

Interview with Sue Shore about the Fall 2003 article What's Whiteness got to do with it?

by Tannis Atkinson

What drew you to the question? In your writing you talk about a lot of white people don't even see whiteness, what made you see it?

I think like a lot of people it started working in indigenous communities and indigenous-controlled organizations so that it was there, in your face, so much.

One of the problems that's come out as I've read in the literature is that is the only way people do start to see it - when it's in your face, when it's so obvious. I always feel on one level I feel uncomfortable about that because I think, well, was it there before? So I've had to think a little bit about that and realized that when I read other people who've written about this kind of work, they've often said they might have been 20 or 25 and they were really unaware of race. And I think, actually, that wasn't late because I was aware of race even as a child; it was around me, in the area where I grew up. So it wasn't like I didn't know about race but the workings of whiteness became much more obvious when I worked in indigenous-controlled organizations and the way in which mainstream education worked, for me came to be much more easily called "whiteness." What they would call here white-fellow organizations I came to understand it much more clearly as white practices and white systems of being and doing.

I suppose in some ways there's this real juggling act about memory, too, I think around what you remember after the act of doing a whole pile of research. I mean it could be really interesting for me to go back and actually talk to my dad or my brothers and sisters about that and say, "Well, what was I really like when I was younger?" My memory is that race was all around me when I was a kid but that I didn't name that as whiteness. But unlike a lot of people I was aware that there were things that happened to me that meant that the path was smoother for me than for a lot of other kids I knew. And I suppose that's in the context of growing up in a working class background so there were plenty of kids who had an even straighter path than I did (laughing).

I think that one of the things that really started me thinking seriously about it was a combination of working in indigenous organizations and also seeing what seemed to be the meaningless of rules, regulations, requirements, and guidelines of educational systems. They didn't make sense to me. I didn't get it. So in some ways it was having to come face to face with parts of me that also didn't fit, that just didn't see the sense. Couldn't understand why entry requirements or knowledge content for courses was the way it was. Just didn't get it?

Can you think of an example of that?

I remember in 1989 wondering how it had taken so long to be introduced to Jane Thompson's work in adult ed. I mean Jane Thompson's a writer in the U.K. who's written

a lot on women's ed and it struck me that I'd completed two graduate diploma's and a masters degree and it was only half-way through the master's degree that I got any kind of sustained focus on her work. I thought that actually requires a lot of effort to keep her out, a lot of sustained focus on the centre and keeping her out of my spotlight. And for a lot of people they might not understand that as racialized but for me that seems to be directly related to the way in which education is organized. Mainstream education is organized so that certain kinds of knowledge are important and other kinds aren't and don't even get on the radar. And again it's interesting that's connected more to women and gender than necessarily something racialized. So my early interests were in women in adult ed. When I started this work a lot of it was around women and feminism and particular kinds of feminism and the resistance of adult and community education literature to talking about women and then it just moved from there to talking about certain kinds of women. In some ways, that's connected very much to your next question about what responses my work received. Some of the really common responses are this deathly kind of silence (laughing) which is really frightening. The first couple of workshops and conference sessions that I did there were not many questions. I thought I think there's something wrong here. It doesn't mean that the way that I'm doing this provides people with no way to ask a question. Does the act of naming the problem as whiteness mean that you're not allowed to talk about it.

Or maybe it's because people are so unused to talk about it they don't know even where to start?

Yeah, that's also another option. In the literature a lot of people say they don't know how to talk about it - because they don't equate themselves with whiteness and having white culture and they can't name it, don't even know how to name it. But I also detected something else about not knowing how to ask questions which to me related to I suppose a tendency to ask questions that you know the answers for. Which is also related to the kind of practices which I associate with a certain kind of whiteness in education so that you can only ask questions for which there are answers. You can't say I don't know, I literally don't know. That worries me a bit. That response of silence actually does worry because I don't think actually that the way that I've learned about this is by thinking and talking about it. I actually almost practiced talking to myself about it and I hear what I say and in hearing what I say it helps me to work out whether I think that or not or what kind of sense I can make of it. And so in some ways it's a little bit like dialogue in a way but also not quite like the dialogue of critical theory or Paolo Freire. It's more like hearing myself talk and thinking, "Do I mean that? What does that word mean? Well, now that I've done that reading it means something else. So do I still think that or not?"

