Writing Race: Making Meaning of White Racial Identity in Initial Teacher Education

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Abstract

Race has become one of the key defining features of contemporary society, and a considerable body of work has recently emerged in the area of white dominant racial identity and identification. This paper reports on images, experiences and understandings of white racial identity elicited from initial teacher education students by use of a process of critical autoethnographic interrogations of Self. Emphasis is placed upon the description and analysis of a particular form of critical self-reflection and (re)presentations of autoethnographically-derived understandings of racialised identities. These representations provide an insight into nascent processes of conscientisation engaged in by initial teacher education students. The paper explores possible implications for the development of racially aware teachers, and broader connections with transformative pedagogical practices. The data comprising the basis of this project were derived from a combination of learning conversations and narrative inquiry, both of which are discussed in this paper.

Introduction

Some of the most significant ruptures of old social and ideological certainties have occurred in the supposedly settled racial hierarchies of the world, with matters of race currently among the most visible social issues facing many societies. Indeed, for some, racial imagery is central to the very organisation of modern social structures (Dyer, 1997, p. 1), and as such race assumes prominence in matters of social justice as the major point of accumulation of prejudice, proscription and paranoia in the contemporary epoch. Despite a view that race is "man's [*sic*] most dangerous myth" (Montagu, 1974), the discourse of race continues to be one of the most potent metanarratives of contemporary society (King, 2000, p. 141). From this perspective, race becomes one of a number of social fictions necessary to maintain the denigration or sub-humanising of certain identifiable groups in order that their exploitation continue with relatively clear consciences for the beneficiaries of the process.

This process of naturalising oppression and exploitation (individual or group) involves originating an Other, and is a much explored phenomenon (Bhabha, 1990, 1994; Hage, 1994; hooks, 1997; JanMohamed, 1985; McLaren, 1995; Mercer, 1990; Said, 1978, 1993; Solomon, 1998; Spivak, 1990; Thompson & Tyagi, 1996; Winant, 1998). Essentially, from this perspective the act of identifying requires the simultaneous act of not identifying. In the act of coming to represent Self, the Other marks the oppositionary end of the racial binary – that location that is not "us" but provides the frame against which the Self is affirmed. This paper explores these

formations and understandings of racial identities engaged by initial teacher education students.

Whiteness as Racial Default

For many whites, the word "race" is a code word for the Other. It is used to signify the presence of non-whites in ways that turn the focus onto the non-white, effectively rendering the white centre unseeable. It also operates to arrange various locations on the race axis hierarchically, with whites at the top and others spread across the remaining space (Erickson, 1995). In the Australian context, common perceptions of race and race relations are inevitably taken to mean Indigenous Australians and matters touching upon their position within contemporary society, and, more recently, are used as a code word for "Arab" or "Middle Eastern"[1]). Rarely, if ever, does the term "race" expand to incorporate white Australians as a focus.

One of the difficulties for Whites in talking about and reflecting upon their whiteness is that the very novelty of the concept for many is such that they don't have a familiarity with an appropriate lexicon of race from which to draw in formulating even a sketch of what it is that the term "whiteness" circumscribes. This is reflected in the inordinate amount of anxiety and struggle that many Whites apparently experience in trying to describe themselves racially (McIntyre, 1997).

The irony of this White flailing about in search of the language of identity is that, more than any other group, Whites inhabit a powerful position of identity-naming: "white people have had so very much more control over the definition of themselves and indeed of others than have those Others" (Dyer, 1997, p. xiii). It is because of the centrality of White positioning within the spheres of production of image, identity and location that this capacity to name others while eschewing any responsibility to name Self becomes self-alienating: the continual act of naming and re-naming the Other forces an outward fixation of the gaze to the effect that the Self becomes unfamiliar, strange and virtually unknown (and unknowable).

The starting point for an interrogation of what it means to be "white" must, of necessity, be that of what McLaren (1997, p. 25) calls, with a pungent dual meaning, "unthinking whiteness". In a society where "only white people have the luxury of having no color", McLaren (1997) maintains that:

> Whites need to ask themselves to what extent their identity is a function of their whiteness in the process of their ongoing daily lives and what choices they might make to escape whiteness….Whiteness is not a pre-given, unified ideological formation, but is a multi-faceted collective phenomenon resulting from the relationship between the self and the ideological discourses which are constructed out of the surrounding local and global terrain. Whiteness is fundamentally Euro- or Western-centric in its episteme, as it is articulated in complicity with the pervasively imperializing logic of empire. (p. 21)

Teaching (as) a White Profession

Perpetuating the invisibility of white racialised identity, characterisations of the heavily White teaching profession in the contemporary Australian context are similarly marked by an absence of race. In none of the three major reports on the profile or demographic characteristics of the teaching profession in Australia

published in the past few years does race figure as an explicit feature of teacher identity (Hage, 1998; Dempster, 2001; Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, 2003; Richardson & Watt, 2006). Reading through the paucity of data on the racial characteristics of Australia's teaching force, one could conclude that either race is of such little consequence as to fail to merit any space or that it is so obvious and unremarkable (literally) that to highlight it would be superfluous. Teaching, in Australia at least, is a White profession.

