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Samantha Schulz

*Flinders University*, [samantha.schulz@flinders.edu.au](mailto:samantha.schulz@flinders.edu.au)

Jennifer Fane

*Flinders University*, [jennifer.fane@flinders.edu.au](mailto:jennifer.fane@flinders.edu.au)

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## **A Healthy Dose of Race? White Students' and Teachers' Unintentional Brushes with Whiteness**

Samantha Schulz

Jennifer Fane

Flinders University of South Australia

*This paper reports on efforts by three Australian academics to develop students' sociocultural awareness (in particular, their racial literacy) during a time of mounting pressure on teacher educators to narrow and standardise their approaches. The field of health education provides a vehicle for research; however, it is not the paper's central foci. Of key concern is the development of a critical disposition in students – a disposition geared toward teaching for social equity. Learning of this nature transcends topic domains, and therefore allows for collaboration between academics in different parts of teacher education. Specifically, the paper focuses upon 'whiteness' and applies a whiteness lens (a form of critical discourse analysis) to portions of the research data to explore how discourses of race circumscribe the efforts of white students and teachers, often resulting in unintentional 'brushes' with whiteness (or reproductions of white race privilege). A collaborative approach that develops racial literacy through direct engagement with racial representations is considered as a way forward.*

### **Backdrop**

In this paper we report on a collaboration between Health education and Indigenous education academics in a Bachelor of Education program at a metropolitan Australian university. We share the view that all pre-service teachers should be given the space and time to develop critical sociocultural awareness, where 'critical' is used in the reflexive sense of being self-critical as well as to signify awareness of the 'intersecting axes of difference' that position people differentially within the socius (Douglas & Halas, 2013, p. 455) – our chief concern here revolves around the axis of race. For education to be a basis for equitable social change, we believe that teachers first must be made aware of these relations and of their personal relationships to them.

A collaborative approach to research was important to us because sociocultural dimensions of education are often addressed in piecemeal fashion across degrees, or confined to a single topic. We were mindful that relegating questions of race or whiteness (or how class and gender intersect with race) chiefly to topics such as Indigenous education only entrenches the covertly racist belief that such issues be ignored elsewhere. The practice of relegating race to 'one corner of the curriculum' (Pearce, 2003, p. 285) inhibits students from becoming racially literate, a process that, in Johnson Lachuk and Mosely's (2012, p. 327) view, has to unfold over time. Moreover, excising race from our core discussions as Australian educators is reflective of a broader culture of whiteness characteristic of Australian tertiary settings (Gustone, 2009). For Douglas and Halas (2013), this culture can

be seen in patterned racial exclusions that result in a predominance of white people being represented at all levels of the academy, and in curricula and learning environments that habitually deny a 'non-white' reality by, among other means, avoiding discussions that are likely to create tensions amongst predominantly white cohorts (Aveling, 2002; Haviland, 2008). These patterned omissions create exclusionary sites that render calls for 'inclusion' meaningless in the face of institutional racism (Pearce, 2003, p. 273), details of which we are mindful given our presence as white educators, which can engrain the racial assumptions we seek to challenge.

These characteristics of 'white' academies – that in many ways reflect the setting for this research – are intensified by national contexts wherein 'post-racial' discourses fuel the belief that socio-political issues, such as race, no longer matter (McAllan, 2011), or that teacher education programs should focus primarily on what 'counts': i.e. standardised measures of numeracy and literacy and 'on the job training' as defined by conservative agendas (Connell, 2013; Canaan, 2013). These hegemonic discourses work in formal and informal ways to undermine the development of critical awareness in teacher education students, a situation that is concerning in Australia where most teachers continue to draw from the white, Anglo-dominated mainstream (Austin & Hickey, 2007).

## The study

Our project started with the general aim of interrogating our efforts to develop pre-service teachers' sociocultural awareness. Health education became our starting point, not only because two members of the research team are located in this discipline, but because the theoretical and pedagogical groundwork of this first-year topic may be developed in students' mandated second-year Indigenous education topic, in which the third researcher is involved. In this sense, our research was underpinned by an interest in how our strategic collaborations across topics may be maximised over time.

The Health topic was informed by social critique and grounded in opening students to the idea of health as a social construction (see for example Burr, 2003; Conrad & Barker, 2010). Literature in the health education field emphasises the pervasive influence of individualism as a standpoint held tightly amongst tertiary students due to their previous health education experiences (Leahy, 2013; Quennerstedt, Burrows, & Maivorsdotter, 2010). It was anticipated that this would present a significant barrier to thinking and acting in more 'socially' aware ways, and could potentially contribute to the damaging and anti-health implications of socially decontextualised thinking in educational practice, which have also been long noted (Mogford, Gould, & Devought, 2011; Whitehead & Russel, 2004; Fane & Ward, 2014).

Mindful of these caveats, the topic coalesced around readings and workshop activities that progressively unfolded a view of health 'problems' as 'social' issues (Germov, 2005). Student work analysed in this paper derives from three prompts to which students were introduced during discussions pertaining to Indigenous<sup>1</sup> health specifically. The first was a set reading, which explores the social determinants of Indigenous health (Gray & Saggars, 2009). The second was the Australian independent film *Beneath Clouds* (Sen, 2002) in which themes of whiteness, privilege, and othering are explored through the lives of two Aboriginal characters. And third was a conservative newspaper article written in response to a racialised incident in the Australian Football League (AFL), when a well-known Indigenous footballer became the target of an overt racist slur (Bolt, 2013, May 30).