And in large groups is very hard to have that kind of discussion. It's one thing to hear oneself say something out loud and that helps you clarify your own thinking and maybe talking to one person who you're comfortable exploring something that could be quite difficult and potentially setting you up to be criticized. I think a lot of white people are afraid of being accused of being racist and then they just don't say anything.

Yes, I do think that uncertainty or silence is also about using the R word so that racist and racism becomes something to be avoided. One of the strategies I used was to talk about racialized practices. I'm not sure that that's a good thing or not. In some ways it does avoid that really hard look at racist practice but I think that on another level it's an entry point for people. If they can think about everyday practices as racialized, then I think it provides an entry point for them. Whereas, to talk about racism and racist, it just closes it down. It means you can't talk about it, there's no where to go. Now as a white educator I'd say pedagogically that my strategy is to keep them talking. But from the perspective that people of colour might want them to stop talking literally. So that's where I think that doing this kind of work really does vary enormously with the kind of people that you're working with. But I suppose the common thing across it all would be that I think it's not possible to pretend that classrooms are safe spaces. I think that it's better to start from the premise that they are risky, not safe. And that everyone's involved in putting themselves out there but in fact there are more risks for certain people to put themselves out there. The very way in which classrooms are set up sometimes seems to protect or support certain kinds of viewpoints. So in fact it is okay for me to say "I don't know, I'm not sure" but I do know that indigenous women that I worked with said they can't afford to say that. They've got to know. They've got to be really sure. They've got to be crystal clear.

So is the majority of the work you've done on whiteness academic work? It sounds like you've also done some work with people. Not just written but workshops or that kind of facilitation, is that true?

Yes, however I made a really deliberate decision in my PhD to not go near people, to not interview and not observe because the focus of my interest was on how adult education theory was written to write out whiteness, to be premised on it and underpinned by it but at the same time ignore it. The re-thinking required was just not possible for me to do and to also be juggling other people. It was just too hard. Some other people have done it but I couldn't do it because the shift in thinking was just too great for me (laughs).

So I was very clear in my PhD wanting to map the effects of whiteness, which was what it was called, on how people write theory. And then, I thought "Okay, if I do that it will help me to set up something a bit clearer what are the implications of this for how things are practiced." Except that I didn't also want to make that really rigid distinction between theory and practice. I was trying to look at a notion of pedagogy that was about a relationship between theory and practice, a co-production of knowledge. I did believe very strongly that you couldn't develop or think new theories of education without knowing what the old ones were based on. And if the old ones were based on supposed invisibility of whiteness then there was a lot of re-thinking to do to look at how that operated on our thinking and our practice.

You've done some work on a study of adult literacy practitioners and their view of their work? Is part of that asking people to think about how whiteness might inform their practice?

No, in fact that was done before I started my PhD and I still haven't finished that project (laughs). So it's just one of those things that just hangs around and won't tie itself up and go away. But that project was more about inclusivity and educators understanding that what they thought they were doing when they were being inclusive and how they organized programs not so much how they taught in classrooms but how a community program was managed and organized and structured to be responsive to learners' ' needs. And so the language of that is quite interesting because a lot of the draft of that I've got at the moment based on work that was done before the substantive writing of the PhD. And I suspect that'd be a really different project if I started it again. But in many ways the PhD I wanted to try to move myself to another space, another place of thinking and then from there I have done a couple of different projects. One of them, I was wanting to look at how whiteness operates and some of that I did in terms of policy making. We had a fairly big project here, not a project, a federal government review of adult and community education and lots and lots of people were asked to present submissions to the government inquiry and so what I did there was try and look at how whiteness was being mobilized through the participants, through the people who presented submissions. So that was one way in which I was trying to look at the workings of whiteness in the faces.

So were you looking at who was invited to present or how they framed their presentations?

