

Beyond Guilt, Fear and Alienation

Confronting 'Whiteness' with Teacher Education students

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Abstract

It is my contention that notions of privilege as well as issues of oppression must be explored if we take the idea of anti-racism education seriously. In other words, with my students—most of whom are 'white'—I endeavour to invert the gaze and to explore the profound social consequences that the construction of whiteness holds for Indigenous peoples and peoples of colour. However, given that whiteness is more than about skin colour and is, moreover, socially, politically and culturally located, how does whiteness manifest itself within different cultural contexts? What are the differences? Where are the similarities? What do they mean? What are the implications for pedagogy? These questions and others have concerned me for some time and form the basis of on-going research with various groups of Teacher Education students, both in Australia and Germany. My findings within these contexts indicate that education has a crucial role to play in anti-racism education but that it is not enough to simply discuss white race privilege and hope for the best. In fact, based on my research I would suggest that such an approach can be counter-productive and lead to 'guilt, fear and alienation'. As educators what we must be mindful of is to provide hope and critique in equal measure.

Keywords: Critical Whiteness Studies, Anti-racism education, Teacher Education

Critical Whiteness Studies: Inverting the Critical Gaze from the Racial Object to the Racial Subject¹

My overarching aim in working with teacher education students is to facilitate learning experiences that disrupt the liberal perspective on social reality that so many of my students hold. As part of that project I want my students to examine how the boundaries of ethnicity, 'race' and power make visible how whiteness functions as a social construction that is specific to its historical and social location, because as Ruth Frankenberg has pointed out:

To leave whiteness unexamined is to perpetuate a kind of asymmetry that has marred even many critical analyses of racial formation and cultural practice [...] critical analyses of whiteness are vital concomitants of engagements with racial subordination.

(Frankenberg, 1997, 1-2)

Instead of equating race with 'studying down' in the power structure and focussing attention almost exclusively upon racially oppressed groups we need, therefore, to "study the enactment of power and ideologies in a relational way" (Roman, 1993, 78). For me as a teacher educator, the critical

examination of whiteness is part of the larger project of anti-racism. Within teacher education — and specifically within the context of a course titled *Aboriginal and Multicultural Education*² which is a required unit in the teacher education program at my university and which I have been teaching for almost a decade — it is important to 'turn the gaze around'. Instead of focussing on the differences/shortcomings perceived in the Other, it is vital to decentre and deconstruct the normativity of whiteness, bearing in mind that whiteness is not a transhistorical essence, but refers to "a set of locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced" (Frankenberg, 1993, 6). Further, whiteness is not just about skin colour but is

rather more about the *discursive practices* that because of colonialism and neocolonialism, privilege and sustain the global dominance of white imperial subjects and Eurocentric world views. With such a take on whiteness, the issue of "politics of location" becomes important [...] it encourages us to read whiteness from the perspective of [...] "situated knowledge". Such a reading is important because while whiteness has historically enacted a global dominance of itself, that dominance impacts and affects identities and spaces in different ways in different locations as it takes on different meanings in different sites. (Shome, 1999, 108-109)

² Aboriginal and Multicultural Education (EDU230) is a compulsory course for teacher education students at my university. As this is a large course with annual enrolments of around 250 students, I do not have as much contact with the majority of students as I would like. Generally, apart from mass lectures, my only face-to-face contact each semester is with one or two groups of 15-18 students with whom I meet weekly for seminar discussions.

¹ Taken from Toni Morrison's *Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the literary imagination*: "to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served" (1991, 90).



If whiteness is more than about skin colour and is historically and culturally located, cross-national comparisons are likely to be useful in alerting us to similarities as well as differences. Apart from being illuminating in their own right, these are important in terms of developing a curriculum that will assist teacher education students to become multicultural anti-racist educators.

Four Case-Studies: the Role of Education

What I would like to do in this paper, therefore is to discuss some of the patterns that have emerged in my own research in the area of critical whiteness studies. Thus, the 'evidence' on which I draw is derived from four disparate studies that do not readily compare in the strict sense of the word but that nevertheless display patterns worthy of note. I have reported these studies in depth elsewhere (see Aveling 1998; 2003; 2004), what I would like to do here is to present some key findings and attempt to tease out how these can be useful for professional praxis. What follows, therefore is a brief description of each of the groups I interviewed. This in turn, is followed by a schematic representation of key responses centred on 'race', whiteness, the respondents' own education, and their beliefs about the role that education might play in creating a more socially just society.