The study involved three data collection methods, including; analysis of two student assessment tasks (an essay and reflective journal), semi-structured post-topic student interviews, and teacher academic journals that included observational notes. At the onset of the topic, all students were made aware of the project and recruited along standard ethical guidelines.<sup>2</sup> 31 (out of 79) students agreed to participate with over two thirds being first year students; 17 male, 14 female, and all identifying as white. Participants' final grades reflected a wide and equal distribution overall, and upon completion of the topic student work was collected for analysis. Following data collection, each of the academics analysed the materials independently using their own discrete sets of conceptual tools.<sup>3</sup> The set of working papers to emerge from this process has provided crucial space for dialogue that draws our attention to various insights and concerns. What follows focuses specifically on the way in which discourses of race and whiteness structured the field of possible action, insights that are derived predominantly from de-identified excerpts from student journals due to the high number of journals submitted for analysis, and the considerable data pertaining to race and whiteness contained therein.

### **Whiteness, race and teacher education: Rethinking an approach**

Theoreticians of whiteness in the field of education will be familiar with the sheer scope of literature concerning white teachers and students unwittingly reproducing white race privilege (see for example Aveling, 2006; Durie, 2003; Levine-Rasky, 2000; Picower, 2009). Such inquiries build on the knowledge that racism rarely nowadays manifests in overt acts, but is elided beneath inclusive rhetoric that conflates openly oppressive discourses with those relating to multiculturalism, diversity or human rights (Green, Sonn & Matsebula, 2007, p. 392). In Australia, Hage (2002) has described this shift in terms of the rise of 'benevolent whiteness', or the everyday reproduction of white cultural and political power in ways that simultaneously naturalise racial hierarchy. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that racial hierarchy is not 'natural', and that race remains an organising principle of domination in Australia that circumscribes the ways in which 'all Australians come into relationship' (Nicoll, 2004).

Yet despite this body of research, whiteness remains a largely underutilised or misunderstood concept in many parts of teacher education and robust discussion concerning 'race' (rarely applied to white people) is often avoided or delegitimised in Australian university classrooms (Glazier, 2003; Green, 2003; Wagner, 2005). This is despite, and perhaps because, race is a 'point of accumulation of prejudice, proscription and paranoia' in Australia (Austin & Hickey, 2007, p. 82), which can leave white teachers and students adversely inflected by misunderstanding or fear, or by apathy and an 'unthinking comfort' that accompanies 'White residence in a white place' (p. 84). Nonetheless, our interest in what follows is not limited to exposing hidden racism or doing away with race per se. As Pitcher (2014, p. 15) provocatively contends, not only is it unproductive to reduce race to racism, it is naïve to think that once we do away with racism 'race' will somehow disappear. This reasoning underlies the recognition that educating whites will not itself solve racial inequality, for doing so would merely locate such issues in the minds of biased individuals (Sleeter, 1993, p. 157). López argues that a more realistic approach is to 'ask whether a new relation to whiteness is possible after empire' (2005, p. 14), and this perspective guides our engagement with pre-service teachers in a cultural politics of race.

A common departure point for such work is to highlight the social constructedness of race (Khanna & Harris, 2009), an approach that was adopted in the Health topic. And while social constructionism as a pedagogical framework is nothing new, it is new to virtually all

our undergraduate teachers and remains a useful starting point when seeking to engage them in work that challenges fixed conceptions of race, racism and identity. Pitcher links social constructionism to the practice of cultural politics when stating:

In the same way that the languages we speak and write are collective and collaborative affairs, the meanings of race involve collective and collaborative processes. While we can work to change those meanings by intentional means, such struggles necessitate a complicated negotiation with existing meanings [and] this is what we mean by cultural politics. (Pitcher, 2014, p. 4)

A social constructionist lens also opens students to the salience of social contexts and the fluidity of cultural identity. This creates space for viewing all people as engaged continually in a 'process of becoming', a process through which '(new) teacher-subjects are supported to begin to perform themselves differently' (Green & Reid, 2008, pp. 20-1). Given that racial identity is constructed through the establishment of difference (Said, 1979), knowing ourselves differently can also create room for dismantling damaging conceptions of 'Other' – a term that is used here problematically. The conceptual standpoint described here thus acknowledges that teachers, including health educators, play important roles in renegotiating ideas about race and whiteness (Solomon et al, 2005, p. 147). It is built on the optimistic view that white teachers are capable of developing a critical appreciation of identity 'such that they become secure enough to engage in a project of positive reinvention of that identity' (Austin & Hickey, 2007, p. 84), that is conscious of white race privilege and of the 'blind spots' that hold such privilege in place.

