Repatriating Race: Exorcising Ethno-exclusion

Jon Austin and Andrew Hickey
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Abstract: Race is widely acknowledged as one of humankind's most pernicious and enduring myths, and its contemporary ideological doppelganger – ethnicity – presents as arguably the single most divisive, oppressive and dangerous axis of identity at work in the world today. Attempts to develop more racially/ethnically harmonious communities have typically looked to education programs, usually conducted through the formal mechanisms of schooling, as a primary vehicle for the development of greater understanding and “naturalizing” of difference. Focusing almost exclusively on the effects of racism and marginalization on the typically located victims of such oppression, these programs have largely ignored the importance of turning the focus of attention on to those positioned as beneficiaries of racism. That such programs have been largely unsuccessful in any broad societal sense has led to the exploration of alternative approaches to developing racial and ethnic awareness. This paper derives from a long-term project that has been anchored by two key political imperatives: making whiteness visible and effecting conscientization through autoethnographic work. Research on this project with pre-service teachers, most of it funded over several years, and more recently with middle (secondary) school students has provided valuable insights into more effective possibilities for the development of anti-racist pedagogies and for the decentring of the WWW (White Western Ways) that the authors see as crucial to a genuine move towards ethnic harmony. The first part of this paper exposes and justifies the ideological and procedural underpinnings of the program design and operation, and the second section reports on the outcomes to date. The authors conclude with a set of implications and possibilities for further, future activity.

Keywords: Race, Racism, Anti-racist Education, Ethnicity, Autoethnography, Conscientization, Whiteness, White Ethnicity, White Racial Identity

Racial and ethnic tensions and conflicts present as among the most violent and widespread of social problems in the world today. This is not, of course, to dismiss the suffering occasioned by other markers of difference such as gender, age, ability, sexuality, class and the like. Nor is it to suggest such lines of violence – symbolic and actual - operate independently of each other thereby ignoring compounding effect of the interconnectedness of such axes of power and oppression. What we mean here is that race and ethnicity perform as among the most malicious clusters of exploitation, conflict and despair in the contemporary world.

As one of the most slippery and fluid categories of identity in the (post)modern era, race and its ideological doppelganger – ethnicity – manifest in a most curious way. On the one

1 Throughout this paper, we will use the term “race” and its derivatives to include “ethnicity” and its derivatives. We acknowledge the essential points of difference between these two terms, and also that more correctly, what is often discussed as “race” in fact refers to “ethnicity”. However, we acknowledge the more common conflation of the two terms in everyday discourse and accordingly use “race” as a shorthand for “race and ethnicity” throughout.
hand, race has been possibly the most pernicious of the axes of identity in terms of its direct complicity in the marking out of the exploited from the advantaged, the colonised from the civilised, the feared, shunned and despised from the accepted, embraced and welcomed. On the other hand, race has been the most readily discredited and easily discreditable of all of the facets of identity.

While there has been a long process of refutation of genetic constructions of race, there is still a strong commonsensical view of race as being biologically determined. Kwame Appiah, a strong opponent of the notion of race as a biologically fixed and determined feature of identity, notes:

> What most people in most cultures ordinarily believe about the significance of “racial difference” is not supported by scientific evidence. While biologists can interpret the data in various ways, they cannot demonstrate the existence of genetically distinct “races”, for human genetic variability between the populations of Africa or Europe or Asia is not much greater than that within those populations (Appiah 1992, p.21)

One effect of a biologically-based determination of race is that racial markers or signifiers become sedimented, separated from their socio-political points of origin with a resultant stabilisation of racial categories that leads to “commonsensical” and resilient identity constructions and locations. In attempting to expose the dangerous terrain one enters when historically– and politically-derived categorisations morph into intransmutable processes of natural selection and codification, Keating makes the point that,

> although we generally think of “white” and “black” as permanent, transhistorical racial markers indicating distinct groups of people, they are not. In fact, the Puritans and other early European colonizers didn’t consider themselves “white”; they identified as “Christian”, “English” or “free”... [T]he English adopted the terms “white” and “black” - with their already existing implications of purity and evil - and developed the concept of a superior “white race” and an inferior “black race” to justify slavery (Keating 1995, p.912).

