INVISIBILITY OF WHITENESS, INVISIBILITY OF TORRES STRAIT ISLANDERS: ISSUES OF PRIVILEGE, RACISM AND MARGINALISATION

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines racial issues particularly in relation to the invisibility of whiteness and to the invisibility of Torres Strait Islanders in a private boys' school in Perth, Australia. I examine ways in which systematic racism persists even though it is not always explicitly acknowledged. This paper shows ways in which the notion of invisibility relates differently to whiteness and to Torres Strait Islanders. The invisibility of whiteness enables white experience to remain the 'norm', thus privileging some at the expense of others. The invisibility of Torres Strait Islanders, however, is an example of the ways in which binary categories are normalised[1] and which in this case effectively subsumes Torres Strait Islanders under Aboriginality.

Whiteness is often considered unimportant and relegated as 'invisible' through deeply ingrained discourses that position the social category of whiteness as the norm.[2] However, whiteness can be considered 'a metaphor for privilege'.[3] Indeed, whiteness is a privilege that is enjoyed rather than acknowledged, and a reality that remains unknown: notions that emphasise the invisibility of whiteness. Transparency of whiteness as a racial identity further provides white people with a dominant position within society; a positioning which is reflected within classrooms. It appears that whiteness is only visible 'with reference to that which is not white—as if only non-whiteness can give whiteness substance'.[4] The normalisation of whiteness strengthens power and privilege for some at the expense of others with the 'omnipresence of power … produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another'.[5] Issues relating to hegemonic

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[1] See, eg, Bronwyn Davies, 'Beyond Dualism: Towards Multiple Subjectivities' in L. Christian-Smith (ed), *Texts of Desire: Essays on Fiction, Femininity and Schooling* (1993) 145.

[2] Leslie Roman, 'White Is a Color! White Defensiveness, Postmodernism, and Anti-Racist Pedagogy' in Cameron McCarthy and Warren Crichlow (eds), *Race, Identity and Representation in Education* (1993) 71.

[3] Michael Apple, 'Consuming the Other: Whiteness, Education, and Cheap French Fries' in Michelle Fine et al (eds), *Off White: Readings on Race, Power, and Society* (1997) 121, 125.

[4] T. Muraleedharan, 'Rereading Gandhi' in Ruth Frankenberg (ed), *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* (1997) 60, 61.

[5] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction* (1981) 93.

masculinities[6] and what it means to be male are further complicated by ways in which boys come to understand themselves as certain kinds of boys in relation to what it also means to be white, or not white, within a school system based on a white male Eurocentric middle class model. As a consequence, 'race' can play a significant but contradictory role in schools by placing students within the binary categories of 'white'/'black', with white often naturalised. The normalisation of binary categories[7] such as male/female, white/black often leads to such categories as privilege and marginalisation.

White, however, is not a homogenous category and has different meanings at different times, historically complicated with political actions defining who is white and struggles by particular groups to establish their whiteness.[8] People often do not fit into one ethnic group but by not fitting into any one particular group they may end up fitting into none in particular.[9] It is possible to embrace more than one ethnic group, although often within society there appears to be a need to choose. Sometimes, it may be possible to move from one ethnic group to another. Jayasuriya[10] warns that the "reality of ethnicity" cannot be denied, but it also cannot be used to reify a "fixed and immutable identity". However, as Bradley[11] suggests:

> … being 'British' and white can mean being English, Scots, Welsh or Irish – and also Jewish, Polish, Australian and so on. Thus in a multi-ethnic world ethnic identities are multi-layered, 'hybrid' or 'hyphenated'.

Similar meanings can be extrapolated in Australia where being Australian can mean many different things. Groups occupying some of these positionings can be identified as 'invisible minorities'.[12] Ethnic identities are thus often not 'fixed and immutable' and through the very action, for example, of emigrating/immigrating cultural identification can shift.

Whiteness is often associated with colourlessness, and 'the white culture' is associated with 'the hidden norm'.[13] For people of colour, however, their 'race' and ethnicity are part of their daily experiences.[14] Even when associating with people of colour, the discrimination they experience in their daily lives may not be perceived as being discriminative by those who

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[6] R W Connell, *Masculinities* (1995); See also Mairtin Mac an Ghaill, *The Making of Men: Masculinities, Sexualities and Schooling* (1994).

[7] Davies, above n 1.

[8] Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (1998).

[9] Roxanna Ng, 'Racism, Sexism, and Nation Building in Canada' in Cameron McCarthy and Warren Crichlow (eds), *Race, Identity and Representation in Education* (1993) 50.

[10] Laksiri Jayasuriya, *Immigration and Multiculturalism in Australia* (1997) 12.

[11] Harriet Bradley, *Fractured Identities: Changing Patterns of Inequality* (1996) 119.

[12] Anoop Nayak, '"White English Ethnicities": Racism, Anti-Racism and Student Perspectives' (1999) 2 *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 177.

[13] Roman, above n 2, 71.

[14] Glenn Jordan and Chris Weedon, *Cultural Politics: Class, Gender, Race and the Postmodern World* (1995).

experience life as part of a dominant group.[15] Although people of colour experience their 'race' and ethnicity as part of their daily experiences, for 'white' people, their whiteness can be ignored since dominant discourses accept whiteness as the norm. In this way, 'whiteness becomes something beyond ethnicity, history, privilege or struggle. Something indefinable, something silent'.[16] Furthermore, whiteness takes the form of a marker by which different groups are oppressed or their status maintained.[17] Whilst whiteness remains unnamed and unmarked, it retains a privileged position. In fact, as hooks[18] suggests, "to ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalising it".