To examine how well we supported the health education cohort in that transformative process, our ensuing analysis – which constitutes a form of critical discourse analysis<sup>4</sup> – builds upon Frankenberg's (1993) well-known conception of whiteness as a standpoint that arises from white people's privileged locations in broader structural relations. This standpoint manifests in unmarked cultural practices, which reinforce while obscuring those self-same racial privileges. These practices have variously been described in the literature as 'rhetorical silence' (Crenshaw, 1997; Rowe, 2000), 'dysconscious racism' (Hickling-Hudson & Ahlquist, 2004; King, 1991), 'strategic rhetoric' (Dolber, 2008; Fassett & Warren, 2004; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995), or 'whitespeak' (Moon, 1999), practices that are collectively referred to here as 'brushes with whiteness' – discursive manoeuvres that limit white people's ability to engage critically with a cultural politics of race. As Frankenberg illustrates, while whites cannot step outside of whiteness, they/we can assume different standpoints that are more or less capable of critical engagement, as expressed in the following framework:

- Conservative standpoint: while overt references to race have fallen out of favour with an 'inclusive' white Australian mainstream, we conceptualise a conservative position as one that is evident when patently racialised beliefs are clearly enunciated, or existing close to the surface of white people's dialogue;
- Complicit (colour blind) standpoint: this position overlaps with the last and is evident when white subjects avoid speaking 'race', while relying upon naturalised white standards as yardsticks for normalcy;
- Subordinate standpoint: this position advances a comparatively inclusive viewpoint and may be evident when white subjects acknowledge difference or dare to speak 'race', while adopting a benevolent position that fails to subvert the grounds of white hegemony.

In contrast to these positions, a reflexive standpoint is one where white subjects embrace a socially critical viewpoint by openly problematising unearned racial privilege and

the contexts that reinforce it – in short, this standpoint is enabled when subjects permit structural accounts of the lives of individuals; for instance, a health education student might embrace this position when conceptualising the statistically ‘poor’ health of remote Aboriginal peoples from a standpoint that acknowledges the ongoing impacts of colonial dispossession. We use these standpoints to highlight students’ blind spots, and to assess the effectiveness of our pedagogies in facilitating student thinking. Our analysis is structured around three notable themes to emerge from student writing: blaming the victim, overlooking race, and valorising ‘what abouts’.

### Blaming the Victim

In the analysis of student work, a conservative position was evidenced as a manoeuvre expressed most commonly as ‘victim blaming’. This whiteness strategy was utilised by students who resisted social analysis, deflected a self-critical gaze, and tended to conceptualise ‘the problem’ (of poor Aboriginal health, in this case) in openly deficit terms. This line of reasoning was evident in ‘Toby’s’<sup>5</sup> journal when, after watching the film *Beneath Clouds*, he stated:

In Aboriginal society *they* lack identity and sense of belonging, and men have so much power in Indigenous cultures. These issues are due to the Aboriginal culture [...]. (Our emphasis)

In the same way, Brian remarked:

As much as we try to help the aboriginals [sic] live a better and healthier life we can only help the ones that want to be healthier; many do not want the help or take notice of the programs and support that the government offers.

Similar beliefs surfaced in Tania’s journal when after watching the film she suggested, that had the Aboriginal characters (who were driving to work at a cotton plantation in a ‘beaten up car’) ‘stayed in school and gained a better education,’ they could have ‘found better work with greater pay.’ Likewise, Jamie reasoned:

If the government just gives the money it solves nothing but if they use it to create a health education centre for [the] indigenous [sic] it will assist *them* in their understandings and can prevent the major issues many aboriginals [sic] deal with, such as; misuse and abuse of alcohol, cigarettes, and highly illicit drugs. (Our emphasis)

In these students’ articulations, the ‘problem’ is lack of motivation or education on the part of Indigenous people *themselves*, which essentially expresses a ‘victim blaming’ stance. For instance, Tania drew on a conservative discourse which reduces employability to a matter of ‘individual hard work’. She naturalised education in Australia as a straightforward pathway to employment, rather than a racialised construct that habitually benefits whites, and she mobilised a ‘common sense’ ideology which obscures ‘structural inequalities by proclaiming that individuals are responsible for their own successes and failures’ (Gray & Sagers, 2009, p. 168). Thus despite engaging in the core reading by Gray and Sagers as part of the topic, ‘victim blaming’ continued to be a sticking point for students such as Tania.

In Toby’s view, the problem is not only ‘lack’ of education or motivation on the part of Indigenous people, it is, ironically, ‘their’ lack of belonging and identity, and an issue of Aboriginal masculinity. This resonates strongly with colonial discourses in which black, male bodies are discursively positioned as deviant (see for example Dyer, 1997). Such a position advances a symbolic rejection of blackness that in turn depends on an ethical construction of whiteness. This transposal is achieved in Toby’s writing through invoking the white man’s

‘Other’: the savage black man who destroys his own culture (Hatchell, 2004). Such beliefs rest on a form of biological determinism that is covertly enunciated in Toby’s journal through recourse to Aboriginal ‘culture’ – i.e. Toby remarks; *the issues are to do with Aboriginal culture*.

The conservative position taken up by Toby and the other students mentioned here thus relies upon the assumption that in ‘white’ culture, there are no problems with respect to health outcomes, motivation for work, engagement with education, or gender inequality. In positing that the issue lies primarily with Aboriginal ‘culture’ and with Aboriginal men specifically, Toby defers to a standpoint that obfuscates issues relating to white male hegemony, or the many associated implications. In keeping with this line of reasoning, Nick remarked:

Indigenous Australians should help themselves by not drinking excessively and smoking. [...] Their life expectancy could severely increase just by cutting out these risk factors, which they are in control of.