What this all comes down to is the position that a social phenomenon that supposedly doesn’t exist in “reality” and whose existence certainly can’t be verified by the protocols and standards of positivistic scientific logic and epistemologies, can operate to effect the most horrendous life consequences and conditions for untold millions of people. From this perspective, race undoubtedly is “man’s (sic) most dangerous myth” (Montagu, 1974).

The way in which matters of race are enmeshed in contemporary instances of privilege and disadvantage are complex and convoluted. However, this is not to suggest that race has an exclusivity in terms of the structuring and mediation of life chances: class, gender, age, ableism and many other factors clearly play roles here. But, as Dyer (2005, p 9) maintains, in the present era, it is never not a factor. How, then, does a social construct that skates on increasingly thin scientific ice manage to sustain its power and influence in structuring the Weltanschauung of the time? It is not so much the authority that “science” brought to systems of categorization of human “types” that holds sway today as it might have during the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries but through the seepage into public consciousness of hegemonic connotations of racial imagery.

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The emotional attachment sequestered to enduring tropes of race and the racial imagination through various forms and processes of popular cultural production (on this, see, for example Dyer 1997) has had the effect of scaffolding a communal ordering of the world in “commonsensical” racial terms. Racial imagery, as Dyer maintains, “is central to the organization of the modern world”:

At what costs regions and countries export their goods, whose voices are listened to at international gatherings, who bombs and who is bombed, who gets what jobs, housing, access to health care and education, what cultural activities are subsidised and sold, in what terms they are validated – these are all largely inextricable from racial imagery. (Dyer, 2005, p 9)

The social, political and educative function of much of this imagery is to naturalise a hierarchy of worth or value where without exception, white and non-white present as binary oppositions, with “white” being the repository of all that is good, desirable, civilized and clever. In other words, the socio-political effect of dominant tropes of racial imagery is to solidify an aesthetic of race that provides an explanation of and justification for a stratification of the world based on exploitation and advantage.

It is not our intention in this paper to re-work the philosophical and theoretical fields that many others have productively tended in theorizing and explaining the position within a racial hierarchy held by whites. The literature in this regard is very full (the interested reader is referred to Hill (1997), Clark & O’Donnell (1999) and Rothenberg (2005) for excellent introductions to this field of identity work). However, we do need to emphasise a small number of essential points about white racial locations:

1. “race” is something non-whites, Others, have: whites are typically invisible as racialised beings;
2. Whiteness is at one and the same time everywhere and yet nowhere: white racial identity is conflated with the human race generally; to speak from a position of whiteness is, in effect, to speak for humanity;
3. The invisibility of whiteness means that whites typically fail to see themselves as racialised individuals, although they are clearly seen as such by non-Whites;
4. Racial categorisations structure hierarchies of power and privilege;
5. Despite its unspokenness, being White brings with it unearned and unacknowledged privilege and power; and
6. White racial self-awareness is a crucial aspect of anti-racist work.
7. Attempts to develop more racially and ethnically harmonious communities have typically looked to education programs, usually conducted through the formal mechanisms of schooling, as a primary vehicle for the development of greater understanding of what constitutes racial and ethnic difference. Focusing almost exclusively on the effects of racism and marginalization on the typically located victims of such oppression, these programs have largely ignored the importance of turning the focus of attention on to those positioned as beneficiaries of racism. That such programs have been largely unsuccessful in any broad societal sense has led to the exploration of alternative approaches to developing racial and ethnic awareness. This is the basis for the work we have been engaged in for over a decade.
We research, teach and write from the position of critical cultural workers whose current area of “disciplinary” focus is education and whose concern is to harness our work for social betterment ends. We have been collaboratively involved in identity work for a number of years and our current intention is to contribute to the achievement of racial and ethnic harmony in our local communities through genuinely educative work. To this end, we see three imperatives in the pursuit of more racially-harmonious and –equitable communities: the raising to the consciousness of white people of the reality of whiteness; the development of a public critical racial consciousness (what Freire (1974) termed conscientização); and the decentring of White Western Ways (a different but just as ubiquitous WWW). In the course of this work, we have incorporated these aims into both our university work with pre-service teachers and into work with local high schools.