Discussions relating to race and colour can be fraught with emotional and conflicting difficulties and beliefs so that:

> The colour of one's skin is part of ourselves. It does not matter. It is precious and yet it should not matter; it is important and yet it must not matter. It is simultaneously our greatest vanity and anxiety.[19]

Confusion and contradictions are evident in discussions of the term 'race' and, as Frankenberg[20] suggests, to see racial differences can be racist, but to not see racial differences is 'racist oversight'. Racial differences compete in contested discursive fields of contextual understandings. Thus colour becomes a paradox within itself and within the theorisation of race where it should not matter yet it must not be ignored. This paradox becomes a contradiction and was evident in students' responses in my research, where the colour of their skin was important to the non-white students yet colour was seldom mentioned, and when it was named it was in relation to Indigenous Australians. Given the Australian context this could be considered as self-evident.

Many societies, like Australia, are multicultural, multisexual and multiracial. Despite this, ethnic groups have often been denied access to their history and culture through the school curriculum. At the same time, it is also within school curricula where 'whiteness' is accepted as the norm, while other ethnic characteristics are devalued or repressed. Thus underlying racism goes unchecked, while allowing Eurocentric values to remain dominant. For example, Australian history is usually taught as beginning with European people 'discovering' this land, inferring that prior Indigenous ownership does not really constitute history *per se*. Although European movement to Australia

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[15] Dasiea Cavers-Huff and Janice Kollitz, 'Seeing Ourselves through the Eyes of the "Other": An Intellectual and Spiritual Journey' in Naomi Zack, Laurie Shrage and Crispin Sartwell (eds), *Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: The Big Questions* (1998) 133.

[16] Ruth Arber, 'Defining Positioning within Politics of Difference: Negotiating Spaces "in between"' (2000) 3 *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 45, 51.

[17] Peter McLaren, 'Afterword: Ya Basta!' in Yali Zou and Enrique Trueba (eds), *Ethnic Identity and Power: Cultural Contexts of Political Action in School and Society* (1998) 411.

[18] bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1990) 171.

[19] Patricia Williams, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race (the 1997 BBC Reith Lectures)* (1997) 37.

[20] Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (1993).

is part of Australia's history, it is not necessarily the most significant part for the Indigenous people living in Australia. School curricula can thus communicate powerful images through its representation of identity, 'race' and difference[21], and images of who we are can be shaped and re-created within the educational system. When Aboriginal Education is taught in schools, it often focuses on Australian Aboriginals and excludes Torres Strait Islanders. Torres Strait Islanders thus become subsumed under Aboriginality.

In this paper I focus on analysing whiteness and racism in a localised context in one specific boys' school. I draw attention to the dynamics within the classroom for one Indigenous boy to highlight racialised social relations and practices. I examine the ways in which white experience remains the 'norm' and the persistence of systematic racism. I describe ways in which Torres Strait Islanders are subsumed under Aboriginality, highlighting ways in which binary categories act at different levels with effects of privileging one category over another. The normalisation process is problematic for male students who do not fit into a particular normalised masculine or racialised position. Students are not disadvantaged explicitly because of their ethnic background, but by cultural and structural biases imposed on them through educational systems.[22] However, as Tatum[23] asserts, although we all possess multiple identities, 'some dimensions of our identities are reflected more saliently than others'. Thus the social category of whiteness interplays with other categories, such as gender and social class and creates different potential positionings for students.

METHODOLOGY

This study[24] was conducted in a Year 10 English classroom in an elite private boys' school in Perth, Australia. This class consisted of a female teacher with thirty-three 14-15 year old male students of varied ethnic background. For this study I used qualitative research methods.[25] These methods included classroom observations, open-ended questionnaires, unstructured interviews with students and teacher and students' own written

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[21] William Pinar, 'Notes on Understanding Curriculum as a Racial Text' in Cameron McCarthy and Warren Crichlow (eds), *Race, Identity and Representation in Education* (1993) 60.

[22] Kathryn Gilbey, 'Indigenous Women in Education: Issues of Race, Gender and Identity' in Gary Partington (ed), *Perspectives on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education* (1998) 106.

[23] Beverly Tatum, 'Lighting Candles in the Dark: One Black Woman's Response to White Antiracist Narratives' in Christine Clark and James O'Donnell (eds), *Becoming and Unbecoming White: Owning and Disowning a Racial Identity* (1999) 56, 60.

[24] Helen Hatchell, *Masculinities and Whiteness: The Shaping of Adolescent Male Students' Subjectivities in an Australian Boys' School* (PhD Thesis, Murdoch University, 2003).

[25] See Bruce Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, (3rd ed, 1998); Norman Denzin, *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century* (1997); Patti Lather, *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy with/in the Postmodern* (1991); Jeanette Rhedding-Jones, 'The Writing on the Wall: Doing a Feminist Post-Structural Doctorate' (1997) 9 *Gender and Education* 193; Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (1992).

texts that they made available to me. Ethical considerations included ensuring that consent was given; that participants retained the right to withdraw from the research at any time without prejudice; protection to confidentiality; while always retaining participants' rights to anonymity.[26] Interview questions were directly developed from incidents and discussions observed in the classroom and from students' written work and subsequently problematised during the interviews. Many of the issues discussed related to texts used in class and how texts were read and understood by students. The teacher suggested that students benefited from these one-to-one discussions. The flexibility of informal style of interviews allowed the addition of depth, detail and meaning at participants' personal level of experience. Thus students could develop their own critical thinking in relation to particular issues through more in-depth discussions at interviews.