Group A: Australian school students

I interviewed members of this group of 5 male and 7 female young people in 1997. At the time of the interviews all were of school age (between 12 and 17), although some no longer attended school. They came from a range of backgrounds and brought with them a wealth of experiences. Some young people subsisted on unemployment benefits and lived in high rise apartments where the rent was relatively cheap and the fixtures were falling down about their ears. Others in the group lived in much more affluent areas or older multi-ethnic suburbs increasingly regarded as 'trendy'. Some lived at home with their parents while others lived independently. In terms of ethnic and racial background all participants considered themselves to be Australian, even though they took pride in the fact that some of their parents had emigrated from Greece, Italy, Singapore and England.

As my primary research focus was on Indigenous studies, my questions included the following:

- Do you know if Aboriginal Studies is/was taught at your school? Did you study it? Did you enjoy it? What sort of things did you learn?
- What do you think racism is? Have you ever seen incidences of racist acts?
- Have you ever experienced discrimination?

- Have you ever thought about what it means to you that you are 'white'? Do you think being white has advantaged you in some way?

I allowed the young people to structure the agenda about how they wanted to answer and to elaborate on what were issues of concern to them within the context of the focus questions. None of the young people interviewed had any trouble articulating their opinions about racism or what it might mean to be Aboriginal. When I asked, however, what it meant to them that they were 'white' or whether they felt that 'whites' had more advantages in contemporary Australian society, I was frequently left with the feeling that these were the most stupid questions I had ever asked. One of the girls, for example, said:

I never think of myself being white — I never ever — it never occurs to me to describe myself that way — like I never look in the mirror and think "I'm white — I'm so happy I'm white".

When I probed further she said that being white meant being "happy and living in a marriage — and having children — well that's my idea of being white — but it doesn't mean I'm following it". For this group of young people whiteness was not an issue and my efforts to explore it were met with incomprehension and a certain resistance. Despite a reluctance, even inability to directly engage with the notion of 'whiteness' on its own terms, these young people were only able to think and talk about their experiences *vis-a-vis* 'race' by using 'black' or 'white' markers. Yet during the interviews I was frequently told that "it doesn't matter what was on the outside, it's what's on the inside that counts" and that questions of colour were of no concern. I invariably received a cursory reply along the lines of "colour doesn't really matter to me" or "no, I don't think I'm particularly advantaged" when I asked whether 'being white' gave us certain privileges.

Group B: Australian Employed Post-Graduate Women

I have had contact with the twelve women who make up 'Group B' for over a decade as they are part of another, longitudinal project looking at the career development of academically successful women. They were aged in their mid-thirties late in 2000 when I interviewed them. Even though I have interviewed them a number of times, I had never asked them about 'whiteness'. As a group they came from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, and while some had immigrated to Australia, all identified as middle class and Australian. What they had in common was that they were all academic achievers and white. In terms of formal education these women could be said to be 'well educated', having obtained two Doctorates, one Master's degree and a clutch of Bachelor degrees

(either in Arts or Science and with or without Honours³) among them. They were working, or had worked, as lawyers, doctors, research scientists, occupational therapists and psychologists as well as in various areas of public sector management. Most of these women were working full-time and only two described their current status as "stay at home mum".

When I asked them whether they had ever thought about the fact that they were white, these women all replied in the affirmative. Their answers were startling because within the growing body of literature on whiteness it has become almost axiomatic that as whites, we do not define ourselves by our skin colour and subsequently experience ourselves as non-racialised (Levine-Rasky, 2000; Scheurich, 1993; Roman, 1993). Yet the women whom I interviewed paused only briefly, took breath and answered with comments like the following:

I guess I'm one of those people who thinks that where I am and where I've ended up is due to being white and the descendant of colonialists — I've come to this point in my life where if I was walking along the street on my own and there was this scruffy looking Aboriginal person walking on the other side of the street I feel afraid — where does that come from? — I can't help it — and it's everyday — you see crimes reported in the paper — "suspect was an Aboriginal person in their twenties" — and even though I've got the benefit of an education that should tell me about bias in reporting and everything else — my reaction when I'm on my own and I see that person is to be afraid — and then I feel depressed — that we're not taking responsibility for how this has come about — so it's a pretty problematic thing [...] but at the same time I'm walking down the street feeling afraid — so I mean I'm here because my ancestors in recorded history probably displaced the family of that remnant of the Nyoongar⁴ community walking down the street — so it's a very real thing for me — there's very little you can do in a practical sense — someone in my position — maybe that'll change in the future.