The next section of this paper presents examples of the types of conscientização we detect occurring as a result of some of the strategies and approaches we have utilized in our work with both of these groups as we grapple with the challenge of “unmasking whiteness” (McKay 1999).

**Stimulating White Racial Awareness with Pre-service Teachers**

In our teaching, we work at undergraduate level with pre-service teachers intending to enter the teaching profession across the range from early childhood, primary (elementary), middle and secondary school to vocational and adult education sectors. Over the past seven years, we have found the emancipatory potential of autoethnography (see Ellis 2004) and memory work (Haug 1983) to be extremely productive in stimulating or provoking deeper levels of engagement by our students in their own socially-constructed, -influenced and -resisted facets of identity. We have written previously about this broader project of emancipatory identity work through autoethnography (see, for example Austin & Hickey 2007) and will not revisit this work again here. Suffice to say, however, that the use of memories around the axis of race present typically as among the most difficult to dredge up and to engage, particularly by students who identify as white.

The most common early response to our request of our (largely white) students that they commence the recollection of and writing about memories from their lives that they would associate with race is that, for the large majority of them, race doesn’t feature in their consciousness at all:

\[ I \text{ thought I would have no memories on race as my best friend from the second week of year eight and for twenty years now is Indigenous Australian. I presumed we were equal because the colour of our skin was never a factor within our frienship. (L, 14.3.09)} \]

\[ I \text{ think when you are a kid you don’t see race until it is pointed out to you. Up until then you’re all in it together, there’s no us and them, just us. (M1, 21.3.09)} \]

\[ As \text{ I attended a country school there didn’t seem to be much racial issues that I came across. (J1, 24.3.09)} \]

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2 Extracts included here have been drawn verbatim from an electronic studydesk location students taking the course concerned were able to access for discussions about course content. No actual names have been retained, and the only identifying details included are the dates of the entries onto the studydesk.
In many ways, we have seen students encounter what Gayatri Spivak has called “a moment of bafflement” (1990, p 137). In Spivak’s view, it is ‘more useful to enter into texts so that the moments of bafflement can become useful’ (Spivak 1990, p 137). It is this idea of moments of bafflement that we have found to be valuable in describing the initially-irreconcilable image that many white students encounter when they grapple with an image of themselves as racialised or ethnicised. Such moments appear to be relatively rare and risky, but in the course of our experience, frequently very productive. When pushed to think further about this seeming blank in their memories, blanks that aren’t there when they consider gender experiences, class-related memories or the like, many students come to recognize that they have experienced race as an invisible accoutrement of their everyday personas without ever having to consciously engage a racialised existence.

Student L (cited above) further demonstrates her realization of the fact of race as something she has always had, but never known:

.... after listening to Peggy McIntosh and viewing lectures and readings I have a list of memories that could fill pages. Even one from two weeks ago when we were shopping for Nat’s wedding dress. To name a few:
In year nine our HPE teacher gave us all nicknames derived from either our christian or surnames, Nat’s was SAMBO nothing to do with her name instead the colour of her skin.
In year nine our mothers had written notes for us to leave school early to meet Nat’s mum at the EKKA [agricultural show, fair]. Our principle believed by note and assumed Nat’s was forged, even though it was Nat’s mum we were meeting. If I didn’t ask to ring my mother for her to verify it was true Nat would not have been able to leave. I will most likely use this memory for my assignment, because it was of significant benefit to be “white”.
This subject has rocked me to my core and last night I hugged my best friend and wept, not out of empathy but admiration. Recognising issues I never had to overcome and assumptions I never had to face due to the colour of my skin has made me admire the person she is all the more . (L, 14.3.09)

The potence of critical memory work – of dredging up for interrogation at ever increasing levels of complexity and political connection – for many of our students results in one of two types of responses. The first is to dismiss any notion of white privilege as an excuse for hard work or natural talent:

I am very proud that I work to support myself and my family and contribute positively to my community. Isn’t ‘white privelege’ really just plain hard work for most of us? (B,19.3.09)

The second type of response is one of further concern to engage the topic, to come to know more deeply. This response is the one most commonly experienced by us in the course of our contact with students (one big question for us, of course, is what happens to these commitments and determinations to know once students complete our course and move on to more technically-oriented aspects of their teacher preparation program). Many of our students evince an attitude akin to J2’s statement: J2 put it
I too have this attitude of “unthinking whiteness” (McLaren 1997, pg. 25). I have more work to do. (J2, 20.3.09).