For my discussion in this paper I will be drawing on interview narratives of the teacher and six of the students. Marilyn, the English teacher, identified herself as British. Kevin identified himself as an Indigenous Australian as well as a Torres Strait Islander. Patrick identified himself as an Australian with a Scottish and Welsh background. Anthony identified himself as Australian, born in Australia. William identified himself as Australian. Robert identified himself as Australian, born in Australia. Ken identified himself as British, born in England. For ethical reasons, pseudonyms have been used throughout this discussion.

OVERLOOKING WHITENESS

During one English class I gave students questions in which they were asked to list five things, such as colour of skin, being male, birthplace, ethnic group, social class, or other significant things that were important to them, in order of importance. From answers to this questionnaire I found that students often tried to fit into an Australian image, irrespective of cultural background. The majority of the thirty-three students represented themselves as Australian. However, Australian-born students tended to find issues such as being born in Australia or being able to speak English as important. Being male was significant to a number of boys. However, non-white students and students with European backgrounds tended to include their ethnic group as being important. Significantly, being white was overlooked by all 'white' students and students from European background, although colour of skin was specifically mentioned in the questionnaire. Skin colour was significant to only one student who is of Indian background. Answers to the questionnaire show that self-representations within discourses of hegemonic masculinity[27] were reinforced for students, but without problematising the way hegemonic masculinity is normalised within a framework that considered being white as the norm. In other words: for 'white' students, being white was unimportant but considered the 'norm', while ethnicity *was* important for non-English speaking

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[26] Australian Association for Research in Education, *Code of Ethics for Research in Education* (1993).
[27] Connell, above n 6.

'white' students and for non-white students. This is exemplified by Patrick for whom white is considered unimportant yet fairly reluctantly acknowledged as an advantage. During an interview when discussing what was important to him, Patrick made a questionable statement that needed clarification:

> Patrick: I think that being white is not that important.
>
> H.H.: Do you think being white has been an advantage though?
>
> Patrick: Probably.

I found Patrick's notion of the unimportance of whiteness was common amongst white students. Furthermore, narratives from interviews at this private boys' school show that students represent themselves within a dominant masculinity discourse that is also within a white Anglo-Australian 'norm'. In this specific context, whiteness retains its 'secrecy' of 'white supremacy'.[28] However, in this context of a middle class single sex boys' school, whiteness remains subsumed under more dominant discourses of hegemonic masculinity. Thus the invisibility of whiteness remained the 'norm'.

Although students' cultural backgrounds were varied, significant issues relating to ethnicity that emerged, such as cultural invisibility, were more often in respect of Indigenous Australian issues. In other words, students would more easily relate significant cultural issues to Indigenous Australians than to other cultural groupings. However, many of the emerging issues, specifically in relation to pedagogy, are also pertinent for other ethnic groups. Thus the examination of such issues has important pedagogical potentials. In my ensuing discussion of whiteness in this paper, my focus begins with Indigenous Australian issues and moves to explorations of racism within the Australian context as perceived by students. Through discussions with Kevin, the invisibility of Torres Strait Islanders emerged as an issue. I found that Torres Strait Islanders are often subsumed under the more general named group of Aboriginal peoples. Although the experiences of Kevin are neither representative of all Indigenous Australians, nor indeed of all Torres Strait Islanders, his experiences emphasise some of the struggles that exist for Indigenous Australians in Australian schools. Racism was identified as a persistent though not always explicit problem. These issues are explored in more depth in the next sections.

'A BIT DIFFERENT BECAUSE OF THE COLOUR OF MY SKIN'

In this section I draw on the narratives of Marilyn and Kevin to discuss issues of racial prejudice. Centrally important to my argument is the idea that to

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[28] Christine Clark, 'The Secret: White Lies Are Never Little' in Christine Clark and James O'Donnell (eds), *Becoming and Unbecoming White: Owning and Disowning a Racial Identity* (1999) 92.

be white also means to be privileged.[29] Whiteness is implicated in power whereby privileges are maintained or denied and this privilege influences everyday experiences with or without our knowledge or cooperation. White privilege, like male privilege,[30] does not privilege all within its generalised category. However, I would argue that, like the continued existence of 'patriarchal dividend',[31] a white 'dividend' also prevails and is evident in the middle class single sex boys' classroom. Recognising that racism does not disappear through ignoring issues of racism it is possible to note that, conversely, issues of racism are not challenged simply through introduction of these issues. During our first interview, while discussing *The Inner Circle*,[32] Marilyn considered the issue of racial prejudice. *The Inner Circle* is a story of two teenage boys struggling for personal identities, and narratives in the text are presented alternatively through the eyes of the two boys. The story raises issues of prejudice and of whiteness, such as prejudice relating to an Aboriginal boy from the 'bush' and indifference of the world for a white Australian boy from a divorced family. The specific text, therefore, enabled Marilyn to introduce such issues as racial prejudice into the classroom in a not-so-personal way.

> Marilyn: Joe [the central character of *The Inner Circle*] has been the victim of racial prejudice through his life – through primary school, when he went to work. And he's had to create a web of lies to his parents, sort of thing, that he's done OK and fitting in. And that was interesting. But you know there is an Aboriginal student in the classroom. But here I didn't push it in any way and he didn't make any comment, and no one questioned it really and what was sort of happening to that particular boy. They just sort of said in their written work: yes, it does go on and it's really bad and it's really stupid. And I think one of the questions I asked was had they experienced anything like it, prejudice and stuff, and no one had. But they all generally felt very supportive of Joe.