Excavating Whiteness: Bafflement and Trauma

This study is based on an optimism that it is possible for white teachers to develop a sense of self and identity such that they become secure enough to engage in a project of positive reinvention of that identity, one that would at least be conscious of the privileging that accompanies the assumption and the ascription of White identity. Stephenson (1997) argues that "becoming aware of white advantage is a necessary requirement to challenging it". It was the purpose of this study to uncover ways in which pre-service teachers came to what seems to be the first crucial point in this process: an awareness of their own racial identity.

Two concepts in particular presented possibilities for at least ruffling, if not disrupting, the unthinking comfort that accompanies White residence in a white place. Both ideas relate to the conditions under which questions about white racial identity might emerge as personal imperatives. These ideas are "moments of bafflement" (Spivak, 1990, p. 137) and the impact of identity trauma as a precursor to self-awareness (Giroux, 1997).

In this study, we have attempted to ascertain the contribution that such an approach to the development of White racial identity might have. That is, we have organised aspects of the participants' narratives around this idea of identity trauma, of an unsettling, anxiety-filled experience with Self that doesn't fit with existing images and assumptions – of moments of bafflement that disrupt settled senses of identity and make visible previously invisible ones.

Researching White Racial Identity

The study was concerned to draw out the ways in which the participants both experienced and explained their racial positionings, largely through engaging in a series of learning conversations (Thomas & Hari-Augstein, 1985) and the use of critical autoethnographic approaches (Austin & Hickey, 2007). Both of these methods are rooted in the broad area of consciousness raising research approaches, and as such serve at least dual purposes: one, to provide opportunities for researchers to capture and make meaning of the life experiences of the participants in the study; and two, to generate deeper levels of understanding of their lives on the part of the participants themselves. In this particular case, the intention was to assist the participants to come to a deeper level of understanding about their own racial identity and the ways in which these had been constructed, developed, resisted and manipulated.

Learning conversations provide an alternative to the more formal research interview, and because they are typically conducted around a specific event or experience (Thomas & Hari-Augstein, 1985, p. 101) they allow the participant to come to realise what has been learned through a conversationally mediated exploration of the event in

question. In this study, specific instances and experiences of racial engagement formed the content of the conversations.

In the excavation of those life experiences that seemed critical to the development of a racialised identity, the use of critical autoethnographic approaches was invaluable. In this, participants typically moved through three stages: memory work (Haug, 1983), reflection-on-action (learning conversations); and conscientisation (Freire, 1974).

We focus here solely on the work with one of our participants, Jacinta, a 24 year old student enrolled in a primary school teacher education program. Having spent much of her life, in her own view, in a "normal" Australian family, Jacinta subsequently became involved on a very personal level with various Indigenous Australian communities and people. As such, the period of her life when we worked with her in excavating her racial identity was one that was quite at odds with her previous life experience, particularly from the perspective of the importance of race in contemporary Australian society.

Exposing Whiteness

In our first conversation, Jacinta declared herself to be white and Irish, a combination that was reiterated over the following conversations with the addition of the appellation "Catholic" further complicating her assumed identity. Whiteness was something that Jacinta took for granted while simultaneously resisting. When we talked about how she knew that she was white, she commenced with a set of phenotypical criteria and then brought the scope of the problem into a more personalised, familial ambit by applying a more cultural view:

> Jacinta: Well, you've got your basic skin colour [laughs] which is more pink than white but it's lighter, but that's why I think it's associated with white. Also my cultural background would make me more likely to do things in a European way.
> Jon: Can you give me some examples of that?
> Jacinta: Well, [long pause] I really can't. My family, like most families, I guess, get together and things like that. (Jacinta conversation T3, text units 10-15)

It was impossible at this point for Jacinta to identify what it was that Whites did that constituted their whiteness. She just knew that she was white, and this self-knowledge came about via the operation of the comparative binarisms established early in life.

So how did Jacinta see herself? How and with whom did she identify? In her mind, the influences on her sense of identity were largely proximal ones: the closer the experience with aspects of the complexity of her identity, the more that part was foregrounded in the pastiche out of which she emerged as an individual: "I'd have to say Irish, because all my Irish relatives have just been visiting, so I'm still in that frame, but I'm identifying more with the Aboriginal culture because I live with them" (Jacinta conversation T2, text unit 23).

