leading to salvation (as demonstrated in Australia during 2007 with the Federal Government’s ‘emergency’ action in Northern Territory aboriginal communities) or gestural acknowledgement of past ‘injustices’ (such as Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s apology to Indigenous Australians in 2008) feature as the sorts of responses we consider appropriate (and by implication, sufficient to redress historically rooted practices of discrimination). In these responses, the issue is not so much about the dismantling of the white centre, other than to offer passing acknowledgement that white hegemony is largely responsible, but rather is to show that action on race should be taken due to the plight of variously disenfranchised / underprivileged / violent / untrustworthy / marginalized / disrespectful / unruly / ungrateful non-white peoples. Race, along with all of its attendant problems, belongs to dark-skinned, culturally different people in these conceptualizations.

The point here is that as much as a ‘white’ centre stands invisibly- a hologram from which we fail to see the racial implications of ‘whiteness’ itself- it is the way that the racial Other is formulated and ascribed meaning and value (typically as *bad* or undesirable) with reference to whiteness that is important. This is the argument that Said presents in terms of his idea of Orientalism (1979), and furthered in Mitchell’s (1991) ‘Colonising Egypt’ as an account of the way Egypt as a land of ‘the exotic’ is represented via the Western gaze. The current ‘war against terror’, in which ‘terror’ has come to stand metonymically for a largely Muslim face, works from a similar logic constructed around an age old fear of dark skinned, culturally different and linguistically remote groups of peoples. The patronizing distrust the West holds for difference in this instance (the West has after all charged itself with the responsibility of bringing peace and democracy to this region of the world, as if it is in its power and moral graciousness to do such a thing) carries an air of both fear and mistrust as the cultural difference that exists between ‘us and them’ is constructed as dangerous.

More locally, the then Australian Government’s 2007 ‘intervention’ in Northern Territory aboriginal communities to curb child abuse and alcohol related violence similarly highlights (albeit for very different reasons) the noteworthiness race carries as a signifier of social locatedness, delinquency and deficit. Drawn into the government’s approach, media reporting and general sentiment in white communities to this intervention, race featured as the mechanism by which a homogenizing categorization of entire communities of people could be affected. This ‘emergency’ (Toohey 2008:16) as it was called, was blind to difference within aboriginality (all you had to be was ‘black’) and caught in its net people who had no history of violence, who maintained employment and housing and who (in opposition to the stereotyped representations circulating in the public imagination and reiterated by carefully selected media imagery) were part of loving families. Even so, these people were still required to forfeit salaries, allowances and other finances to the regulation of government agencies,

endure the national stigma that aboriginality had been associated with and, in what was suggested as being an effort to monitor and control spending on alcohol, simply accede to the government's policy because they were 'black'; not because they were violent.

Somewhat ironically, at around the same time a series of child-neglect cases in white families in Australia surfaced. One situation involved the gassing of children in a murder-suicide following a marriage break-up whilst another, in affluent professional family, twin toddlers were neglected to the point of starvation^{2 3}. Most recently, a 3-year-old girl was thrown off Melbourne's West-Gate bridge⁴. As desperately sad and exasperating as these cases each were, there was no call for intervention to curb violence and child-abuse in white families as there had been in remote aboriginal communities. These situations were considered as extra-ordinary in white communities and the result of specific situations, but not an inherent problem with being white. This feature of the racialised identity binary is important: a bad white is an oddity, someone who has gone off the tracks. A bad black, by comparison, is "typical". In the unthinking popular imagination the surprise is a black who is not bad.

Being White- Being Raced

The point that these situations highlight is that race is more than seeing problems as the province of the Other. Race isn't just 'over there' where strange cultural traits and ways of life occur. Race, it is so easy to forget, is also about whiteness. Fine (1997) notes this point, and suggests that 'by keeping our eyes on those who gather disadvantage, we have not noticed white folks' (57).

To be white means carrying racial legacies that are just as significant as being 'non-white', but that position the white person in a social dynamic in which race largely doesn't marginalize or call into question ones entire being, morality, and worth. Whiteness is the 'invisible knapsack of privilege' that McIntosh (1989) notes and is, for the most part, about being racially 'invisible' (at least when it comes to the assigning of 'bad' bits of race). As Dyer (1997) notes, 'white people have had so very much more control over the definition of themselves and indeed of others' that it is easy to forget the implications of race as white.