Links between Aboriginal people and racism were highlighted through the introduction of *The Inner Circle*. However, although racial prejudice was introduced to students, an underlying notion perceived by Marilyn was that somehow Joe (a character in the text), as an Aboriginal person, or as an 'other', had to fit in with society even though he was the one who was experiencing racial prejudice. The teacher's underlying notion reflected dominant discourses in society suggesting that 'white' experiences are the norm.[33] The notion of 'fitting in' was also reflected in Kevin's narrative. As an Indigenous Australian student, Kevin's own experiences were often negated because they did not fit

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[29] See, eg, James O'Donnell, 'The Recollections of a Recovering Racist' in Christine Clark and James O'Donnell (eds), *Becoming and Unbecoming White: Owning and Disowning a Racial Identity* (1999) 137; Patti De Rosa, 'Building Blocks: My Journey toward White Racial Awareness' in Christine Clark and James O'Donnell (eds), *Becoming and Unbecoming White: Owning and Disowning a Racial Identity* (1999) 178.

[30] R W Connell, 'Gender Politics for Men' in Steven Schacht and Doris Ewing (eds), *Feminism and Men: Reconstructing Gender Relations* (1998) 225.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Gary Crew, *The Inner Circle* (1999).

[33] Roman, above n 2.

in with what was perceived as 'normal' or Kevin was given looks that identified him as 'different'. During my discussions of *The Inner Circle* with Kevin he stated that he was able to identify with Joe, one of the protagonists in the book and an Aboriginal boy. Introduction of texts such as *The Inner Circle* thus enabled identification of marginalisation, difference in treatment and discrimination for students like Kevin. Kevin explored how he often felt 'different because of the colour of [his] skin', and how discrimination was not necessarily spoken, but was also from body language. These 'feelings' created uncertainties for Kevin, which he could not grasp and explicitly challenge, but were feelings that left him in a disadvantaged position. It is these hidden elusive moments of racism that Ang[34] found so 'infuriating' because of 'the fact that one cannot prove any *hard* racism here while still feeling objectified, subjected to scrutiny, othered'. When I asked Kevin if he could relate to the text *The Inner Circle*, our conversation took the following path as he discussed his feelings of discriminatory treatment and of his experiences of hidden racism. His pain was discernable as he spoke of racial issues highlighted in school texts and their links to his own life struggles.

> H.H.:   Can you relate to *The Inner Circle*?
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> Kevin: I think, yes, sometimes, because I've seen a problem with my brothers and sisters. They sort of have a problem with identifying who they are and I think some of the things, I can't really remember his name. Joe, I think, is the Aboriginal.
>
> H.H.:   Yes.
>
> Kevin: Well I think being a black person, I think some of the things that happened in the book certainly do, I can relate to because it happens sometimes. And, like if we walk into a shop, and it's not just me, and if you're out in a shop and you can see Aboriginal people or any other black people, if they walk into a shop there's always sort of, you can feel someone's watching you or you're being looked at. When people start say cracking jokes about say Asians and you sort of think they're going to maybe start to pick on you and find faults in you. Sometimes I feel that I'm a bit different because of the colour of my skin. And sometimes I find like that's like a disadvantage, when really I shouldn't look at it like that. But sometimes that's how I feel. And it's sometimes what people say or just from what the body language that I see from people giving or them just looking at me. That's how I feel sometimes.

Kevin's discussion of how he felt *different* and *disadvantaged* led me to ask about his experiences with teachers. Kevin expressed how he held teachers at his school in high esteem, and felt that their actions and language were not discriminatory. But, he also communicated that at school there was little opportunity to express his opinions, which left important issues unresolved for him and with hegemonic discourses and stereotypes unchallenged.

> Kevin: Sometimes you're not given the opportunity to say what you want to say. Again when we were talking about Aboriginals and where kids would come up with things like well they're bludgers and they drink and there's sort of not a chance to

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[34] Ien Ang, 'The Curse of the Smile: Ambivalence and the "Asian" Woman in Australian Multiculturalism' (1996) 52 *Feminist Review* 36, 42.

discuss that more. Being the only black person in the class, and being a Torres Strait Islander, I wasn't able to sort of say anything. And I did sort of want to say some stuff but I was cut short. And again, you know, that sort of thing wasn't resolved, that issue. People go away with negative feelings and thoughts … and they're not making an educated decision based on what information they received … And in the end, in that class, that feeling was still there because it had not yet been resolved and I still feel a bit funny when I talk about it. I feel a bit sad but about how people feel and that not being able to discuss it more and stuff like that.

Kevin expressed how important issues, such as Aboriginal negative stereotypes, were difficult to challenge in classrooms. However, the effects of ways in which issues remained unresolved were felt long after such incidents occur. In this case Kevin remained sad and still found such issues 'funny' to talk about. Although he felt that teachers were not discriminatory, hidden disadvantages and racism remained within the educational system. This informs a power relationship[35] which exists within the school curricula which can exclude and contain Indigenous Australians. Assumptions can be difficult to challenge when opportunities are denied and this is evident in Kevin's narratives. His ideas were expected to remain within the school's ideology. bell hooks[36] clearly identifies ways in which hegemonic ideas and assumptions of white people, such as the idea that whiteness represents goodness, are forced onto other groups.