As the interviews progressed the women related certain experiences that had temporarily positioned them as 'other'. These experiences led to insights they had not had before, as well as a certain amount of introspection about their position of privilege. For many of them these introspections led to feelings of guilt about the advantages that had accrued to them on the basis of their whiteness. One of the women commented:

When we were living in France I looked French — there were lots of people in our building that were Algerians — they spoke perfect French — but they were black and they were terribly discriminated against — people would

say "they're rough" — "they're this or that" — people would come up to me in the park and say what's the time — I couldn't speak French but they thought I was French — but if I'd been Algerian or looked different they probably wouldn't have even bothered asking me — and those Algerians are as French as the French people because they've got citizenship — I think in those situations I've been able to see how lucky I am to fit into the background and go and live in these privileged countries and not have that implied racism directed towards me because of how I look — as long as I don't speak — nobody looks at me and thinks is she a migrant — and I think I have actually thought about the fact that I'm white and look the same as everybody else — how much that is helping me and how much easier my life is because of it.

Group C: Australian Teacher Education Students

This group consisted of a mixed gender group (7 female; 8 male) of fifteen teacher education students aged between 21 and 45 who were enrolled in *Aboriginal and Multicultural Education* and with whom I met on a weekly basis during second semester in 2003. All of the males in the group were white and identified as Australian. Of the seven women, one was an international student from Africa, one was a reasonably recent immigrant from East Timor, one was Jewish and one was Indigenous but did not publicly identify as such. They all planned to teach and said that they wanted to teach in ways that were culturally relevant and non-discriminatory. While they expressed a firm commitment to social equity — some more so than others — they also expressed more than a little apprehension about how well informed they were to do their aspirations justice.

During the semester students are required to submit weekly critiques of one of the readings for that week. Students tell me that they generally find this requirement quite useful because being required to (and being assessed on) the readings, they are able to contribute to discussions in a more informed way. These critiques — that invited students to comment on the paper in a personal way — have made fascinating reading and have, at times been instructive for me in terms of re-thinking my teaching strategies. Of particular interest here are students' responses to two papers — Gloria Yamato's *Something about the subject makes it hard to name*, and Mary Gannon's *What would a white girl from Boston know about racism* — that were set for the second-last week of semester. I chose these papers for discussion because both employ a first person narrative style in discussing racism in a theoretically rigorous manner, from respectively 'black' and 'white' perspectives. Without fail, those students who were white, appreciated the idea of becoming a 'white ally' because for many of them being white carried with it a sense of guilt and hopelessness about being able to make a difference

³ In Australia, students have the option of adding an Honours, or research year, to their first degree.

⁴ The Indigenous population in Australia comprises of a number of language groups. Nyoongar land is situated in the south-west of Western Australia.

in the lives of their students. One of the white women wrote:

I am glad to have finished with such a powerful reading. This has made me really think about what it is to be white and today I saw colour: my own. My white face in the mirror of my bathroom, in the house that I had no difficulty renting and in the car that my father bought me because I graduated high school. As I walk into university no one looks twice at me, it is easy to belong. My whiteness is all of these things and even more. The privilege of white people is simply immeasurable, it is about life chances.

I have found that this course is sometimes confusing and I am sometimes worried about saying the wrong thing and insulting someone without intending to. Yamato says "know that you'll make mistakes and commit yourself to correcting them and continuing on as an ally, no matter what. Don't give up". I look forward to teaching in ways that are socially critical and making a real difference, at least in some students' lives. A rather fanciful notion, but I'm a bit like that.