It is from this perspective and concern for the implications of the invisibility of whiteness that we attempted to explore the ways that living whiteness worked from a mostly 'invisible' basis. For many 'race' is a code word for the 'Other' (Austin 2005: 60), and simultaneously represents a failure to see the specific social relations, locations of privilege and the 'ideology of dominance' (McIntyre 1997: 3) that whiteness maintains. Whiteness must be excavated if any serious understandings of race hope to move beyond simple paternalism or 'false charity' (Freire 1972). To do anything else is to maintain a view of race that situates the exploration within the realm of the Other whilst implicitly continuing the invisibility of whiteness by drawing attention to 'othered' outcomes of race alone. Whiteness, too, must be explored for a full appreciation of how race operates as our 'most dangerous myth' (Montagu 1974).

² As reported on the Nine Network's '60 Minutes' in Australia on July 6th 2008, <http://sixtyminutes.ninemsn.com.au/article.aspx?id=590636>

³ Tenenbaum (1999), in what now seems like unfortunate coincidence, provides a survey of similar events that occurred a decade ago.

⁴ As reported by the ABC, 29th January 2009, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/01/29/2477730.htm>

The Project

The project that underpins this paper sought to explore ideas of race and *self as white* with a group of middle years high school students. The point was to confront race and whiteness as a ‘moment of bafflement’ (Spivak 1990) from which new understandings and ideas about race might emerge. While the vast majority of the students we worked with in this project identified as ‘White’, the school community in which the project took place had a racially and ethnically diverse student population, and had recently experienced conflict that was identified by some students as being ‘racially motivated’.

A second purpose of the project was to ‘make real’ the often abstract conceptualizing that work in identity and race can sometimes result in. With this project and the connection to the students we worked with, we wanted to develop an approach for transformative research that moved beyond just academic cultural critiques’ to become ‘collaborative and politically involved’ in the sites of our work and cultural production (Foley and Valenzuela 2005: 217). This also aligns with the concerns of the ‘engaged campus’ in which universities and academic institutions (re)connect with their local communities (Hackney 1986).

Method

‘Exploring Race and Ethnicity’ is a large scale ethnographic research project undertaken by Jon Austin, Andrew Hickey and a team of research assistants funded through the *Centre for Research in Transformative Pedagogies* (CRTP) at the *University of Southern Queensland*, Australia. In partnership with a prominent state high school located in Queensland, Australia, the project explored the understandings of race and ethnicity held by a group of middle-years secondary school students as part of a formal Civics/Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) program.

The project commenced with a ‘racial audit’ of the school undertaken solely by Austin and Hickey as the project’s principal researchers. The audit sought to identify and record instances of racial identity expressed visibly in the school. This partial and ‘monological’ (Carspecken 1996) view of the school site served two purposes; firstly, to provide the principal researchers with an understanding of the school site including its structure and layout. Secondly, it worked as a foundation from which the students could undertake a later interrogation of how representations of race operated in the site. The point of the audit at this stage of the project was to capture, using digital photographic techniques, expressions of race appearing on such things as murals, posters, signage and other visual signifiers (Figures 1, 2 and 3 present examples of images capturing such instances).



Figure 1: Mural Depicting Freda Kahlo near an Assembly Area



Figure 2: A Didgeridoo on Display in a Glass Cabinet in the School Administration Offices



Figure 3: 'Ethnic' Dolls on Display in the School Auditorium

The audit was performed using a visual ethnographic approach, whereby the captured images were applied 'as a referent for the development of theory' (Harper 2005: 748). This inductive process sought to uncover the ways race was represented in the physical environment of the school from the perspective of the ethnographic outsider- both researchers had limited connection with the school prior to the project and cast their observations as 'professional strangers' (Agar 1996) to the site.

After this foundational audit was completed and a sense of the school generated by the principal researchers, work with the students began. This was scheduled into the weekly class timetable of the students, with a 'double' lesson (70 minutes) set aside for direct work with students by the researchers, and follow up sessions later in the week in which preparatory tasks, revision and follow-up work was led by the classroom teacher. The sessions were all planned, with set activities and a structure for the sessions organized in advance (Appendix A captures some of these materials). From this basis, the program ran over a full term as a discreet unit of work within the Civics/SOSE class.

As work with the students in the classroom commenced, the second stage of the project sought to have students deploy their own audit of the school site. In a similar approach to that utilised by the principal researchers during the initial 'audit', the students were arranged in groups and sent out with the simple brief to 'capture images of race as they saw it expressed in the school' with digital cameras. Following this, and after being encouraged to continue noting and recording expressions of race in their everyday lives throughout the following week, a group discussion of the captured images and revealing of the researchers' audit of the school commenced in a subsequent classroom session. The point here was to develop a dialogic approach to reading the site that combined both the researchers theoretically informed observations of race as 'outsiders' with the local familiarity of the students. Such an approach went to engage multiple positions in the naming and interrogation of this site and to remove the 'ivory tower position of autonomy and objectivism' (Saukko 2005: 344) that researcher-centric accounts can sometimes bring.