Socialised to believe the fantasy, that whiteness represents goodness and all that is benign and non-threatening, many white people assume this is the way black people conceptualise whiteness. They do not imagine that the way whiteness makes its presence felt in black life, most often as terrorising imposition, a power that wounds, hurts, tortures, is a reality that disrupts the fantasy of whiteness as representing goodness.

Ways in which hegemonic ideas were continually dominant were evident in Kevin's narratives and were considered discriminatory by Kevin. Yet these same or similar dominant discourses were not necessarily considered to be any form of racial prejudice by other students.

RACIAL PREJUDICE

Although students had not admitted to experiencing any kind of prejudice by Marilyn during classroom discussions, students were able to discuss racial incidents with me during interviews. At the same time they did not always associate such incidents with racism or prejudice (discussed later). The educational environment silenced students like Kevin through the discourse of whiteness as the privileged norm, so that they were unable to voice their experiences and thus make these experiences significant. For example, during interviews Kevin mentioned racism often thus showing it was a significant part of his life, and that he was aware of racism even when discussing other issues such as gender. With an understanding of how voices

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[35] Jan Pettman, *Living in the Margins: Racism, Sexism and Feminism in Australia* (1992).
[36] bell hooks, 'Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination' in Ruth Frankenberg (ed), *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* (1997) 165, 169.

are often silenced[37] and how direct questioning can be too confronting for students, I questioned Marilyn further on issues that might be considered sensitive to students:

> H.H.: [Do you think that] sometimes though students might not want to actually say anything if it's too personal?
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> Marilyn: True. But often that comes out with English in their writing because they know it's just me seeing that. And they know that I'm not going to stand in front and read it out and embarrass them. They know that. So often they sit there quite quietly, particularly you know Year 10 to 11, and particularly Year 12 that's when it will come out, when they do maybe answer in front of their peers. They don't want to, although I mean English is the subject really where you have to put a lot of yourself into. I'm constantly asking, well how do you feel about this, what's your response. It's different from other subjects. They've got to really get into the text. Their context is where they're coming from is so important for the text, particularly in Year 12. That's part of the syllabus, that's the only type of questions that are asked in the text: the relationship between the reader and the text, and the writer on the texts. And certainly in Year 12 we try to choose texts that challenge their point of view I suppose what the syllabus perceives to be the kind of dominant point of view. Like we read the text *Wild Cat Falling* which is a very powerful Aboriginal text, which … kids have said oh this is just about stereotypical Aboriginals and whatever. And we really have to sort of say hang on and challenge that and spend time talking and giving them knowledge. And I know another teacher this year had trouble with his class and so he's found really positive things to do with the Aboriginal liaison officer now, he's become involved, to see another side of things. We really try and address that if it does come out. And it does come out in classrooms sometimes. But not in Year 10, going back to Year 10, not so much… It's a shame it's such a big group really but, yes in their writing it comes out and possibly with their close friends or something like that.

Notably, Marilyn acknowledged that teachers at school addressed Aboriginal and racial issues when these issues emerged. However, because issues were addressed only when they surfaced, institutional and hidden racism[38] was never explicitly challenged. Again, significant issues were left undiscussed with Year 10s because issues were not explicitly introduced by these students. However, during classroom interactions and discussions - when students were working on issues brought out through the reading of *The Inner Circle* - I found non-white students identify racism as significant, whereas friendship and divorce issues seem to be identified by many of the white students.

My understanding that different students found different issues introduced through *The Inner Circle* as significant is supported through students' narratives. I found the conversational style of my interviews enabled students to introduce issues that were personally significant. Consequently, Kevin, as a Torres Strait Islander, discussed many issues relating to racism and

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[37] Shulamit Reinharz, 'Towards an Ethnography of "Voice" and "Silence"' in Edison Trickett, Roderick Watts and Dina Birman (eds), *Human Diversity: Perspectives on People in Context* (1994) 178.

[38] See, eg, Rhonda Craven and Robert Rigney, 'Misconceptions, Stereotypes and Racism: Time for a Change' in Rhonda Craven (ed), *Teaching Aboriginal Studies* (1999) 43.

whiteness in depth, with a much clearer, first-hand knowledge of racism at work in society and in institutions. During interviews, Kevin introduced the topic of the stolen generation in Australia. The idea that whiteness represents goodness, an idea that is normalised through its identification with the colour white, also provides an underlying justification for the way Aboriginal children were forcibly taken away from their families. Kevin's linking of not being given an opportunity to discuss Aboriginal issues at school to the stolen generation exhibited an understanding of how 'black' voices were often less significant than 'white' voices even on specific Aboriginal issues. This linkage related to the present as well as historically.

> Kevin: And like our teacher was saying that they had like little babies, they would put them in the ground and they would kill them. That's what our teacher was saying. And that's sort of, you know, hard because it makes me feel like it's again the thing with the stolen generations.

> H.H.:   What was the story behind putting them in the ground and killing them?

> Kevin: It was sort of a way of wiping out the Aboriginal race I think.

> H.H.:   Who were they saying was doing that?

> Kevin: The Queensland government, way back when they first came and settled. When I was doing my project, one of the articles in *The West Australian* was about an Aboriginal boy who had driven a car into a hole. And again his mum wasn't making any excuse, wasn't using being part of the stolen generation, she wasn't using that as an excuse to defend what her son had done, but was saying that that had affected his upbringing. And I sort of got into a, not an argument but a disagreement between my tutor and myself because she was saying that it happened in Australia and in Europe where they were taken. If before they were a certain age and they had a child, it was taken away and put into like a, what is it? [struggling for the right word]…

> H.H.:   A foster home or adoption?