And later:

I believe they need to change their ways and become less drug involved if the community of Australia is to respect them. [...] They themselves should want to contribute to society and show that they are willing to become valued members of society by working hard and following a career path.

In this first excerpt, Nick draws on an individualistic discourse which negates the historical antecedents of Indigenous ‘ill-health’. He assumes the moral high ground when stating that Aboriginal people should ‘take responsibility’ for ‘their problems’, and in a sleight of hand displaces responsibility for the ongoing effects of colonisation onto Indigenous peoples themselves. Not dissimilarly, in the second excerpt Nick relies upon ‘us’ and ‘them’ binaries that reproduce racial hierarchy. Nick re-centres Australia as an implicitly White possession when invoking an imagined ‘community of Australians’ who, it is inferred, are ‘properly’ self-regulating. In juxtaposition, Indigenous Australians are positioned by Nick as an irresponsible and homogenous population of ‘outsiders within’ who ought to strive for white approval; i.e. *they should be less drug involved if the community of Australia is to respect them*. Nick overlooks racialised relations that historically, and in the present moment, act as barriers to Indigenous employment (see for example Lipsitz, 1998), and he draws heavily on the aforementioned ‘victim blaming’ modality to suggest that Indigenous Australians are ‘at fault’ for social conditions brought about by white incursion.

Despite being exposed to a range of critical discourses, by the final weeks of the topic the conservative beliefs of the students mentioned here thus remained unchanged. All of these students articulated Aboriginality together with irresponsible behaviour, for in the above excerpts; to be Aboriginal is to deny the help that is benevolently offered by white society. White society is not implicated in the construction of black disadvantage; rather, Aboriginal ‘ill-health’ is repeatedly posited as a problem of Aboriginality. These students’ journal entries hence indicated that they had taken little heed of the critical materials made available to them throughout the semester in order to ‘rethink’ health.

### Overlooking Race

In a set of manoeuvres not radically dissimilar, an equal number of students expressed ‘complicit’ sentiments in their writing that, despite being less overt also fed into the epistemological foundations of ‘race’ by deferring to an essential sameness. Alex did so when

discussing Andrew Bolt's article concerning the 'Goodes incident' (an incident that received major media coverage in Australia at the time due to the aforementioned racial slur that was levied at an Indigenous football player during a highly televised football game). In the following excerpt, Alex reaches a point of resolution by agreeing with Bolt (well-known Australian conservative and media 'shock jock') that we should 'start seeing each other as individuals.' In this regard, Alex draws on a complicit (i.e. colour blind) logic that obscures the ways in which a broader culture of whiteness negates the 'level playing field' to which Bolt appeals in his column. Alex explains:

This week was probably the most interesting of all the weeks. We were given an article by Andrew Bolt that was called *Spare us the Race to New Racism*. It was an interesting article that focussed on an event that happened at the AFL game during indigenous [sic] round. Indigenous AFL player Adam Goodes was upset by a 13-year-old [white] girl calling him an ape during a game, he then had the girl forced out of the stadium [...]. We all had slightly different opinions as to whether we agreed with [what] Bolt was saying. My group felt that it may not have become such a big deal if it [the overtly racist incident] hadn't happened during indigenous round. I felt that Adam Goodes had every right to be upset; I am in no place to judge or understand [what he] did or the criticism he faces. However the girl was only 13 so I am not sure whether she knew the meaning of what she was saying. However when Eddie McGuire<sup>6</sup> made a racist comment about Goodes and King Kong I was less sympathetic to McGuire. Somebody that knows the meaning of what he is saying and somebody that is a public figure. I found this an interesting article that makes us think about new racism. I agree with Bolt's statement [that] more of us should now start seeing each other as individuals rather than [as] representatives of some race.

This excerpt is worthy of detailed consideration given the number of racialised manoeuvres it contains. Firstly, by implicating the 'Indigenous round' as being a key part of the problem, there is a suggestion that Alex is drawing on a covertly racist line of reasoning, which emerged in the media at the time – Joel also alluded to this in his journal when stating, 'to have a set round [called] the indigenous [sic] round purely signifies that *they* are different. [...] To signal out race is an invitation for drama.' As the popular logic went, *the problem* was not the overt racism levied at Goodes by the 13-year-old white spectator; rather, the problem was that the AFL had allowed an exclusively 'Indigenous' football round at all. This was viewed by some sectors of the white community as 'unfair' treatment because, it was argued, had the AFL arranged for an exclusively 'white' round, there would have been an uproar. To avoid the latter, both Alex and Joel deferred to the complicit belief that being 'colour blind' – i.e. not actually speaking 'race' or addressing racism – is the only viable answer.

However, this racialised logic obscures the fact of 'everyday whiteness' (or everyday racism): the overwhelming whiteness of the AFL with its majority of white players, managers, media commentators, and its long history of valorising white people and white mainstream Australian culture. This logic denies the significance of the AFL Indigenous round in going some small way toward tipping this racialised imbalance. It could be argued that both Alex and Joel deployed a discourse of 'new racism', an assertion of middle-class whites as the new 'victims' of positive discrimination strategies. In this sense, 'inclusion' can act as a rhetorical device within the terrain of Australian whiteness to either affirm 'white' benevolence or to spark a covertly racist backlash.