Following this combined audit, from which perspectives of race were developed according to what the semiotics and interpretation of collected images suggested, the third stage of the project went about establishing a theoretical basis to understand why representations of race existed as they did. To do this, a 'cultural studies' approach that drew on history, media studies and linguistic and semiotic theory to theorise the ways that race came to be understood socially was deployed. Working through and deconstructing (Hickey 2005) 'artefacts' of culture that related to race provided an opportunity for the students to look at the racial politics of language, imagery and 'naming' presented socially. By reading these 'social texts' as politicized artefacts and connecting this to an emerging theorization of how race works to actively marginalize or privilege, the students then turned their attention to 'reading' the images that they had collected during their audit. While the earlier analysis of these images was concerned with establishing the contexts and broad descriptive elements inherent to these photographs, attention now turned to what these images said about race in the school. The point here was to activate the students' own enquiry via the 'generative themes' (Shor 1987) that emerged from the collected images and to develop an interpretation grounded in the students' emerging knowledge of race as a socially mediated, historically signified and arbitrarily constructed mechanism of human stratification.

Given that the majority of the students identified as 'white', specific attention was given in this process to the way that whiteness works implicitly and 'invisibly'. The students set about establishing definitions of whiteness against a conceptualization of race as an 'axis of identity' (Austin 2005; Hickey and Austin 2007) from which signifying terms such as 'safe/dangerous', 'good/bad', 'wealthy/poor', 'refined/rough' were overlaid on an axis that had at each end the terms 'Black' and 'White'. The point here was to establish a symbolic etymology of the terms that are applied to describe and signify race and how the politics of naming work to marginalize or privilege dependant on the assumptions linked to racial locations. From the theoretical and conceptual framework this provided, the expressions of race captured in the images of the school were critiqued in order to have the students conceptualize the way the school was racially politicised via visual signifiers.

The final stage of the project sought to have students develop a response to the issues of race that were uncovered. As part of the formal assessment in this program, the students were required to develop a folio of their collected images and develop responses to set tasks through the term, and finally develop an artifact that could be used to write-back and challenge those expressions they encountered during the audit. The students developed a series of resistant artefacts: post-card style information flyers, posters, pamphlets and several other forms of information disseminators to carry messages that challenged racial stereotypes, encountered the invisibility of whiteness and baffled existing assumptions presented in the school were developed. Figures 4 and 5 show examples of some of this work.

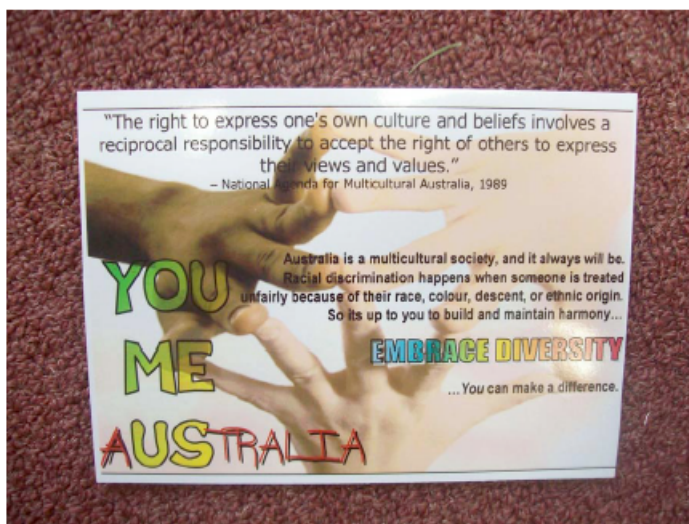


Figure 4: A Postcard Style Racial Awareness Artifact



Figure 5: A Flyer Style Racial Awareness Artifact

Student Beliefs

At this point of the program the principal investigators interviewed the students to gain an insight into their thoughts on the program, and any changes they felt had occurred in their own understandings of race as an identity marker. The interviews attempted to gauge what (if any) transformation in thinking about race had occurred through the term. The interviews were applied according to an open, unstructured format that drew on Spradley's (1979) approach to the ethnographic interview as a 'friendly conversation into which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to assist informants respond as informants' (58-9). The interviews were recorded using an Olympus WS-100 digital recorder and transcribed soon after the interview in a 'denaturalised' (Oliver, Serich and Mason 2005) format that focused on capturing the rich informational content of the conversation. Students met with the researchers in pairs or threes of their own choosing. This format was utilized to provide a more secure and comfortable setting for the student participants and seemed to yield qualitatively better data than would have been the case if students had been interviewed individually. Both researchers were present at and participated in each interview. All names attributed in the following transcripts quotes are pseudonyms, with the interviews all conducted in a classroom at the school.

