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“White Practices” in Adult Education Settings: An Exploration

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Abstract: This paper draws together literature from the newly emerging areas of studies about Whiteness, and postcolonial theory to provide an alternative analysis of the Inquiry processes into adult community education undertaken in Australia over the last decade.

Introduction
In this paper I draw on the work of Ruth Frankenberg, Edward Said, Ann Laura Stoler and Ghassan Hage to push a little further the contemporary trend in research studies about Whiteness. My agenda, in drawing on these and other postcolonial writers, is to make more explicit the links between studies about Whiteness, the ongoing historical contexts of imperialism and colonialism within which these new research directions are set, and the overarching claims of benevolence and progress embedded in much policy and literature about Australian adult community education. Edward Said describes this work as “contrapuntal” (Said, 1993, p. 78), acknowledging the continuities of power, history and politics invoked by policy texts. Moreover it foregrounds a number of textual practices that have material effects on the ways in which adult community education is practiced in contemporary Australia. Such textual practices include the casual way in which references to marginalized groups and their agency orbits around a White enterprising center; the effort involved in disguising repertoires of Whiteness and their effects; the slipperiness with which issues of power and productivity are constructed around representations of normalized White “effective citizenship”. All of these textual practices are part and parcel of constituting what adult community education can and should be.

Theoretical Insights Informing the Work
Two areas of theoretical work underpin this paper and the data I analyze; first, literature specifically about Whiteness and studies of Whiteness drawn primarily from postcolonial and cultural studies; and second, literature describing and/or theorizing adult education.

What do you mean Whiteness!
Many researchers have begun to explore the concept of Whiteness as a social construction that is fleshed out in the daily contexts of our lives. Ruth Frankenberg describes it as “a location of structural advantage, of race privilege … a “standpoint”, a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society … a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed” (1993, p.1). She identifies three aspects of “thinking through race” in her work on White women’s understandings of their racial locations: “it suggests a conscious process” (ibid. p. 142) that also may have differential effects on the way people engage around race in the future; it occurs within a field of understandings already permeated by assumptions about race; and third, it assumes that all bodies are “racially positioned in society” (ibid. p.142).

Elizabeth Ellsworth (1997, p. 264) supports efforts to interrogate Whiteness, claiming it is a practice; a form of property; a performance; a constantly shifting location upon complex maps of social, economic, and political power; a form of consciousness; a form of ignorance; a privilege; something those of us who “are” White must unlearn; something we Whites fear, something that gives us pleasure, something we desire; something we must name and describe and understand; something we must change; an invisible something we must make visible, finally at this moment in history, to our White selves.

This kind of thinking about Whiteness, as always-already located within a racialised, albeit shifting and partial, field of power, provides the ground for rethinking how White educators and scholars might understand our own Whiteness. It resonates, to a certain extent, with many Indigenous writers in Australia who have long been involved in demonstrating how Whiteness affects their lives.
(See for example Holt, 1992, 1999; Moreton-Robinson, 1998; Huggins, 1995; Langford, 1988; and the recent Human Rights Commission Report Bringing them home, 1997.) But some of these Indigenous people are also circumspect about the fluid and malleable ways in which understandings of Whiteness evolve in “Whiteness studies,” precisely because such work can elide the continuities and consolidations of white power hidden beneath the surface of “hybrid” White subjects. Invoking the notion of White hybridity may potentially reinscribe a form of Whiteness that is ever-changing, fluid, and malleable. Yet hybrid White subjects may take no responsibility for the “unearned privileges” (McIntosh, 1988) they attract everyday. It is naïve to think that all White people experience the same kind of privilege; privilege varies with the nuanced and changing dimensions of Whiteness experienced through gender, financial (in)stability, sexuality and mobility, and White folk living in poverty are testimony to this. At the same time, the racialised dimensions of privilege in relation to work and financial (in)security are evident in research which shows how poverty and poor working conditions are experienced differently by Whites and our Others (Brodkin, 1999; Roediger, 1991).

I am unable, in this paper, to rehearse the full complexities of this body of work, the effects of colonialism and imperialism embedded in contemporary government review processes, or the textual strategies that render invisible (to many White people at least) the power-knowledge dynamics of Whiteness in policy making. Nevertheless in this paper I refuse the assumption that Whiteness is an “invisible,” disguised discourse in ACE. I begin from the point established by many writers (Said, 1993; Stoler, 1995; Hage, 1998; Ellsworth, 1997), that Whiteness is indeed a set of visible discursive practices that have material effects. Furthermore, these discourses are enmeshed in the cultural practices and beliefs of a particular form of White, heterosexual civility that informs the masculine consciousness (cf. Miles, 1996) pervading many public institutions in Australia.