More in how they framed their presentations but in one bit, and most of the work that I've been trying to do has tried to not look at indigenous or non-white participants and what they do. It's actually been really interesting to stay with for all intents and purposes white people and their practices because often people will use examples like, "Well, look at the Chinese," (laughs) here's a quote, "Look what they do." What I've said is that to me that is a practice of shifting the gaze to the other and what I'm interested in is what's going on here. What's going on in this education institution? How are our practices operating? Yes, I understand that things happen in other contexts and I'm interested in that but I'm not interested in moving the gaze off to explore that like an anthropologist who trots off to look at exotic cultures. I'm interested in looking at the kind of banal, boring, everyday things that go on in the places where we are supposed to work and feel comfortable and to make that everydayness unfamiliar and strange. So in the few workshops that I've done recently, people will often want to talk about internationalization of education and in talking about it they want to talk about how non-white students cope in Australia. I'm more interested in what are the practices of education institutions that connect up with the research findings around whiteness. Like when people try to identify what whiteness is, what practices in education institutions map on to that, resonate with that with surprising similarity. That's also a bit of a struggle is to not say, "oh yes well, let's go off and look at others." I'm interested in practices of the mainstream. I think that is a problem for some people because it just means you reinforce the importance of the centre, the mainstream, or whiteness. So I think that's a delicate balancing act that one. One of the ways that I was wanting to explore that was that most recent that I've done is looking at managers who are responsible for organizing programs in technical and further education colleges. I worked with those managers to look at what their work was and introducing them to some of the literature around whiteness. Where did they see parallels or where

did it resonate with the work that they're doing. One of the interesting things that came out of that was one of the participants talked about whiteness at work and it's become a nice little catch phrase that I use. She said that it's there when you see it, you see whiteness at work. And I thought well, does she mean whiteness in her work place? And she said yes but I also mean how whiteness works to make the workplace the way it is, the way one of the other terms that came out in that project is the way things are done around here. So the decision making practices, the ways that people can behave or perform in meetings, the questions that they can ask and the questions that are not able to be spoken. They talked a little bit about politeness and learning to play the game was a really common phrase that they used. You know, you learn how to play the game. In a lot of literature from people of colour there's a lot of learning how to play the white fella's game. So that if you're successful then you've learned how to play the game. However, you also get accused of selling out to your own group. So these women that I was talking to, largely women there were two men in the group, but the women were talking about learning how to play the kind of masculinist game of managing in (word) . What I found interesting in projects the aim of the project was to try to connect up these literatures that people generally don't connect up around management and whiteness. So while they were describing management in (word) as this bureaucratic game, when you look at the literature around whiteness, the practices are almost the same around styles of decision making and the requirement to come up with an answer, and the demand to count and measure and classify and organize and make everything accountable within quite rigid frameworks.

So that's in the literature as masculinist?

Not only as masculinist but also as feature of, if you talk about whiteness as I do, it's also a feature of whiteness. That it's part of a colonial enterprise of naming and classifying the world. I think that's the connection that I found most difficult to maintain, is that if you do a workshop in education or on literacy, generally people want to know about what they're going to do in their classrooms. How can I work with my student? What kind of resources can I use that will be helpful for them. I really, I understand that struggle because I have to teach myself. But I find it really difficult to start there when the connections seems to go back 500 years to colonialism. So starting with what might we do seems to almost be counter to a project talking about the visibility of whiteness. That it's actually in starting half or two-thirds of the way along, the message is different and the implications are different. And so that's another response that my work has received - is that at times we only seem to get halfway through and then the time runs out. And often the people who've asked me to come and speak would say well, next time come and talk about what you do in the classroom. And I think well, yes, I'd like to do that but it's also really important for me to start not so much start at the beginning but start a long way back.

There's this whole tendency to want simple solutions to things and it's process of inquiry in a way, it requires a lot people think through how is this existing in my own life and you can't you know in a one and half hours workshop make sure

people go through that whole process and then feel prepared to teach in a different way, right?

Yes and also to feel really comfortable at the end of it.