From this viewpoint, both Bolt and Alex misappropriated the term ‘new racism’. In his article, Bolt used the term to suggest that *renewed cries of racism* on the part of Indigenous footballer Adam Goodes were ‘trumped up’ and overindulgent – indeed the article’s title incites Goodes to ‘spare us’ (i.e. spare white society) the unnecessary ‘drama’. In contrast, Alex used the term to suggest that the overt racism aimed at Goodes by the 13-year-old spectator indicated that racism had suddenly re-entered Australian cultural life. In taking this stance, Alex overlooked that racism in Australia has never gone away, white society continues to accept a fundamentally racialised status quo and this acceptance constitutes a persistent and pervasive form of ‘everyday racism’.

### Valorising ‘What Abouts’

Another key whiteness strategy to emerge from the student writing involved the use of counter-narratives – or what Durie (2003) terms ‘what abouts’ – to affirm unintentionally racist beliefs. Durie explains,

In the space of the classroom – and in other spaces of contested whiteness and white identities – the work of deconstructing whiteness and challenging discourses of race and racism is littered with ‘what abouts’: the rebuttals and countering stories of experiences of discrimination against white people; and the refusals, the denials, and the ignorance of those of us who are white as to how we come to be in this country. (2003, p. 141)

In this section we draw briefly on a number of journal entries that use a subordinate standpoint that incorporate ‘what abouts’. Sally’s ‘what abouts’ lead her to deviate from the critical content of the class discussion and rely instead on other students’ non-reflexive ‘beliefs’ about Aboriginal people, which she uses as a basis for conceptualising Indigenous health. Sally explains:

Class discussion today was Indigenous health and our views on the reading. As a group, we ended up in a heated discussion [... and] the class members had different views on why Aboriginal people have a particular stereotype and the reasons white Australians look at them differently. Some of the students know Aboriginal people and spoke about how they have different ways of living and that *they* see white Australians as the people who took their land. [Consequently] they tend to resort to violence easier [...]. (Our emphasis)

Sally goes on in this excerpt to favour her colleagues’ counter narratives over and above the critical literature in order to verify that ‘the problem’ (associated with Indigenous health) relates, firstly, to Aboriginal people’s view that white people ‘stole their land’ (as though the fact of dispossession is fallacious), and secondly, to Aboriginal people’s supposedly innate violence. The latter signals a common racist stereotype to emerge throughout several of the journals – the stereotype of the ‘drunken’ or ‘violent Aborigine’. According to Feng (2002), the presence and durability of stereotypes over time determines to some extent the degree to which race thinking has or has not been challenged within a given setting. Consistent with Bhabha, it is ironically ‘the fixity of stereotypes, or the fact that they have maintained a remarkable constancy that lends them their aura of truth’ (in Feng, 2002, p. 9).

Feeding into these dynamics, some of the students revealed in their journals a marked lack of understanding of Aboriginality or contact with Indigenous people, verifying, to some extent, the way in which racist stereotypes so often remain unexamined and unchallenged. Related sentiments arose in Lucy’s journal when she reflected ‘[I was] never really taught

Indigenous studies [at school].’ This comment and others like it set the tone for appreciating the invisible ways in which Lucy’s life, like most white people’s lives, had been so thoroughly mapped by whiteness. Lucy reflected:

One of my only experiences with the Indigenous population was when I was 7 years old in [the capital city of the state of South Australia] with my mum. We were walking past a group when one approached me and said inappropriate things. I’ve also grown up with an extremely racist father, so without the necessary teachings about their culture I grew up to be racist as well. Had it not been for my time at university, I probably would still hold this mindset and think negatively towards the Indigenous population.

This excerpt speaks volumes in terms of explicating the racialised beliefs informing Lucy’s standpoint, and the shift she was taking from a conservative to subordinate position. When seen in this light it is possible to view Lucy’s overall stance in terms of potential movement towards reflexivity. But both Lucy’s and Sally’s reflections are also useful for shedding light, in Durie’s terms, on the ways in which the ‘process of rebuttal and challenge can make the classroom a site of confrontation and fear’ (2003, p. 142), for neither of these students enunciated their racialised beliefs in class (a point to which we return).

Lucy concluded her journal entry by stating, benevolently, that ‘views of acceptance’ of Indigenous Australians on the part of white Australians ‘need to be taught to children’ because ‘unfortunately, not everyone gets to go to university or partake in courses that help you to realise the error of your thoughts. Many remain racist their entire lives, and teach their children to think the same way without their child ever knowing differently.’ Lucy’s journal indicated that she had developed important understandings during the Health topic (and during her time at university generally). She remained, however, subordinately implicated in racial domination through suggesting that white people’s acceptance of Aboriginal people represents ‘the solution’; a view which does nothing necessarily to challenge the stubborn grounds of white race privilege in Australia.