Although the above discussion sets a broad context for investigating Whiteness, this project falls short for many educators and scholars, in that the forms of privilege invoked by Frankenberg and Ellsworth seem amorphous, intangible, overwhelmingly “large” in scope, and disconnected from a set of practical guidelines that may help to disrupt privilege on a day to day basis. In this paper I want to acknowledge this tension, demand even, in some adult education sites to provide “scripts” for practice. Yet I also know that the demand for practical advice and “facilitation techniques” is complicit with a set of “adult learning principles” that actively work against rendering visible, to White people at least, the effects of an invisible norm of Whiteness (Shore 2000) and the assumptions about control, power and the certainty of knowing which that norm presumes. In this paper therefore I want to resist the tendency to talk about Whiteness in the context of pedagogical strategies (See Durie, 1996; Johnson–Bailey and Cervero, 1998; and Barlas, 1997 for examples of this work.) Rather, I want to examine the effects of Whiteness in the sphere of policy making in contemporary Australia.

“Adult Education” in Australia

A second body of literature relevant to this study is the material produced about adult education in Australia. For the purposes of this paper adult community education (hereafter referred to as ACE) signifies those activities that occur in many neighborhood centers and technical colleges in Australia. These activities generally come under the umbrella of lifelong learning programs that are “learner centered, responsive to community needs, accessible and inclusive, diverse, varied and flexible” (Crowley, 1997). They are often distinguished from programs offering a vocational or tertiary curriculum to adult learners.

The literature most relevant to this paper is the material produced from the two government inquiries into ACE, carried out by a Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training in 1991 and 1996/7. The 1991 Inquiry provided the first comprehensive report on Australian ACE since 1944 and aimed to map and describe, in a more visible way, the strengths and needs of the fourth sector. It produced a report Come in Cinderella (Aulich, 1991) and thirty recommendations to be table with the Senate to guide deliberations on future government policy. The 1996/7 Inquiry aimed to continue the mapping exercise, albeit with a more focused effort on reviewing progress related to the policy and structural changes that had been implemented since 1991. It produced a report Beyond Cinderella: Towards a Learning Society (Crowley, 1997).
ACE of the kind discussed in this study is often portrayed in theoretical and practitioner writing as removed from the processes of social regulation accompanying the more formal sectors of schooling and universities. ACE is often characterized as democratic, voluntary, participatory and empowering. A popular image of ACE is of the benevolent sector, somewhat detached from issues of repressive power relations as they apply in other sectors. In keeping with the spirit of this study I am not suggesting that scholars and educators offering these views are wrong or naive in their views about power. Rather, I want to explore what is achieved by promoting this view of benign power and how it might obscure alternative analyses and modes of action.

**Some Outcomes of the Australian Inquiries into ACE**

Prior to the 1991 Inquiry the Australian Association for Adult and Community Education (now renamed Adult Learning Australia), followed overseas trends in describing ACE as the “fourth sector.” It was framed as a field of practice defined, in part, by its participants, precisely because they “have already left the formal education system, have returned to learning of their own volition, and have chosen an educational structure and environment which is compatible with their situation” (Aulich, 1991, p. 7). These distinguishing criteria impart an idiosyncratic “flavor” to the sector – guided by a philosophy of lifelong learning, a consumer driven, client responsive, flexible ethos that is non-compulsory and imbued with the desire to offer a second chance to the disadvantaged (ibid. p. 7). A taken-for-granted assumption pervaded the first Inquiry and was even more evident during the second: the sector needed to be named, identified and classified. It needed to be brought into a more visible relation with mainstream vocational education and training, to ensure not only its growth, but its viability and capacity to survive as a sector. It needed to be aligned with, but kept administratively distinct from, the primary and secondary sectors of formal schooling, and articulated with tertiary institutions such as technical colleges, private training organizations and some universities. Yet Ania Loomba (1998, p. 95-97) provides an analysis of naming and aligning that draws parallels with colonialism and the take over of territories; a set of practices different in context, but similar in effect, to the constitution of “the” ACE sector in Australia.

Following the 1991 Inquiry responsibility for Commonwealth funded ACE programs was transferred to a national training authority, responsible also for funding and monitoring vocational education and training. Requirements for data collection regarding ACE funding, including student hours and accountability/quality assurance processes accompanied this shift, as did a more competitive submission based tendering system.