When I think of my own thinking it's been kind of a process, well, it's been a big part of many years of my life and a conscious re-thinking of the way I approach things it's been twelve years. It's not going to happen in an afternoon workshop.

There's a very practical issue that I've been struggling with just today where Shereen Razak's coming here to Australia and I've organized a workshop in about a months time and a few people have asked me to tape it and I've said no. I think they feel quite irritated with me for saying no because it almost seems like I'm hoarding or storing knowledge and information and not making it accessible, not being flexible, not distributing it out to whoever wants to hear it. I've just found that in the workshops that I have convened for others or for myself that it can actually be dangerous to have those tapes floating around because it is a process of like se Rose Frankenberg says thinking through, you're working through it, in both senses of the word.

It's like you were saying earlier about safe spaces in a classroom, what are the implications for the people in that seminar. Is it safe for them that they know they're being taped. They may not articulate things.

Yes, I don't have any problem with it being risky or uncomfortable. I do have a problem with that risk and discomfort being taken to another space that then has to be justified or explained or rationalized in another way. That's a very practical thing about doing the work. It's hard (laughs) and it should be.

People need to be pushed but sometimes they're just not ready to deal with something, there's only so far they can go.

That's where I think pedagogically there are a whole pile of assumptions about how people learn that are really embedded in assumptions about whiteness, about learning through whiteness. You go through a process and you come out at the end knowing and that process should be comfortable and it should be safe. I know that Jenny and I haven't talked in detail about this but I know that her work rubs up against that in a very strange way because I'm not suggesting that people should feel so unsafe that they feel torn to shreds but there is a really interesting question about who's gets to be safe in a classroom, who gets to always feel unsafe in the kind of learning practices that are often set up in classrooms. And I think that while I equate those to be racialized, the effects of those practices show on anyone who kind of sits outside of a fairly conventional mainstream body. So I remember a number of years ago now of a poly here, the university that I work at, asked people to introduce themselves and one of the students in the class was telling me afterwards that people went round introducing themselves and they all started talking about their wives and their husbands and she was at the end of the row and she said she just did not know how to even begin to speak about the fact that she was gay and

lived with her son and her partner and she said there was no way she was going to say it either. I mean this was ten years ago and I suspect there are still people who wouldn't say it now in this environment. And so what I am interested in particularly how racialized practices also get classed and gendered. I think that's the other interesting thing that I find that whenever I mention whiteness people only think race they don't get that it is a particular form of gendered sexuality that's also classed, never not anything but the mix of them.

That's what somebody mentioned, I was telling the editorial committee that I wanted to include something about your work and that it was about whiteness and they said, "oh, ethnicity?"

Yes, yes. And I think that the stuff that I've been doing to is a very particular take on it. I am interested in the very everyday practices of how this stuff happens but I have been for a long time more interested in how discursive practices influence people's capacity to build theories in education. So a lot of practitioners would say what we really need is some really practical grounded work but what I have been interested in more is the Steven Brockfields and Peter Jarvis and Alan Thomases of the world who write theory without even seeing at times the racialized nature. I mean there are other people not just those three but...so there are a couple of other people, know probably two, no only one woman really at the moment in adult ed and none in literacy none who are doing works specifically in this area, where they are naming it whiteness, and that in itself.. the conversations we're going to have with Shereen I think I hope will actually help us to explore what are the problems with naming this as whiteness cause I think there are a number of problems. I'm not entirely convinced that it is the best way to go about the work but I have stayed with it for a whole range of reasons.

So why do you bother with this work?

I want to say that it's really important but that sounds so self-aggrandizing. Why do I bother?

By important do you mean get at something really fundamental?