Group D: German University Students

I first became interested in comparisons between Australia and Germany after speaking with researchers (whom I had met at different conferences) whose research seemed to indicate that while there were striking differences between these countries —*vis-a-vis* the question of articulating whiteness — at the same time there were also certain similarities. I felt that these ruptures deserved further exploration. The opportunity to speak with German students presented itself recently when I spent some time at a German university.

The group of German university students consisted of three females and two males, aged between 23 and 35. All of them were enrolled in education degrees, although not all were planning to work in schools. Some intended to use their qualifications in areas such as social welfare, youth work and counselling or the private sector. All of them had chosen to attend the seminar series I was teaching, titled *Culture and language: issues within Australia and Germany* that I presented in the first semester of 2003. These weekly seminars were of three hours' duration and provided me with the vehicle to talk to these students about 'whiteness'. I had been advised by a colleague that questions about 'whiteness' would not be well-received and that I should, perhaps ask about 'being German' instead. Given my earlier experience with the group of Australian school students I was prepared to go along with this to some extent but hoped to be able to steer the conversation around to 'whiteness' at some stage. The opportunity arose at my third meeting with this group of students within the context of (then) recent public debates concerning the notion of "Leitkultur"

(as far as I understand it, this is the concept that there must be a body of knowledge that is common to German culture and that is privileged within the democratic German state). Our conversation developed along the following lines:

Nado: So what does it mean to be German?

[silence]

I probed: Is it just having a German passport?

R1: No. Well, Germany hasn't existed all that long as a federation.

R2: It's a feeling of belonging.

R3: It's speaking the language.

R1: Being able to vote.

R4: Being prepared to learn the language and the customs.

R5: To fit in.

[at this point a lengthy discussion ensued about immigrants "not fitting in"]

Throughout our various conversations there were occasional references to cultural differences that prevented 'full integration' into German society but any references to differences on the basis of skin colour tended to be absent. It seemed to me that the particular circumstances of German history made it imperative for the students not see colour and to believe that discussions about colour were racist by definition. It was only when I specifically referred to 'being black' or 'being white' that students were able to cautiously explore their thoughts about this. Nevertheless students commented more than once that 'colour' was not a problem in Germany; that 'problems' with ethnic minorities were based on factors other than colour.

Emerging Patterns

Given these brief snapshots I want to reiterate that no hard and fast comparisons across these groups can, or should, be made. What I want to do in the table below is to explicate the patterns that emerged for me in looking at the responses of these individuals as members of their respective groups. While there were counter-patterns, I do not believe that these were sufficiently strong to obviate making some general statements about each group as a whole. Certainly, in taking this approach, the richness of the data is dissipated and the individuals who participated in the research process disappear into anonymity. I have always resisted working this way, however, in this instance I believe that there is some value in cutting back to the bare bones of generalities to illuminate patterns that dominated within each of the groups.

The 'bare bones' offered for analysis consist of responses about 'whiteness' and 'race'. They also

provide an overview of answers to my questions dealing with respondents' education about multicultural issues or issues related to 'race' while

still at school and finally, sketch respondents' beliefs about the role education might play in promoting a more just and equitable society.

Overview of Findings

	Group A: Australian school students	Group B: Australian employed post- graduate women	Group C: Australian university students (post- EDU230)	Group D: German university students
About being white	thought this question was very peculiar; suggested that it would be more useful to talk about being Australian	had thought about being 'white' and the material benefits that ensued from this	Had never really thought about this before, felt somewhat overwhelmed by all the material being presented: to learn, to think about etc	uneasy about this question; preferred to talk about what it meant to be German and more specifically regional identity; talking about 'whiteness' unimportant because 'problems with immigrants' were seen to be not about colour; being 'white' associated with the extreme right
About 'race'	'race' is about the other; professed to be colour-blind	race cognisant	moved from professing to be colour-blind to acknowledging that to see colour might not necessarily be racist; moving into race cognisance	'race' is about the exotic Other; professed to be colour-blind
Education	reported little education about Indigenous history and culture	reported little education about Indigenous history and culture while at school or university; reported experiences of temporarily being positioned as 'other'. This served to engender crucial insights into white privilege	reported little education about Indigenous history and culture before undertaking EDU230	reported a great deal of education about the Holocaust: "we've had it hammered into us" and "things like this must never happen again. "
Beliefs about the role of education	believed that education makes us more tolerant; that "things are better now"	Believed that education must take a key role in creating a more just society; spoke of guilt, fear and alienation; were critical of past & present government policies	most expressed a degree of optimism that education could change lives; that they could make a difference but also said they felt daunted by the task ahead ; expressed a desire to be a 'white ally'	felt that they had too much education, to the point of 'turning off'; "we've been taught not to be proud of being German"