> Kevin: Yes adoption and we were sort of talking about it and she was saying that's the same sort of thing with the stolen generation. And I was saying, well to me I was looking like it wasn't. It was not the same. It was sort of the same thing that you were taken from your mother, but I mean if you think about it you've got a white baby going to a white family and a black baby going to a white family. It's different. It's like a loss of their culture, identity and stuff like that. I mean my aunties, a couple of my mum's friends … are part of the stolen generation and they've been brought up by white people and some of them don't know their family, don't know their custom, their culture or anything, whatever. And I was trying to explain that to my tutor, you know what the difference is between the two, really there are similarities but you know. My opinion is biased. I'm a Torres Strait Islander. I'm Indigenous, raised in Australia, and although separate from Aboriginal I'm still Aboriginal people. We still sort of say they're our brothers and sisters and stuff like that. So I was sort of biased. I was on their side. We just got into a heated debate about the stolen generation and the article so you can sort of see how that affects my schoolwork.

Kevin articulated how people he knew were part of the stolen generation and how they subsequently were less able to identify with their family, customs or culture. By being placed with a 'white' family, their own 'blackness', which

linked them to their Aboriginal culture, was lost or 'stolen' from them. Social injustices for Indigenous Australians have dominated much of recent Australian history.[39] Although Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their communities and families since the early days of European occupation,[40] acknowledgement of these stories is only slowly seeping into school curricula. Only recently, and particularly with a 1997 Government Report, *Bringing Them Home*, have Australians been given opportunities to read stories by Indigenous Australians of their removal from family and communities. Thus "selective amnesia"[41] relating to Aboriginal realities in Aboriginal history filters down to schools through school curricula and enables myths to remain and resurface. However, the comparison that Kevin mentions (above) of government policies which forcibly removed Indigenous children to incidents in Europe and America where children of young mothers were taken away to be adopted, provides an escape route for non-Indigenous Australians. Such comparisons enable the importance of incidents like the forcible removal of Indigenous children to be devalued and relegated as insignificant. For Kevin, significant Aboriginal historical issues remained unresolved and led to questions relating to school curricula:

> Kevin: I think one problem I have had is when we start a discussion about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and there's not a thing saying these two cultures, that these two people are different cultures, different kind of people, with different beliefs. And there are some similarities, but on the whole there's very different aspects and they've got different lifestyles.

Insightfully, Kevin identified how Torres Strait Islanders are often incorporated under a more general term of Aboriginal people, with assumptions that their educational needs and life experiences are akin to Aboriginal peoples. As Synott and Whatman observe,[42] although the expression 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' is often encountered in education, 'the "Torres Strait Islander" dimension in educational debates, policies and issues is rarely followed through.' The hidden and peripheral dimensions of Torres Strait Islanders filter through the educational system. To add to this peripheral dimension, living away from what could be considered Kevin's 'home country', Kevin felt that links to his culture were broken.

> Kevin: Well I think growing up in WA [Western Australia], and being such a long way from the Torres Strait, we sort of, the ties with your culture, I think, break because you're sort of learning a different kind of culture, European culture. You're not learning the values of the culture, or the traditions that your parents were brought

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[39] Quentin Beresford and Paul Omaji, *Our State of Mind: Racial Planning and the Stolen Generation* (1998).

[40] Simon Forrest, 'That's My Mob: Aboriginal Identity' in Gary Partington (ed), *Perspectives on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education* (1998) 96.

[41] Anne Pattel-Gray, 'The Hard Truth: White Secrets, Black Realities' (1999) 14 *Australian Feminist Studies* 259, 265.

[42] John Synott and Sue Whatman, 'United to the Sea and Land: Cultures, Histories and Education in the Torres Strait' in Gary Partington (ed), *Perspectives on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education* (1998) 55, 55.

up in.

Breaks from what is considered one's own culture are significant when, as for Indigenous Australians, kinship is attributed as an important element of identity[43]. This was evident from Kevin's narrative where he identified family as being the most significant part of his identity. However, when I asked Kevin the most important thing about himself, his Torres Strait Islander identity was most significant. However, because this meant 'being the *other* Indigenous race' he found there were problems with Aboriginal people as well as white people, specifically in terms of not being recognised as separate to Aboriginal people.

> Kevin: I think of myself as more of a Torres Strait Islander. I just think of everyone as just the same but there are cultural differences and your culture and your custom and your upbringing is always going to play a part in your future life or whatever you do… With being the other Indigenous race in Australia we have a problem with our Aboriginal as well as white society. Sometimes we're seen from the white perspective where we're one and all the same, and we're not really. We've got a totally different culture. I mean there are a few similarities but different customs. We live differently. We eat differently and other things like that. We speak differently. That's a problem for Torres Strait Islanders where they're not recognised as a separate race and we're sort of grouped as two. We see it with ATSIC [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Commission], the two together. But the Torres Strait Islanders now … are looking towards greater autonomy. They can be separate and have their own organisation and look after their own affairs. And there's also the problem of accessing various services within Australia, mainstream services. That's a problem sometimes. I mean, not for me personally, but for other people. Sometimes it's hard for them to access certain services that are available, the mainstream services.

> H.H.: Do you find you're almost forgotten here in the school, when they're teaching history and that?