Yes (laughs) but we're not allowed to say fundamental, I'm not allowed to say essence. Everything is fluid, there are no truths except there are a couple of truths I reckon. I'm silent because in fact when I looked at your e-mail before I couldn't get passed it. I was thinking, oh, it's important and that's all I could think but in fact I bother because it's at the heart of the education systems. It's actually one of the problems I think is that the claims is that people like myself make is that literacy makes a difference but we know that literacy only makes a difference sometimes. And certain literacies make more of a difference than others. So to be involved in adult education and adult literacy in this way I think it's absolute critical to understand the contradictions in those claims. And to see how the claims themselves actually influence the kind of work that it's possible to do. So I bother with the work because I'm still trying to explore ways to step outside of what it is that we do at the moment, the kind of provision, the work that is valued, the work that

gets valued, the work that gets written about in the newspapers, in international literacy day and adult learners' week tv shows. And it seems to me that starting from this entry point (laughs), I don't want to say it but, can help to make a difference. I mean that in itself is part of the contradiction: make a difference in what?

So are you saying in making a difference in transforming from an oppressive system to a more open one?

Yes or also starting someplace else. It would be interesting to see how we would do this work if it weren't named education. What would adult literacy look like if it were located in a health system or a youth system? So I think that part of the reason that I bother is because I think it's important to unsettle some of the assumptions that education can make a difference because if the kind of claims that I've been making are even 10% right then in fact it doesn't make a difference it just consolidates and affirms some of the existing inequalities, some of the ways in which people are allowed to learn only certain kinds of things and be only certain kinds of people which at the moment in Australia is to be very enterprising kinds of subjects, to be get out there and go for it. That kind of thinking seems to me ignores the fact that for a long while now people have been saying if we keep getting out there and going for it we're not going to end up with very much left. It's an unsustainable model of growth. And so a lot of what I'm interested in is trying to circle around those ideas, working out where to find entry points where you can talk about them in teacher education programs without being completely marginalized. And talk about them in workplace training programs and literacy programs without being told that you're some kind of leftover remnant from the 70s, you're romanticizing the past.

The why bother is for me is really important. I think that it's not up to other people to do this work for us, to provide us with neat models of cultural difference. It is up to people who like myself have got enormous benefits and privileges out of education to also unsettle the ways in which I got those benefits.

The what next for me is at the moment I'm really interested and I know a lot of people have been doing this work around anti-racism or cultural awareness for years. I'm interested in trying that kind of work from the perspective of what's whiteness got to do with it, linking learning cultures like learning in community or learning in the workplace settings with learning to be white. And making a bit more explicit what that looks like in different ways. And I think there's lots of stuff that could be done with young kids that's quite outside the bounds of work I do. I'm more and more conscious that this is just racialized, gendered, sexualized practices but there are a whole set of generational influences that mean young kids think differently about racialized practices. There are disturbing similarities to when I was growing up but they are in the world differently. So I think the what next for me is to think about what it means to work with adult education (word cut off, flipped tape over)

Young people but others working with, take educators who are 40, 45, 50 who have a very different entry point to the whole notion of whiteness and racialized practice just because what we've been exposed to in our own lives.

I'm curious what you see as difference with the younger people in terms of how they perceive racialized practice.

It's a lot harder for a lot of younger Australians to say they're not aware of race, they're not aware of differences in culture than it was for people of my age to say it even though I am also curious about what it takes to be unaware. The effort it takes to shut that difference out. Because in Australia you would have had to been living in very close circumstances to not notice race 30 years ago. So on one level I think there's a lot of effort going in to not noticing but I think that despite the fact that there's still lots of things that need shaking up in the school curriculum, kids are exposed much more to, well, certain kids are exposed to pretty violent racist practices but in the curriculum kids are explicitly exposed to discussion and debate about difference and culture and race. So it's there in a way, although I'm also mindful that in my daughter's school, what she says is that that doesn't matter mum, that's not what we notice. So for a mother who's really into whiteness it's a fairly soul-destroying thing to hear your daughter say at times. She says that it doesn't matter, that's not important to us. And I think what's really interesting there is who is the us that she is talking about. So that in itself is an interesting exercise. I always think when people say context matters, that the location and where you are and how you're positioned matters. I think well, to take that seriously, you can't just say that whiteness operates the same across all settings. so for me one of the tensions to balance, someone has said and it resonates with what I've experienced, is to keep thinking about the amazing sameness, the predictability, the guaranteed way in which some social relations work but always to know that they're not entirely predictable. The thing that interests me about whiteness I suppose is that there are some things are pretty predictable, that haven't changed. And to always be a little bit alert. I'm always on the alert for things that I don't expect, the surprises.