Similarly, others start to enter a more deeply reflexive process of self-knowledge:

I am white!
I was really having a hard time grasping at that concept, sure I look white I just don’t feel it. (T, 19.3.09)
It’s funny how you don’t think too much about race and all that, but once you do, you can’t stop! (D1, 18.3.09)

A smaller number of our students reach a point of being both aware of race and whiteness as personal characteristics of their own and of a critical consciousness of what whiteness – as an ideology or political position of privilege – means to them. Some engage in localizing or extending provocative work like that of Peggy McIntosh’s invisible knapsack of privilege (1990). In this instance, some generate personal examples of what being white allows them to do that non-whites might not escape scrutiny or sanction for:

1. When I fill out a form I don’t need to explain my whiteness. (I.E. I am not of aboriginal or Torres Straight Island decent, I am of English and Irish, but no-one has ever asked me about that).
2. I never got asked if my hair had been straightened or dyed, even when it had.
3. I can get in to clubs and pubs with a large group of friends.
4. I can use welfare shopping docket and people think..” she must be having a hard time right now”, not “typical!”
5. I can have a BBQ and a drink in the park with my family and friends and not be looked at twice, even if we are being a bit noisy. (D2, 16.3.09)

Other personalized lists of what whiteness brought included:

I can smoke a cigarette and drink a beer without someone thinking I could have spent that money on better clothes to get a job.
If I climb a tree no-one implies this is instinctive or natural.
I can go into town with a few mates without people thinking we’re out to get drunk and fight. (C, 18.3.09)
Nobody ever asked how much English, Irish, German, Dutch was in me (how much whiteness) while my friend was oftern called half cast or asked whose “black” your mother or your father.
I could attend school and work in a community with the christian name given to me by my parents. The boy who I spoke about in early posting name given to him by his parents was Gilroy yet to attend school his name was changed to Michael. (M, 14.3.09)

Whilst only a summary of the types of consciousness raising development stimulated by the use of strategies and method of memory work located within a critical autoethnographic framework, the preceding examples are indicative of the outcomes of our work that lead us to assume a position of optimism for the further and continuing critical awareness of whiteness and race on the part of pre-service teachers. While many start from a position of uncertainty
at best (My race memories scare me G2,19.3.09), some end up developing an articulated sense of what their racial identity has accorded them:

I have really struggled with this question in relation to ‘White culture’ for most of my life. When asked to write down what race I am, I have never been able to describe it, because it has never been explained to me, I just am. ..., I have to consider being white is usually unwittingly dominating, central, egotistical, unappreciative, suppressive, priveledged, etc., especially in terms of our cultural history and unfortunately a lot of present terms. (W,16.3.09)

White Racial Awareness Work with Middle School Students

The second strand of our work here consists of school-based teaching in the formal school curriculum areas of SOSE (Studies of Society and Environment) and Citizenship Education. In this, our concern has been to contribute to building greater racial awareness and harmony within the school environs. Here, we work from the same set of beliefs as we do in our undergraduate university teaching: whiteness and white racial identities need to be exposed, analyzed and reconstructed as an almost a priori starting point to overcoming or minimizing racial and ethnic tensions.

In the specific research project presented here, we worked for a period of eight weeks with a class of 27 14-16 year olds at a local State (public) high school. The students were not selected by us or the school, but were those members of a particular Citizenship Education class whose timetable provided the best fit with our availability. We spent two hours every Friday afternoon for the period of the project with this class, and utilized a number of the strategies from our university teaching – albeit modified to accommodate the age differences – and supplemented these with photographic racial audit work conducted by both the researchers and the students independently at the school site, and artifact analysis and creation. (The interested reader is referred to Hickey and Austin (2009) for a more detailed description of this project. What we would look to address in this part of this paper, however, are the seeming effects on these students of having undertaken a formal program of racial awareness raising activities.)