> Kevin: Yes, I do. Because like we learned Aboriginal studies and we didn't really learn anything about Torres Strait Islander culture. There's not really a lot about what we are like, there's more Aboriginal stuff, there's not to say we're neglected, we're not discussed as much. The kids are not being taught really. They're just taught like Aboriginals and that there's not another Indigenous race of Australia. And I sort of do feel left out sort of. I mean I do sort of feel left out, because we discuss things like NAIDOC week. NAIDOC week stands for National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Conservation. And I mean that I understood from Year 5 that the name, it's National Aboriginal and Islander. Islander can be anyone. We're sort of Islanders. That's broad. There are different Islanders and it should have something like National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander or something like that, because 'Islander' is just too broad. And we're sort of left out in the dark. Certain policies are implemented by Aboriginal departments and government departments, without consulting Torres Strait Islanders and our sort of people involved in decision-making processes or the government agencies. And that's one of the main reasons why there's been a big push for a greater autonomy – so that we can have Torres Strait Islander people running their own affairs and making decisions for Torres Strait Islander people.

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[43] Forrest, above n 40; Merridy Malin, 'They Listen and They've Got Respect: Culture and Pedagogy' in Gary Partington (ed), *Perspectives on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education*, (1998) 245.

Thus although Aboriginal studies are taught at schools, Torres Strait Islanders often remain excluded from discussions. This highlights ways in which normalisation of categories of a binary nature[44] occur to exclude 'others'. Kevin is acutely aware of his marginalisation. However, resistances to power[45] as well as the need for negotiations with the contradictions presented to him are evident as Kevin positions himself significantly as a Torres Strait Islander, while at the same time he selects positions within a mainly white Eurocentric elite private boys' schools, where he is also successful. The lack of inclusiveness for Kevin as a Torres Strait Islander is apparent. Kevin's Torres Strait Islander identity is not reinforced on a daily basis at school, but instead is often made invisible in a similar fashion to how he is silenced in discussions that relate to his culture and identity. But, as Weedon[46] suggests, although competing discourses may contain silences and gaps, competing discourses also provide spaces for resistance and challenge. Notions of resistance and challenge, with aspirations for greater autonomy for Torres Strait Islander people, are apparent in Kevin's narrative. Significantly, Kevin is also resisting the tendency to homogenise all Torres Strait Islanders by stating that there are many 'different' Islanders. He thus highlights the diversity within Torres Strait Islander peoples. Indeed, overall there was a general lack of understanding of the many differences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including their many languages.[47] The contradictions for Kevin show his resistance to dominant and more powerful discourses but within the social constraints of the school environment.[48] Although not representative of all Torres Strait Islanders, Kevin's experience of marginalisation is an example of some of the struggles that exist for Indigenous Australians in Australian schools. Struggles relating to marginalisation are further compounded by issues of racism which remain prevalent in schools. In the next section I draw attention to the issues of racism that became apparent during interviews.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF RACISM

The notion of unrecognised and unacknowledged privilege of whiteness, introduced earlier, is evident in the reading of selected narratives of other male students. These students' own whiteness was irrelevant to them and thus they felt that it was insignificant. However, there was a strong link between racism and 'non-white' people. In this section, I specifically draw on the narratives of Anthony, William, Ken and Robert (all of whom identified as either Australian or British). Students like Anthony and William took a more distant approach to the issue of racism whereby they acknowledged that racism existed in the

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[44] Davies, above n 1.

[45] Foucault, above n 5.

[46] Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (2nd ed, 1997).

[47] Gary Partington, 'Shaping Indigenous Education' in Gary Partington (ed), *Perspectives on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education* (1998) 75.

[48] Marie de Lepervanche, 'Working for the Man: Migrant Women and Multiculturalism' in Kay Saunders and Raymond Evans (eds), *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation* (1994) 82.

school, but accepted racism as part of life. The links of explicit racism to that directed at Indigenous people were strong for Anthony who suggested that there was *not too much* racism in the school because there were *not too many* Aboriginal students at the school. Thus fewer Aboriginal students at school were clearly and closely linked to less racism. Anthony also makes a distinction between Aboriginal students and students of other ethnic groups. With other 'races' it is possible, he argues, to ignore any racial comments more easily because of the possibilities of retorting with similar comments. In this way, selected racism can be overlooked. Racism thus appears in different forms in different situations.[49] Racism is discerned to be less significant for other 'races' and Anthony returns to linking racism with Aboriginal people.

> Anthony: There's not really any racism because there's not many Aboriginals like there is in a majority of schools and I'm spending seven hours of my day here and the rest of it at home basically. So you come up against other races in sport and stuff and you just, if they do have racial comments against you, you just ignore it because you could easily turn around and say the same sort of thing back to them… Like you come across them like in town and they'll ask you for money and stuff like this, and you just say no. I mean they don't believe you and you probably because they face so many people who say they don't have any money and they know you do. But yes, even if you don't have any money they turn around and ask you and they probably follow you for like ages. But you've just got to say to them no. You just can't turn around and say get lost you Abo [*sic*] or something like that because that's when fights start and stuff like this. And like you hear about all the Aboriginals in town getting into fights. But the police are always going to protect the white people over the Aboriginals because they've got that reputation that they start fights and all this sort of stuff. So yes, basically they're going to be the ones that they have to face the music basically when we don't and we probably just get off scot-free and that, yes they just start fights. Like you normally see them yelling out in town and all this sort of stuff and even the policemen will discriminate against them because that's how they've dealt with those sorts of situations before.

Anthony reiterates myths and stereotypes of Aboriginal people and their reputations in the city; reputations such as asking for money, yelling, getting into fights. He acknowledges that Aboriginal people are often discriminated against because of their Aboriginality. However, when I ask if he feels safe going into Perth he replies that he does feel safe and he then talks his way through his ideas and his experiences and negotiates himself into a position where he realises Aboriginal people do not really hassle and cause trouble after all.