But unlike Lucy, who had experienced only one encounter with Indigenous people while growing up, Hayley’s ‘what abouts’ were based on lived experience. In her journal, Hayley reflected on the film *Beneath Clouds* from the standpoint of a white person who had grown up in a rural town situated in close proximity to an Aboriginal community. Hayley remembered that the Aboriginal people in the neighbouring community had a ‘bad reputation’; ‘a reputation for stealing stock and trespassing on properties nearby and generally causing grief.’ She explained:

I heard [the Aboriginal township] being termed as ‘blackfella town’, and the people who lived there as ‘black bastards’, ‘boongs’, ‘coons’, etc.

She added:

[But] there [was] an equal amount of racism on the other side though, with many of the Aboriginals not having any respect or showing common courtesy to the white inhabitants or the station owners.

It was clear from Hayley’s recollections that overt racism was rife in her rural childhood area. Indeed, Howard-Wagner (2009) has written about the area in which Hayley grew up and demonstrates the manifold ways in which the enforcement of white boundaries and the exploitation of Aboriginal peoples by the dominant white community continues to take place. However, in stating that ‘there was an equal amount of racism on the other side,’ and going on to explicate the poor behaviour of the Aboriginal community, Hayley tended to whitewash these relations of white domination. Hayley’s stance could therefore be described as swinging from subordinate to conservative in that while she starts by acknowledging the

overt racism of the white townsfolk, she reframes the ‘problem’ as being disrespectful black people who *generally cause grief*. In this sense, white racism and domination are vindicated by Hayley through invoking a counter-narrative (a ‘what about’) of black dysfunction.

And yet, despite this, a smaller number of students demonstrated that ‘what abouts’ can equally be leveraged to challenge whiteness. Levi, for example, demonstrated a burgeoning capacity to destabilise racist stereotypes through drawing on a personal narrative. And while ultimately he remained in a complicit (i.e. colour blind) standpoint, it is important to acknowledge that colour blindness is a contested location and some aspects of a colour blind perspective may lead to a more race cognisant white subjectivity. For instance, ‘for whites to believe that [non-white people] are “the same” in terms of having equal potential for certain abilities, personal characteristics, talents or proclivities seems to be an important step toward destroying stereotypes’ (McKinney, 2005, p. 54). Levi spoke from this standpoint even if his allusions to equality tended to reinscribe white hegemony. He remarked:

As I have grown up in places and played sport with teams that would have more Indigenous people than non-indigenous [...] I have grown up knowing that Indigenous people are no different than myself. I feel that is where the main problem lies [in] that we as a society do not treat each other with respect and it doesn’t matter about race or religion, there is a lack of respect around the entire population. This is going to be the real first step as we would then be able to put our trust in people and we will be able to move faster [toward closing the gap between Indigenous and white health outcomes in Australia] and we can see the rewards of the work we are doing sooner.

This excerpt not only speaks to a colour blind perspective that is expressed with genuine good intent, it also demonstrates how childhood encounters with difference can either affirm racist beliefs espoused by white parents/caregivers (as in Lucy’s or Hayley’s experiences), or can work to increase white people’s sociality. Moreton-Robinson describes ‘sociality’ in terms of our exposure to difference and highlights its power to transform our understandings of Self and Other. She says:

Sociality plays an important part in affirming or disrupting subject positions in cultural contexts. As such cross-cultural intersubjectivity provides an opportunity for encountering differences and similarities that may lead to disrupting assumptions about Other. (2000, p. 5)

Suffice to say, students deploying subordinate discourses in their writing tended to be more sympathetic towards Indigenous people (than those occupying conservative standpoints), even if they ultimately failed to challenge white race privilege. Jack, for instance, exemplified this standpoint when stating:

There was a debate around the equality of Indigenous to non-indigenous Australians in the job sector [in class], and this certain classmate raised the question, ‘I just don’t get why they don’t go and get a job’. That quote is one that I believe sums up the idealist’s way of viewing things. When you actually take time to think about it you can realise that maybe they don’t want a job in the first place? The way of life of the indigenous [sic] before colonisation was one without currency. So why should they change their ‘way of life’ just to ‘get a job’?

Although Jack rescues a moral pretence here by rejecting the notion that lack of participation in the job sector relates to laziness on the part of Aboriginal people, he also conveys a subordinate stance when relegating Aboriginality to an archaic time (before currency) and he overlooks that lack of involvement in employment is intricately linked to

the ongoing impact of unearned white race privilege. As Nicholls, Crowley and Watt (1996, p. 6) explain; Indigenous people in Australia are typically offered ‘the most menial, degrading jobs at the bottom end of the economic heap.’ These writers argue that to overlook such details serves to reduce ‘the enormous socio-political problems brought about by the ongoing effects of colonisation to mere ‘cultural differences’.’ This is particularly interesting given that, immediately prior to this entry, Jack had drawn on the core literature for that week in order to acknowledge that ‘the contemporary ill health of indigenous [sic] people can be located within the historical context of colonialism’ (Gray & Sagggers, 2009, p. 161 as cited in ‘Jack’s’ journal). Thus for Jack, as for a number of ‘subordinate/complicit’ students, the problem (in moving toward a position of greater reflexivity), was not necessarily lack of engagement with the critical literature, it was the ability to use the literature critically.

In contrast, it was possible to see how some students’ budding engagement with the literature enabled them to develop a dawning reflexive awareness. For example, Matilda stated:

I liked the section in the [core textbook] chapter when Gray and Sagggers were exploring explanations of ill-health in a sociological sense. There are strong links between health status and social indicators such as class, ethnicity, and gender. In this sense, as we also saw in the film, Indigenous people face high levels of racism. Racism is [...] a key determinant of ill health.