Jacinta did see herself evincing a positive white identity, despite being unable to flesh out what that might actually be. She contrasted this positive identity with more racist whites in a way that exposed a "good white-bad white" dichotomy. Identity was something that was both given and asserted, but that identity was contingent on its recognition by others, particularly white others, and on the environment in which that

identity was located and forged: "I think I see myself more as Catholic than white because the families I went to church with were all white" (Jacinta conversation T3, text unit 15).

Here whiteness was a subset characteristic of a stronger element of identity, that of (Christian) religion. The enduring nature of this influence is important, particularly in view of an earlier admission of an increasing distance between herself and the dictates and practices of Catholicism. Nevertheless, in terms of self-identification, white Catholicism is significant here, as are the Indigenous Australian environments that Jacinta is finding herself traversing more and more: "I'm identifying more with the Aboriginal culture because I live with them. I live with three Aboriginal students" (Jacinta conversation T2, text units 23-24).

Does this meandering across "identiscapes" mean the emergence of a hybrid form of identity, neither white nor non-white? Is this the place where the Third Space[2] of Homi Bhabha resides? Jacinta doesn't see herself as a positive white identity in the sense of being powerful and aggressive in a quest for overcoming racism. During one of our conversations, the talk got around to bell hooks's view of whiteness as terrorism and her plea for Whites to work to construct more positive racial identities. I asked Jacinta to consider what the view of whiteness as terrorism might mean and what her experience of living with racism meant for the emergence of positive white identities in hooks' (1997) sense:

> Jon: Do you see yourself as a white terrorist?
> Jacinta: No, unless the house isn't clean, but then Colleen [Jacinta's Indigenous Australian flatmate and friend] is more frantic than I am. I don't know that I see myself as a positive white identity either, because a lot of people I used to speak with before they knew [where] I lived and I used to hang down at Kumbari[3] more now. People used to speak to me a lot more often than they do now.
> Jon: So your influence has declined?
> Jacinta: Oh, yeah. (Jacinta conversation T4, text units 96-103)

Following on from this, we talked about Jeater's (1992) idea of the two types of white identities (black wannabes and racist oppressors) and the similar call for whites to develop non-intimidatory, non-appropriating white identities:

> Jon: Do your white friends see you as the black wannabe?
> Jacinta: Not really; how do you put it? I think I hang out there [Kumbari] because I study with Karen [an Indigenous friend and fellow pre-service teacher], I tutor there so I'm seen more there, but even if they see me in the library there isn't a great number of people who know me and I know many of their views and I disassociated myself….Karen's a very confronting person and once she's confronted somebody it's like "She's scary; I'm moving away". I see it in lectures and I cringe at times, but she's up front and she's either been influenced, or they've been influenced by something Karen's done and they've thought [about me], "Oh, no". Tarred with the same brush.
> Jon: Now there's a good example of Karen being a non-stereotypical black identity because she's prepared to put up, explain and confront, but that's a different black identity, and the challenge is to look at how we can help, through education, construct positive white identities.
> Jacinta: Yeah, yeah I agree with that. (Jacinta conversation T4, text units 105-113)

While not being able to capture her own racial identity in clear terms, Jacinta was at least able to recognise what membership of that group brought with it: "I have more privileges because of my skin colour" (Jacinta conversation T3, text unit 121) and the examples of this weren't difficult for her to find:

> If Colleen and I walk into a shop I'll be the first attended, even to buy food. And sometimes I feel that even the people I live with do that. If I'm walking towards the front door they'll let me in first. When I go into the kitchen, they'll let me do what I want to do first, and sometimes I don't think and I just do it and I think, "Oh, no, you go, you don't have to wait for me" and things like that. (Jacinta conversation T3, text units 124-128)

The ingrained nature of the deference accorded to whiteness by, and its everyday effects on, those who are outed by it are clearly evident in this passage – even racially and politically aware Others give unthinking priority to Whites and whiteness.

In response, Jacinta located these personal domestic experiences within a larger context of white dominance, one of the few times that she jettisoned the individual perspective on race and racism and re-viewed these as group or systemically rooted (and routed?). At this time, white privilege existed for Jacinta as a systemic dimension of her simply being who she was: "…but you don't even have to do anything [to earn this privileged position]. And that's what I think shocks me, because before I'd just trundle on my way and accept it" (Jacinta conversation T3, text units 197-198).

Awareness of one's benefiting or taking from a communal pool of rewards without contributing or working to add to the treasure trove can be disturbing, but by the same token Jacinta spoke to perhaps the most difficult dilemma in reconstructing whiteness: "…but you don't want to give up your privilege either in a certain sense" (Jacinta conversation T3, text unit 203).