> H.H.: Do you feel quite safe when you go into town?
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> Anthony: Yes, I still feel safe because you normally find the Aboriginals hang around in like groups and stuff like that and there's actually Aboriginal elders in the group. And they're sort of like, even guys that are like twenty-one, twenty-two years old they sort of like take responsibility of them and tell them what to do and this sort of

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[49] Carolyn O'Grady, 'Seeing Things as They Are' in Christine Clark and James O'Donnell (eds), *Becoming and Unbecoming White: Owning and Disowning a Racial Identity* (1999) 122; Fazal Rizvi, 'Children and the Grammar of Popular Racism' in Cameron McCarthy and Warren Crichlow (eds), *Race, Identity and Representation in Education* (1993) 126.

> stuff. So they just basically talk to one another in groups and you don't have a problem with them. But it's only like little kids that are walking around on their own when their parents aren't watching them. Yes you normally find it's the little kids that start hassling you or, either that they just like, or you just say you don't have any money and they just, like they'll ask you a couple more times and then they'll just leave. It's not a problem in town basically. Yes they all see that there's not much point going up to people hassling and hassling and hassling you because they're just not going to get anything out of it and eventually a policeman is going to walk past and they're going to be gone so yes.

Initial responses are thus informed by ingrained dominant discourses that form strong links between Aboriginal people and Aboriginal stereotypes. These initial responses did not, however, contain Anthony's contradictory feelings that Aboriginal people did not always fit their associated negative stereotypes. Furthermore, initial responses, if left undeconstructed, remain the more prominent ideas even if reality reveals different meanings. Many students were able to identify situations associated with racial prejudice when related to Indigenous Australians. However, racism and negative stereotyping linked to Indigenous Australians remains perceived by these students as inescapable.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

As acknowledged in my introduction, whiteness is not a homogenous category that is fixed and immutable, but is often fluid and at times contradictory. In this study I found that whiteness remains invisible and that the white experience remains the 'norm' whereas racism and negative stereotyping was clearly linked to Indigenous Australians. The use of literary text enabled some deconstruction of whiteness and of Aboriginal stereotypes. I found that literary texts play critical roles in exploring ways in which students represent themselves and create their own 'visible' meaning of whiteness. The roles of literary texts revealed the malleable nature of whiteness as a 'racial' category. Students' narratives show promise for changes and show the importance of teaching anti-racism at all levels in schools. My research shows that it is not enough to address issues only when students introduce them because students often find sensitive issues difficult to bring up. Frankenberg reminds us that "the bulk of antiracist work is being done by people of colour."[50] Therefore, it is important that white people also be active participants in antiracism. At schools, teachers play a central role, but despite best efforts of teachers, some students remain alienated. Social injustices continue and degrees of prejudice continue.

In this paper, I examined ways in which systemic racism persists although the racism is not always explicitly acknowledged. Importantly, students recognised that racism against Indigenous Australians continued to exist, but without educational tools in this instance to help students deconstruct these notions in a more permanent fashion, they were left believing in the

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[50] Ruth Frankenberg, 'Growing up White: Feminism, Racism and the Social Geography of Childhood' in Linda McDowell and Joanne Sharp (eds), *Space, Gender, Knowledge: Feminist Readings* (1997) 209, 215.

inevitability of racism against Indigenous Australians. I explored the acknowledgement that racism was strongly linked to non-whiteness, which in this instance was linked more specifically to Indigenous Australians.

This paper has shown how Torres Strait Islanders tend to be subsumed under a more general classification of Aboriginal people and Kevin, as a Torres Strait Islander, was often silenced on issues relating to Indigenous Australian issues. Noticeably, experiences of Torres Strait Islanders can vary significantly to Aboriginal Australians' experience and this should be recognised more widely. It is also important to recognise that although members of disadvantaged or marginalised groups experience educational social justice or succeed in perceived equitable educational systems, this must not be seen as representational of all in disadvantaged or marginalised groups. Although Kevin's position as a Torres Strait Islander is not representative of all Torres Strait Islanders, it is also important to note that Kevin remained marginalised despite being positioned in a relatively 'advantaged' position in a private boys' school. Greater research with Torres Strait Islanders at school would be beneficial for a greater understanding of social justice issues at school.

The invisibility of whiteness and the invisibility of Torres Strait Islanders emerged as important issues of concern. However, the notion of invisibility acted in different ways so that one, the invisibility of whiteness, normalised and reinforced power and privilege, whilst the other, the invisibility of Torres Strait Islanders, marginalised. During my research I found evidence of dominant discourses that suggest that the 'white' experience remains the norm in Australia today. Further exploration on ways in which teachers can play crucial roles in the deconstruction of dominant 'white' discourses, for example through the use of school texts and through open classroom discussions, is important. In this study I found that school texts played a significant role in Kevin's experiences at school, where, as an Indigenous Australian, he was able to identify and discuss issues of marginalization, difference in treatment and discrimination. However, these issues remained unimportant for many of the students in this classroom. Greater exploration of these issues by teachers within the classroom could more effectively highlight and challenge issues of racial discrimination. The centrality of the school positions it as a significant arena where issues and dominant discourses can be challenged and shaped by teachers, as well as by society through school policies. Although I found that school texts play a critical role in how students define their own lives, perceive racism and create their own 'visible' meaning of whiteness, I would conclude that raised awareness on its own is not sufficient to fashion more permanent societal changes.