Explorations into why some students (albeit a small number) were more amenable to adopting a critical viewpoint is the focus of a forthcoming paper.

## Discussion

I know this is not the thing to say but in my home town there are lots of Aboriginals and no matter what help they are given they just don’t appreciate it. I’m not being racist. That is just the way it is. I know what it is like. At my school they are given all sorts of money and help that other kids don’t get. That’s not fair. And still they don’t care. Not all, some are good. (‘Lily’ during class discussion)

Reflecting upon these analyses leads us to a number of conclusions. Firstly, we acknowledge that many of the students involved in the project would not have had the opportunity to think about health in collective or socially critical terms. In this respect, our expectations of students were admittedly ambitious. However, by immersing them in new ways of thinking we also positioned them as agents engaged in a long-term process of ‘becoming’ (Green & Reid, 2008). During the course of ‘becoming’, our analyses indicate that students’ blind spots coalesced around a number of common themes, including: the impact of previous pedagogical work of schools and society; the need for students to be equipped with critical tools for analysis; and the related need for us to uncover what remains ‘hidden’ during class discussions and activities.

Concerning the latter, we opened this section with a quote from ‘Lily’; one of the few pre-service teachers who categorically dared to ‘speak her mind’ during a particular class discussion. During this encounter, Lily embraced a conservative view of Aboriginality under the provision, ‘I’m not being racist’. Lily’s quote is drawn from one of the topic facilitator’s reflective journals, in which the author considers a class discussion that occurred following *Beneath Clouds*. The ‘Lily incident’ is a telling example of a discursive manoeuvre often used by people adopting a patently racist view, which is to sanitise the statement by stating

'I'm not racist...but.' It also highlights that despite several of the students expressing similar sentiments in their journals, very rarely was such a standpoint shared openly in class (on silence in the classroom, see also Rich & Cargile, 2004, p. 352). When recording the event, the author of the observation divulged that Lily's statement:

Punctuated the air with an uneasy silence. The moment threw me. Lily was being honest. She was 'putting it out there' as I had asked the group to do. I threw 'what do others think?' to the group. Cop out. Caught between facilitating open-ness and grasping a teaching moment. Jeremy came in (to the rescue?) and affirmed Lily's courage to voice her opinion. He then made the point that *Beneath Clouds* gives us the opportunity to examine our own positions, whatever they might be. Discussion continued, Lily did not contribute any more.

The interplay here between white student, white teacher, and group demonstrates, to a keen extent, one of the most problematic manoeuvres of all; choosing to no longer share one's thinking due to potential disapproval. Owing to this discursive manoeuvre, many students' blind spots remained hidden to us during class discussions only to be revealed later in their journals. This incident now figures as a 'prompt' for us as white educators to rethink the way in which we frame classroom environments: 'whether challenges can be made, questions voiced, questions raised and so on' (McGloin & Georgeou, 2015, p. 8).

On the one hand, being 'white' teacher educators is a designation that contributes problematically to the patterned racial exclusions aforementioned that result in white institutions employing a predominance of white staff. In this respect, we needed to 'out' ourselves (Davy, 1997) as white people in a white institution from the outset, to draw collective attention to the implications of the racialised milieu we shared. A stance such as this would, we hope, make race and whiteness far more immediate and meaningful phenomena for students, and as a framing device would start to focus student awareness on a number of otherwise taken-for-granted racial absences. Indeed, for Johnson Lachuk and Mosley (2012, p. 326), a focus on absence is a key method for developing racial literacy.

But on the other hand, being white teachers of white students also endows us with the unearned racial advantage of being 'insiders' (Hylton, 2009, p. 67; Schulz, 2014). With hindsight, we failed to exploit this position by better shaping our pedagogical approaches so as to elicit 'uncomfortable' yet vital conversations. Aveling (2004) suggests, one way of doing so is to draw upon the concept of the 'white ally' to assist white students to move beyond feelings of guilt or apprehension – a process of 'speaking up' as white teachers in order to empower white students to do the same. And while some of the more reflexive students reflected critically on these rare if 'uncomfortable' encounters – for instance, Jeremy wrote, 'even if [Lily] did not realise it, [she was] being racist' – if students remain silent due to judgement about their beliefs and thinking, we as educators miss the opportunity to help students push past these sticking points, because we remain unaware what their sticking points are.

Looking back at the academic journals of the topic facilitators we thus find places where we may have missed teachable moments through 'copping out', avoiding tension or leaving class discussion to those with reflexive viewpoints. These reflections also make clearer the way in which conversations about race and whiteness are just as anxiety-laden for white educators, particularly when we feel we are 'losing control' or 'stumped' by challenging comments. Pitcher (2014) suggests, anxiety often accompanies engagement with racialised representations that are not our own. He says, 'this anxiety can be understood as being produced by the absence of a fundamental underlying truth to a culture' (p. 41). Thus, anxiety emerges when we realise our lack of authority in response to comments like Lily's,

partly because we ‘do not’ (and *cannot*) ‘know’ Aboriginal culture, but also because our impulse as white teachers is to embrace the ‘correct’ explanation. Herein lies an opportunity.