Increasingly ACE activities came to mean those activities funded under the umbrella of ANTA designated Commonwealth funds, and some state funding for adult education. Furthermore, philosophical debate about the boundaries of ACE accompanied this containment, and this was not something confined to the comments of politicians and bureaucrats alone during the Inquiries. Time after time, witnesses to both Inquiries portrayed a picture of a field ignored, marginalized, forgotten in the rush to embark on a reskilling program more consistent with the Federal government’s contemporary agenda of economic reform. The fourth sector was defined variously as

that which is yet undefined, … activities … which are not accredited; it involves the activities that women’s resources centers and the various voluntary and industry bodies undertake that are just not recognized at all in any way; it involves what I would consider to be the concept of a basic education. (SSCEET, Witness statement, 1991, p. 2271)

It was portrayed as “the whole range of anything that can be described as teaching adults” (ibid. p. 939). In establishing this normalized view of ACE as Commonwealth funded and liberal in focus, the 1991 Inquiry provided explicit evidence that ACE was disconnected from more formal systems. In doing so it emphasized its unruliness and implicitly provided the groundwork for an argument that it should be “built in,” integrated with the other sectors of formal schooling and tertiary education, rather than enjoying its independence as a separate sphere of activity.

By 1997 *Beyond Cinderella*, noted, somewhat paradoxically, that the fourth sector contributed to the social and cultural goals of a learning society, especially in terms of articulating with the more
formal system. Nevertheless, funding to sustain or enhance this contribution was being systematically eroded by recent changes to government policy (Crowley, 1997, p. 10). The report claimed that a vocational/non-vocational binary would not be reinstantiated in its recommendations (Crowley, 1997, p. 5) and acknowledged the need of people to develop and maintain technical and professional skills to ensure an internationally competitive workforce. … [and] … the broader social, cultural and personal values concerned with the enrichment of communities and the fulfillment of human lives. (ibid. 5)

Nevertheless, the Committee does not “see” its own privileging of values and beliefs within the framework already established. Nor does it address the internal processes structuring its terms of reference, the processes and structures by which it collected and analyzed information, the discourses and subject positions available to witnesses, the statements of structure and direction provided by the Chair, and the genre of reporting to government, all of which were always-already located within a set of bourgeois practices (Stoler, 1995) that were both gendered and racialised.

In submissions to put the case for further support for ACE, descriptions of the participants provide the baseline against which the heights of achievement are possible. Submissions to the 1991 Inquiry repeatedly portrayed learners as unemployed (Witness statement SSCEET, 1991, p. 2153-4), disabled (ibid. p. 2078), bereaved and lost (ibid. p. 2077), as victims of domestic violence and as experiencing family and health problems (ibid. p. 2077). The educators who depict these representations are genuine in their desires to “increas[e] the quality of life” (ibid. p. 2074) of the learners they describe. Yet what is obscured in desires to help is the way in which the policy process uses this information to set the benchmark for what a competent citizen will not be. ACE is employed as an ally to ensure this through a process of social training, one in which educators and scholars are also coopted, willingly I might add, to train the body politic.

These heights of achievement, made available to new learners through ACE programs, form the backdrop against which ACE programs produce “effective citizens.” The 1996/7 Inquiry continued to refine this process of fashioning “effective citizens” through policy mechanisms such as “target groups” which emanate from a White center that “acknowledges” and “encourages” diversity, yet is unaware that it has located its arguments in a framework of tolerance for the Other, which is dependent on the fantasy of a particular kind of White, capable center that provides the standard against which learning, curriculum development and funding are measured. The policy speculates about disadvantage, and positions ACE as a potential ally in overcoming the inefficiencies in “human resource” potential that are directly related to these groups of disadvantaged people.

This theme of social training has a long history in Australian adult education, and resonates with Foucault’s claims that such strategies form part of a wider discourse of “social war” (Stoler, 1995, p. 72-3) designed to seek out and transform those “enemies of the state”, who work against the needs of the nation. In contemporary terms these enemies look somewhat similar to ACE participants who are unable to meet the criteria of effective citizens.

From this perspective ACE is simply a benevolent means of distributing innocent knowledge, skills and opportunity to disenfranchised minorities. Yet by the rules of this framework, a large group in society, the unemployed, the disabled, the bereaved and so on, are positioned by these discourses as effectively incompetent, unless they participate in a program which will grant them the status of the lifelong learner. Within this frame of thinking lifelong learning is configured as a solution to a problem that exists, only to the extent that certain groups in society do not meet the heights of achievement demanded by hegemonic versions of competent Whiteness.