A large part of the conversations centered on how the students now understood their own racial locatedness and how they might work to disrupt problematic assumptions about race. In response to one question that asked students to reflect on what they thought about race, two responded as follows:

"I never stopped to think about my own racial identity before. As a 'white' person, you don't think about these things" (Sam 13 th Nov, 2008)

"I knew it was there but I just didn't really think much of it really, like just sort of went past" (Justine 13 th Nov, 2008)

The underlying significance of this question centred on the 'moment of bafflement' (Spivak 1990) that had occurred in the students' thinking about whiteness as racial location. In terms of the reasons for this disruption in their thinking, another student noted that:

"Yeah you sort of [don't] really think of it because white people are everywhere sort of thing and you just think oh black people they have a race, Indian people have a race and you just don't really think white people do really like" (Alex 13 th Nov, 2008)

This was very much the point of the project- to have the students appreciate that race works from all positions and carries influence (whether privileging or marginalizing) over how individuals are represented and positioned.

From this, we asked the students how they felt they could affect change if confronted with situations of racial conflict. Several students identified that there had been instances where 'racist' language had been used against groups of students in the school community, and in response to a question that asked how they might challenge this noted the following:

Interviewer: Do you think in the case of people who perhaps use those words around the place or use them off-hand... is it important do you think to stop those people and say, "hey that word is really problematic, you need to stop and think about it" or is it

a situation where we should just get over it, it's just a word, let's not worry too much about it? What do you reckon?

Abby: It depends on the situation, like if they're like being derogative sort of thing, like by saying, you're a nigger, sort of thing like, you've got to pull them up like, yeah. (13 th Nov, 2008)

In terms of how this might be done, another student noted the following:

Patrick: It depends on whether the situation would be violent... if it was violent it'd probably be best just to stay out of it...I think it depends on the person because if you know the person who's doing it you don't, you don't know what you'd do in a situation unless you're stuck there...

Interviewer: Okay, so let's say a friend of yours is being quite racist, would you feel more comfortable suggesting to this person- someone familiar to you- that this is wrong?

Patrick: Yeah, it's like, pull your head in. I'd probably say something to them because I don't see why people have to be like that. (13 th Nov, 2008)

A significant theme that came out of our work with the students and emerged in the interviews was a sense of empathy when considering race. This worked not only in the consideration of problematic issues of race from the perspective of the Other, but also in terms of what whiteness might mean:

Because the majority of people you are usually surrounded by are white and you took it as the normal and then when we started talking about it, it kind of made you think, oh, okay, yeah I'm a race too and what it would be like in someone else's shoes. That's what I found interesting (Vicky 13 th Nov, 2008) .

Given that our central purpose for this project was to open for discussion issues of race as a significant element of identity and social stratification, this realization of the effects of race was a major breakthrough. During the sessions through the term, the students demonstrated a growing awareness of the importance of difference, with several of the students raising these concerns in the interviews. While in many situations race is an uncomfortable topic to discuss openly, we found that the students were developing a discourse that allowed for frank, but critically informed discussion about how race influenced their lives and outlook on the social world. From this experience, we maintain that if critical thinking can occur in terms of what race means, how it positions people in the community and how we collectively might do something to overcome the fears, assumptions and stereotypes surrounding racial difference, the communities in which we live will be far more harmonious locations. These ideas were certainly supported by what the students were telling us.

Some Final Notes

The significance of race simply cannot be ignored. But by engaging race and the problems that surround the stratification of human beings on racial lines, a major point of recognition must be that whiteness too, occupies racialised territory. There exists the challenge to make sense of whiteness as a privileged zone of identity and one that through its privilege and

unquestioned existence provides a backdrop against which otherness and non-white race locations find definition.

To make sense of race in this project, we engaged a group of young people who, whilst showing pre-existing concerns about race and the effects that racial tension had brought to their school, didn't have the theoretical foundations to articulate fully what their suspicions suggested. Our work was to walk through the terrain of race, pointing out significant ideas and inconsistencies in the deployment of race in 'everyday' settings such as their school grounds. By problematising what was directly local to them, we developed a dialogical approach to discovering what race meant in this environment and then went further by starting to conceptualise positive, emancipatory and informed responses to what we found.