Source: In understanding the way individuals make sense of the complex concept of race, I have found the work of Ruth Frankenberg (1993) very useful. Frankenberg suggests that we think in terms of a discursive repertoire that each of us has at her disposal, within which 'race' can be made meaningful. She identified three historical moments: "essentialist racism", the double move toward "colour-evasiveness" and "power-evasiveness" and lastly "race cognisance".

Making Meaning: Implications for My Own Praxis

I have always believed that education has a crucial role to play in an anti-racist project and perhaps that is why I have been so passionate about my work with prospective teachers. I have known for some time that what passes for multicultural education in Australian schools is of the 'spaghetti and folkdance' or 'holidays and heroes' variety, when it happens at all. Nevertheless I held firm in the belief that the 'right' kind of education — that is, education that moved beyond 'teaching about' different cultures — might have a crucial role in racism reduction and that the 250 (or so) students who take my classes each year might yet prove to be a force for change.

Given the responses of the German students, however, it is too early to be overly complacent and the question that re-emerges for me is "what constitutes the 'right' kind of education"? The responses of my own students, who have had a semester's exposure to multicultural education, would suggest that my approaches are at least partially successful. I say partially because the group of students whom I interviewed constitutes but a small proportion of the total cohort. I know from anonymous student evaluations each year that there are other students (see Aveling, 2002) whose responses are likely to be more akin to the responses of the German university students. Some of my students too, feel that their semester in *Aboriginal and Multicultural Education* constituted too much education about multicultural and Indigenous issues. A second question then becomes "How much education is too much?"

Quite apart from those concerns, however, the essential component in all of this is the question of how one moves beyond the guilt, fear and alienation embedded in acknowledging whiteness, so eloquently expressed by the Australian women. While the other groups were not as specific, or indeed as eloquent, it is something that I believe runs throughout the interviewees' narratives: for Group A this was implicit; for group B it was writ larger than life; Group C held on to vestiges of guilt,

fear and alienation and Group D were, I had a sense, paralysed with guilt.

Running the risk of over-simplification, based on the overall outcomes of the four studies cited, I would suggest that regardless of the cultural context within which whiteness is enacted, education has the potential to develop a critical multicultural consciousness. However, if this is to happen, education must move beyond 'teaching about' and must incorporate an experiential component. On the flip-side, education can be detrimental in developing multicultural consciousness if firstly, students see it as "too preachy" and secondly, alternate models of being 'white' that move beyond guilt are not made available.

These conclusions are not new. Jana Noel, for example contends that:

The steps necessary for effective multicultural education include awareness of self and how community and background affects individuals, confrontation with outside perspectives, involvement of emotions and feelings, and the taking of action (1995, 269).

I believe that these steps are crucial. Despite their apparent simplicity, however, they do not represent a cook-book recipe that is guaranteed to work because multicultural teacher education is risky business. 'Teaching about' is easy, it is the other components that are difficult because what we are really asking of our students to put their identities at risk. It has been my experience that some resist strenuously, others 'muddle' along as best they can while still others take the knowledge of white race privilege on board regardless of the stress it causes. We owe it to these students to restore an element of hope to make "hope practical rather than despair convincing" (Kenway, 1994). In the words of Beverly Daniel Tatum:

in my view the restoration of hope is an essential part of the learning process. Otherwise, students, both white and of colour, become immobilised in their own despair (1994, 473)

To me, that is the challenge for educators: to work with students to become aware of white race privilege and at the same time to provide them with strategies and resources which enables them to move beyond feelings of guilt, fear and alienation.

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About the Author

Dr Nado Aveling's research and publications are grounded within a critical, postcolonial framework and while broadly focusing on anti-discriminatory education, her most recent research focuses more specifically on the use of auto/biographical narratives to deconstruct the normativity of 'whiteness' and the social construction of gendered and racialised subjectivities.