This framing of ACE sets in place an individualistic, apolitical model of education for social training which sets ACE policy adrift from a platform that, in theory, encompasses politically explicit programs of social change – feminist learning centers, trade union training, and so on. In closing off the possibilities for this kind of work to be readily funded, the policy process valorized a particular form of White liberal practice as “the” contemporary ACE tradition. Second, it mobilizes a set of textual practices, that sustain the notion of rewards for participation in such a system, and at the same time manages to ignore the racialised effects of participation on outcomes.
In the 1996/7 Inquiry lifelong learning was recuperated as a discourse which instanitates, in every learner, particular “habits of thought” ... [such as] free will, instrumental thinking, dominance, [and] passivity etc.” (Bateson, 1972, p. 166), rather than simply representing a code word for the practice of updating knowledge and skills to meet the changing needs of contemporary societies. Participation in this context becomes a code word for the management and containment of diversity, as well as the standards and beliefs by which diversity is measured and evaluated (Hage, 1998).

Scholars as diverse as Basil Bernstein (1996), Richard Edwards and Robin Usher (1998) and Christine Sleeter (1993) have shown how education, framed in the benevolent terms of participation, and cultural literacy, represents archetypal practices of “training in rationality” (Edwards & Usher, 1998). Thus ACE learners are not simply learning skills, they are learning to learn the “habits of thought” for particular social contexts. In ACE participation parlance this will make them more capable of accessing the benefits of the economic and political system. Yet I maintain that for White and non-White learners alike, it is significant that this social system is deeply imbricated in the “structures of attitude and reference” (Said, 1993 p. 61) that establish Whiteness as the disguised norm of “adult learning principles” (Shore, 2000).

Some Conclusions
The brief review of relevant theoretical insights provided earlier in this paper provides added background to the Australian Parliamentary Inquiries that form a significant means of constituting a field of adult education practice. On the one hand government inquiries present an important site for critical intervention, especially given the way they are conducted in adult education settings in Australia. Nevertheless these Inquiries are also the domain where notions of adult learning and learners can be reinscribed within theories and practices that take a White norm as the basis for generating claims about learning and social change.

I contend that the available ways by which adult educators and scholars constitute understandings of adult community education are always-already imbricated with racialised discourses and practices that are “woven into the weft of the social body, threaded through its fabric” (Stoler, 1995, p. 69). These discourses and practices provide the basic conceptual tools by which adult education scholars and educators understand, but also constitute, ACE in Australia. They are the sites whereby racialised understandings are recuperated, sometimes unwittingly, as part of the tactics of a “permanent social war” (Stoler, 1995, p. 69) to “purify” society. In this paper I have offered only a hint of the possibilities for analysis using this kind of theoretical framework within ACE settings.

I analyze the data from the Inquiries to demonstrate that the domain of ACE, as it was constituted during these disciplinary processes in the 1990s, was a core element in the structure of a wider “social war” to further regulate disenfranchised groups in the Australian community. At the same time the Inquiries mobilized a set of implicitly racialised disciplinary measures that would allow greater internal organization (Hage, 1998; Dreyfus and Rabinow, 19982/3, p. 153-5) of the domain of ACE. What is more they activated the “preserved possibilities” (Stoler, 1995, p. 69) for racism, present, yet disguised, (for some people at least) in the existing discursive formations invoked by adult education scholars and educators.

I hesitate to call the practices portrayed in my analyses “White” practices in some deterministic frame. Yet I believe it is fair to say that there are strong parallels between recent efforts to fashion “effective citizens” (cf. ALLP, 1991; MCEETYA, 1997) and many of the “civilising” practices detailed by Ann Laura Stoler in her colonial analysis of the genealogy of the bourgeois self. In various ways these practices reinforce the following:

- they center White people as the arbiters of judgment and discretionary power;
- they enhance White people’s access and involvement in the systems “we” are developing;
- they ignore the complex undertones of diversity likely to exist within populations participating in ACE; and
- they ignore the racialised undertones of tolerance embedded in the public acknowledgment of this diversity.

Any attempt at understanding the problematic effects of framing ACE as a benevolent system of education which offers unmitigated reward to all participants, will have to deal with the complexities that emerge as effects of the “White” practices I have begun to hint at here.

References: available at the presentation.