In keeping with our experience with undergraduate students, the mere fact of consciousness raising in and of itself is a significant step in the movement towards a critical exploration of whiteness. The students here all claimed to have experienced an “ah-ha” moment through engagement with the materials and activities, and the class teacher supported this view. Students were engaged in research conversations at the conclusion of the formal teaching unit.

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 13.11.08)

I knew it was there but I just didn’t really think much of it really, like just sort of went past (Justine 13.11.08)
The underlying significance of this question centered on the ‘moment of bafflement’ (Spivak 1990) that had occurred in the students’ thinking about whiteness as a 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 13.11.08)

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 13.11.08).

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.

One of the activities we had the students engage in involved the development of some form of artifact production to carry a message regarding the nature of race and racism. The intention here was to have the students move from a situation of consciousness raising leading to political awareness to one encouraging collective action (Aung, 2009). While many of the artifacts were poster- and pamphlet-based calls to end racism, a small number drew on emerging understandings of the invisibility of whiteness. Image 1 shows one of these
In one of the activities, we had presented to the students a cartoon from 1970 that depicted a very dark-skinned man of probably African-American origin who had a light colored Band-Aid plastered across his forehead. The contrast in colorings of the skin and the Band-Aid was immense. The caption of this cartoon read “White is… a flesh colored Band-Aid”. In the artifact activity undertaken by the students, one drew upon this conflation of a particular phenotypic characteristic of a particular group of people – skin color – with the universal descriptor “flesh color” and developed an idea for a poster that disrupted this notion.

A post-project interview with the classroom teacher provided us with further appreciation of how strongly visual representations of race and whiteness can be in the development of learning experiences for the students involved. In talking about the Band-Aid lesson, the teacher said:

That lesson after you guys came in with the pictures the kids said in the next lesson, that’s your challenge. You have to go and find non beige band aids, which I went desperately in search of in Google but couldn’t find anything. I googled all kinds of things like non white band aids, African American band aids, black band aids, and when I googled black band aids a whole bunch of stuff came up – but it was all about the fact you couldn’t buy black band aids. There were blog posts and everything. And a guy had a website and he had pictures of band aids on there that were different colours. He was saying that, for him, having a small child and being African America, he can’t buy toys that have non white representations. It’s very difficult. He wanted to buy his son a fire truck and he wanted to have at least one of the crew that wasn’t white. He went to toy shop after toy shop and he couldn’t find that representation. Reading the article and trying to explain this to her, his problem is that this representation of normal for his child is white. And that’s what he has to give his child, that’s the representation of what is normal, and you’re different. And he’s having to reinforce that with his own child. (Marion 14.11.08)

Overall, our experience with this class of students reinforced our belief that consciousness-raising about the very existence of whiteness is a crucial step in the process of generating cross-ethnic and inter-racial understandings. We were surprised at the degree to which the students involved took on the challenges of witnessing whiteness in their everyday lives and seemed to be genuinely committed to contributing to a more harmonious racial / ethnic environment in their school. Our expectation is that a number of the artifacts for public
awareness raising will be mass-produced and deployed in the school grounds at various points in the coming months.

**Conclusion**

Our work in whiteness and anti-racist education has led us to appreciate the importance of the development of critical consciousness. We have been seeking paths that connect with Dyer’s prescription for disrupting unthinking whiteness:

> **For those in power in the West, as long as whiteness is felt to be the human condition, then it alone both defines normality and fully inhabits it… White power reproduces itself regardless of intention, power differences and goodwill, and overwhelmingly because it is not seen as whiteness, but as normal. White people need to learn to see themselves as white, to see their particularity. In other words, whiteness needs to be made strange.** (Dyer, 2005, p. 12)

As a strand of critical educative work where the pedagogical imperative is to make the familiar more generally strange (Shor 1987), lifting the veil of the innocuous from the visage of whiteness remains an incomplete and on-going project. Our intention is to bring Race back home to the Centre in order to re-locate white racial and ethnic identities as one of many, rather than the invisible measure of superiority and privilege.

**References**


**About the Authors**

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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) and is currently working on a book on new ethnographies jointly with Andrew Hickey. His doctoral work was in the area of whiteness and white identity. His side projects include ensuring that the role of Neil Young in contemporary popular (music) culture is not understated or lost.

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