For many of the participants in this study, the journey to a sense of security with their personal identities has yet to occur: indeed, that journey may never be completed for any of us. What does seem to be apparent in some of the stories, though, as with Jacinta's, is that, as understanding and awareness of aspects, dimensions and elements of identity proceed, a certain sense of security accompanies the process. Whether this is because of a broadening of a field of commonality with others or as a result of emerging cognisance of the terrain of identity politics is unclear. However, as the extracts from Jacinta's experiences show, the process of identity trauma (Giroux, 1997) seems to lead to an understanding and acceptance of self in ways that open up possibilities of minimising the negative and advancing the positive elements of Difference.

Developing an Understanding of Whiteness and White Racial Identity

What is apparent from the stories of the participants in this study is that, once the dimension of race enters considerations of personal identity, the existence of "white" as a category of race becomes less controversial or surprising. This is not, however, to be taken to mean that recognising oneself as a racialised being is not unsettling: as the previous discussion demonstrates, it can be quite the opposite. What the participants in this study seem to have encountered, though, is the image of themselves as

members of the white race, although this is compounded in some instances. Once one commences to see race as something that everyone has or is, it becomes possible to explore the ways in which racial location admits of privilege or disadvantage. This is the terrain of whiteness: the systemic privileging of one racial group over all others in all aspects of social and community life. This latter component of white self-awareness seems to be a far more difficult thing to imagine or accept in the case of the participants here.

Implications and Challenges for Anti-racist Educators

Emerging understandings of the ways in which white initial teacher education students move to make meaning of their racial identities through an explicit focus on the mundane practice of whiteness in everyday life suggest a number of possibilities for practising educators intent upon working in genuinely anti-racist ways. We believe that these pedagogical possibilities and imperatives are of four types:

1. Consciousness/Awareness raising: How might teachers work to make their students aware of the existence of white racial identity and that "white is a colour too" (Roman, 1993)? It seems crucial that educators build in opportunities for students to confront the meaning of "race" as a sociocultural construction that includes white as well as non-white.

2. Conscientisation/encouragement to act: How might educators deepen the effect of their pedagogy to assist students to move from awareness to activism? The move from consciousness to what Freire (1974) called "conscientisation" – developing consciousness, but "consciousness that is understood to have the power to transform reality" (Taylor 1993, p. 52) – is the single most significant contribution that teachers might make to socially just community development, certainly in the sense of challenging racism and its attendant forms of oppression, exploitation and cultural violence. Using their pedagogical authority (Enguita, 2007), teachers need to connect their teaching with action. That is, a broader understanding of the ends of education needs to inform the pedagogical practices of teachers in the classroom and inspire them and their students to act. The challenge here is to engage in a project of reconstructing whiteness.

3. Self-reflection: In what ways might educators overcome or minimise their complicity in the perpetuation of the unearned privileges of whiteness (McIntosh, 1993)? This challenge to educators carries with it the imperative of tying self-knowledge to extant structures and processes of disadvantage and inequity and then of enacting a pedagogy of disruption – a genuinely critical pedagogy that requires, as a first step, an understanding of the fact that "teaching is not an apolitical undertaking" (Bartolome, 2007, p. 280). This requires a contemplation of the individual teacher's political location and preparedness to confront the privileges that this might well bring with it.

4. Humility: How might teachers come to understand genuinely the life experiences of Others? In this study, the participants expressed an emerging understanding of what it means to be raced, an experience that as white people they had not previously thought about and even less been explicitly taught about. The challenge to educators broadly is to enact a pedagogy of humility such that privileged knowledges and worldviews are unsettled, and the existence and legitimacy of alternative ways of meaning-making acknowledged and experienced.

The essential meaning that emerges for us from our work on white racial identities is that teaching can never be settled. Its practitioners must engage in a constant search:

> [C]ritical pedagogues become detectives of new theoretical insights, perpetually searching for new and interconnected ways of understanding power and oppression and the ways they shape everyday life and human experience. They become sleuths on the trail of those ever-mutating forces that threaten power-sensitive forms of democracy around the world. (Kincheloe, 2007, p. 19)

Exploring what it really means to be White presents to us as a major point of departure for such a search.

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[1] While limitations of space require that we resist the urge to engage in an exposition of the essential differences between "race" and "ethnicity" here (the reader is referred to Cornell & Hartmann, 1998; Ng, 1993; Weber, 1968), it is important to note that in the Australian context considerable formal political mileage has been gained through the clever conflation of race and ethnicity in order to build

and maintain an image of growing threat to the Australian (read "white Christian") way of life that "we" supposedly all enjoy and support.

[2] Bhabha's (1990) notion of the Third Space is one that describes an in-between location of hybridity within which new forms of identification might arise: "For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges; rather hybridity to me is the 'Third Space', which enables other positions to emerge" (Rutherford, 1990, p. 211).

[3] Kumbari Ngurpai Lag is the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student support centre at the University of Southern Queensland. Part of its role is to assist Indigenous students with university life and work, and to promote general understanding of Indigenous cultures on the campus.