As a process for engaging a critically informed understanding of race, we suggest that firstly 'auditing' the physical aspects of local social contexts and surroundings and taking note of those otherwise mundane and everyday 'things' that stand out once viewed via the lens of racial criticality, an understanding of how race operates as a very real and spatially located element of identity might be undertaken. The point of this approach is to remove discussion of race from abstracted conceptualization alone, by seeing it as part of the physical landscape. Race is demonstrated in graffiti, posters, billboards and the arrangement of school buildings as well as in the embodied practices of people. These are the traces that we leave as human beings and when interrogated and 'read' as documents of human activity, provide a basis from which a full appreciation for how race operates might be generated. The focus in such an approach is the development of both a criticality that allows for the identification of racialised markers of the landscape and a theoretical framework from which these markers might be historicised and situated socially as artifacts of the constructedness of race. It is from this point that the gaze might also turn inward, so that an exploration of the racial formation of Self might be charted against these social phenomena.

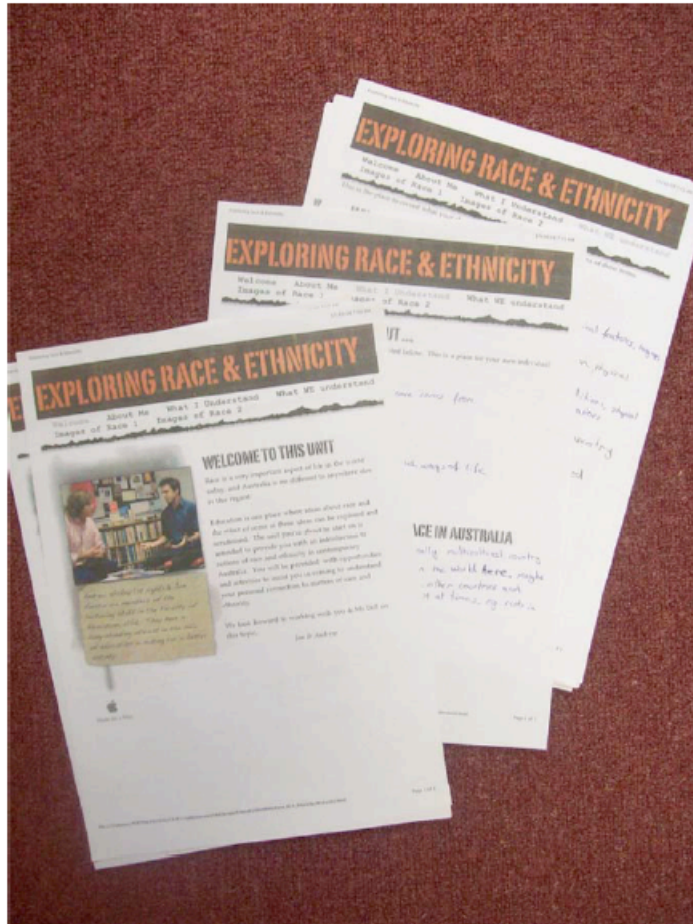
The next stage in this project is to further our work with the students in terms of charting race as Self. The emphasis here will be on how the critical practices for reading the social might be mobilized to account for the constructedness of Self. Whilst we have previously undertaken work (see Hickey and Austin 2007; Austin and Hickey 2007) in this area with groups of informants located in very different contexts to the students we encountered in this project, we now turn to now explore how processes of knowing Self as raced might be engaged within formal classroom practice.

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Appendix A: Resources from the 'Exploring Race and Ethnicity' Project



About the Authors

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Andrew Hickey is a member of the Centre for Research in Transformative Pedagogy and Lecturer in Social Theory and Cultural Studies in the Faculty of Education, USQ. He has published in the areas of identity, representation politics, critical pedagogy and qualitative research methodologies and is the author of (Re)Presenting Education (with Jon Austin) published by Pearson in 2006. Andrew is also a musician and plays in blues-rock bands whilst maintaining a collection of Fender Stratocaster guitars. Between playing in bands and keeping his two boys under control, he completed his Doctoral studies by ethnographically investigating applications and ideas of 'community' in contemporary urban settings.

Jon Austin

Jon Austin is an Associate Professor and member of the Centre for Research in Transformative Pedagogy in the Faculty of Education at the University of Southern Queensland. His current academic and research interests reside broadly within the areas of cultural studies and critical pedagogy: identity & difference; postcolonial and decolonial praxis; and transformative pedagogies. He is the editor and co-author of three books (*Culture & Identity* 2005, *Re-Presenting Education* 2006, and *Educating for Healthy Communities* 2007). His doctoral work was in the area of whiteness and white identity.

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