So is there anything else you feel we haven't touched on or you want to cover?

I'm sure there are 100s of things.

In terms of literacy I've noticed that it is really hard to introduce the notion of whiteness because a lot of work done in Australia has emphasized inclusivity, culture and diversity. So this seems to go against the trend a bit by saying here's something definable and tight and bounded that I want to look at. I think that's one of the mistaken impressions people have is that by naming something as whiteness they think ah! I know exactly what that is about that's about white skin. For me it's not, it's about a lot more than that but it is also fundamentally about some of the benefits that accrue with white skin. I think that with all of the talk about social inclusion I don't understand how we can learn more about what social inclusion might achieve unless we can understand how social exclusion has lasted so long. The particular practices that seem to be so incredibly powerful at maintaining the need to keep talking about social inclusion.

When people talk about being inclusive they really mean assimilation without knowing it.

Yes, yes.

Whiteness is so unexamined people think if people feel more included then they'll want to live the way I live.

And there's nothing wrong with the way I live, in fact the way I live is the desired way for all people to live.

Or not even realize that there are other ways to live, the way we live to be successful in society is The way to live.

Yes. That whole thing about the unexamined is related to why bother doing the work, there are huge areas in education where what's examined is probably the wrong thing, it's the wrong thing to be examined. Hence shifting the focus seems to me to be a really useful exercise, it's an important exercise in looking differently in both senses of the word.

Do you feel like people are aware of the whole idea of assimilation. I've heard people in communities of colour talk about that but rarely have I heard anywhere else except in your writing.

One of the things that I find working in a university I feel like I'm being assimilated into a way of thinking and being that I don't always like, that I rail against and resist but also desire. I think a lot of women have talked about that in terms of western rational thought and masculinist thought have talked about the ways in which, they probably haven't used the term assimilated they've used more terms like oppressed. I think the notion of assimilation and tolerance also, words go quite neatly with this understanding of how whiteness. So in a sense the whiteness at work is about being tolerant, assimilating, homogenizing. I think that's where introducing ideas about classifying, organizing knowledge in very particular ways is one entry point that is fairly useful in trying to explain to people what the effects are, that it's not the actual categories that are the problem it's the practice of classification, organization, assimilation and tolerance. Those practices are the problem and the results of the problem too, but I'm more interested in what happens as an effect of those, how is it that things get organized and positioned as a result of those desire to nail everything down and have it organized around a framework that's already understandable, that's already established. I think that people would say those kinds of ideas were introduced by feminists and by people who were interested in exploring about different ways of thinking about sexuality. And I agree that it's true and I say also that those ideas are always also racialized. You don't have sexuality without it being racialized and you don't have gender without it being racialized.

Can I ask you a question?

Were you happy with your paper?

As a starting point. I felt that there was, when I read it over I realized there were several sections when I thought that things were too facile and stated too simplistically but given the space limitations I just ploughed ahead. So I think it's framework for how I'd like to continue to think about the work and it makes me realize some of the other things I want to explore a bit more.

Are you thinking of publishing it somewhere?

I don't know of anywhere that might be interested.

Well, I'll think about it. I found it really interesting. It's really nice to be able to read things that is starting point like that paper. It's a very different starting point. And I like it. I suppose in some ways that's , I keep getting stuck on this question of why I bother to do the work, which is a really interesting thing, that's why I think it's important to do the work because there are very few people who talk about anything other than assimilation and half the time don't even hear that themselves anyway. As always I was thinking there must be somewhere where that might publish it.

I'm not sure I want to submit it to literacies given that I'm the editor. There aren't that many places that are interested in this, there were some people in the class. It's very non-academic, it doesn't seem like it would have a home in journals and I'm not sure I want to go in that direction. I've been thinking more about that whole idea of is doing graduate work a away to support my inquiry into this or would it just require me to do things that I'm just not interested in putting energy into.