Since the knowledge we have of another group is always partial – what Hall (1996) describes in terms of the problem of representation – we can *only* have an understanding that is ‘shaped by the impossibility of attaining something like full knowledge’ (Pitcher, 2014, p. 40). This tension creates the conditions for the production of racial stereotypes, which frame our conceptions of Self and Other. Looking back, in all of the journal excerpts showcased in this paper, the white students engaged in processes of constructing racial representations: be it the ‘drunken’, ‘lazy’ or ‘violent’ Aboriginal, the Aboriginal who chooses to ‘not work’ given the pre-colonial conditions of Indigenous Australia, or the Indigenous subject, powerful in their own right, whose current life choices are circumscribed by socio-historical conditions. Rarely did the student writing return the gaze to interrogate whiteness; the white Self was established as a by-product of negation, or what Hall (1996, p. 18) terms abjection.

Pitcher further contends, rather than shy away from direct engagement with racial stereotypes, it is stereotypes that provide the very material for grasping the contingency of cultural identity. This process in turn establishes entry points for genuine engagement in a politics of race, which A) ‘can reveal a culture’s stereotype to be the most substantial thing about it’ (Pitcher, 2014, p. 41), while B) making space for renegotiating existing meanings. Had we engaged with student journals earlier in the semester we might therefore have uncovered the dissonance between what was being said and left unsaid in workshops. Moreover, we might have utilised student writing to engage them strategically in their own racial constructions, in the manner described by Pitcher.

Had we drawn upon de-identified composites from students’ journals – composites that were far enough removed from students’ original work to avoid individual confrontation, while close enough to stimulate targeted classroom discussion – this would have enabled us, to some extent, to model how the critical literature might be used ‘critically’ to interrogate racial assumptions. Such work would not only involve exploring students’ representations of ‘Other’, but would allow space for interrogating white culture as it existed in the shadows of student writing. Taking this approach, we might have opened students to a view of racial representations in terms of ‘infinitely complex processes of engagement, exchange and negotiation’ (Pitcher, 2014, p. 42), rather than as ‘truths’ to be proven or disproven.

## Conclusion

Overall, these reflections are a sober example to us of the work that needs to be done in undergraduate teacher education. If we are asking students to engage with radically different views than those instilled through the pedagogic work of silence surrounding ‘whiteness’ (in mainstream schools and society), our critical focus needs to target these racial silences. This is necessary to challenge widely held beliefs and ideas in ways that empower students to start to engage meaningfully in a cultural politics of race, no matter what their teaching area. It would be remiss of us, however, to make such claims without acknowledging the political environment presently influencing our work as educators. Pearce has said of the UK context:

[...T]he current emphasis on the bureaucratic and technical aspects of teaching at the expense of wider social and philosophical issues on teacher training [sic] courses has left little room for a consideration of the effects of ethnicity and race in education. [...T]he current conception of teacher education as on-the-job training is likely to

afford fewer opportunities to address such complex theoretical issues.  
(Pearce, 2003, p. 285)

Over a decade later and these comments ring true with respect to teacher education in Australia. While collaboration between academics is not a novel response, we are attempting to embrace a collaborative approach to ensure that the work we undertake with students across topics may be characterised by consistency, and by more than a mere ‘dose’ of racial literacy. We present this as a work in progress.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The terms ‘Indigenous’, ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’ are located within contested power relations (Carey, 2008, p. 8). We use the terms Aboriginal and Indigenous here to describe First Nations Australians; nevertheless, we do so with a view to resisting the processes of racialised domination inherent in such terms, and also in recognition that this terminology is sanctioned within Indigenous Unit with which the first author is connected.

<sup>2</sup> An intermediary visited students at the start of the semester independently of their teachers, to provide information about the study. Information sheets were distributed outlining that few risks associated with the study were anticipated, but that it was possible other group members might be able to identify their contributions – even though they would not be directly attributed – in publications coming from the research. Participants were made aware of how anonymity would be protected through de-identification, and were invited to raise concerns regarding anticipated or actual risks or discomforts at any time. Ethics approval was obtained from the University and all participants gave informed consent.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Bourdieusean and critical Marxist lenses have been used in other papers to explore similar themes; see for instance Fane and Schulz (in press).

<sup>4</sup> Critical discourse analysis is a contested concept. Here we use it in the Foucauldian tradition (combined with a whiteness theoretical lens) to explore how power and knowledge work through language to reproduce *or* resist racialised social hierarchy in the construction of social ‘truths’. The study is limited on several fronts, but we do not view the sample size this way; indeed, a single life can provide a resource for analysing society (Frankenberg, 1993). We do acknowledge however, that it is beyond the reach of teachers to change aspects of the broader terrain of whiteness and, furthermore, it can take years of dedicated work to achieve the kind of decolonising consciousness signalled in this paper. Other limitations are that whiteness studies, while cognisant of ‘race’, often overlook the significance of other relations, such as gender and class. This is a conscious limitation in that these categories are not the focus of this paper.

<sup>5</sup> All proper names have been changed.

<sup>6</sup> Eddie McGuire is a well-known Australian media personality. Following the Goodes incident, McGuire made an openly racist quip on morning radio which fuelled heated public debate.

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