

## The Whiteness of Creativity

In an attempt to keep my research mainstream, I intended to steer away from race related issues; to explore creativity untainted by the colours of racial bias. However, using self-reflections as part of my methodology resulted in the concept of Whiteness, to become a thorn in the side, deserving attention.

There is ample research illustrating how the Whiteness of teacher education creates pressures that undermine the success of those who do not fit in, for example writing about this “Whiteness in Education”, Sleeter (2016), using a Critical Race Theory (Delgado, Stefancic et al. 2012) framework, refers to the “myth of neutrality and color blindness”. I have found relatively little existing research that specifically explores the relationship of Whiteness to creativity although I found that the plight of highly creative people in formal education, is similar to those, such as myself, who have experienced racism in education, being constantly marginalised, overlooked or ignored.

One of the external pressures that suppresses or oppresses creativity is the insidious force of racism, which for the purpose of remaining within the parameters of my thesis, I will refer to as the Whiteness of creativity and I will highlight the literature that has informed and influenced my perceptions.

I prefer to use the concept of “Whiteness” rather than “racism” because I am focusing on the societal and cultural context rather than individual or personal behaviours. Many authors, for example Henry & Taylor (2006) (Education 2015) emphasise that Whiteness is a learned social construct which is broader than the racial term “white” and that “the meaning of ‘whiteness’ is historical and has shifted over time (ie Irish, southern European peoples-Italian, Spanish, Greek; have at times been ‘raced’ as non-white)”

Similarly, Gillborn (2008: 33) distinguishes between “Whiteness” and “White people”, explaining that the concept of “whiteness” is associated with the “socially constructed and constantly reinforced power of White identifications and interests”. For example, Gillborn (2008: 34) notes that “...White authors tend to receive greater rewards and recognition, even when they are repeating analyses made elsewhere by scholars of color.” I consider this to be an example of “Whiteness”, behaviour that is socially and culturally accepted rather than personal, deliberate racism.

Drawing on Critical Race Theory (Delgado, Stefancic et al. 2012), Gillborn (2008: 10) has written extensively about racism in education where it seems as though there is a conspiracy to preserve the superiority of “whiteness” in a well-defined racial hierarchy which is upheld through conscious and unconscious biases of White people. This is perpetuated through ignorance, moral rationalisation and ‘motivated inattention’. In his chapter “WhiteWorld: Whiteness and the performance of racial domination”, (Gillborn 2008: 162) suggests that:

“Most White people would probably be surprised by the idea of ‘WhiteWorld’: they see only the world; its Whiteness is invisible to them because the racialized nature of politics, policing, education and every other sphere of public life is so deeply ingrained that it has become normalised, unremarked and taken for granted.” (Gillborn 2008)

Similarly, Gaine (1995) articulately illustrates the concept of Whiteness using the rhetoric of multi-cultural versus anti-racist education, in his book ‘Still no problem here’. He argues that White homogeneity often encourages people to claim that “There aren’t many of them here so there isn’t

a problem...". In fact, absence, invisibility and lack of attention to those on the periphery of Whiteness, is often evidence of exclusion, marginalisation and the 'motivated inattention' that Gillborn and other Critical Race Theorists have written about extensively.

It is this concept of Whiteness that is relevant to my exploration of creativity in the context of education. One of the few contemporary writers that illustrate the role of Whiteness in creativity is Goodfellow (2014) who recounts the following illustrative story:

"A couple of months ago, I was watching music videos with friends when a band made up of Cambridge graduates came on the TV. As images of the musicians flashed in front of our eyes, someone made a "joke" about one of the non-white band members: 'he can't have gone to Cambridge, he's black'. While it's easy for some to dismiss this as a harmless aside, this one comment tells us a lot about British society. Even if a minority ethnic person succeeds at their creative endeavour (whether academic or musical), the focus is not on their talent, but the colour of their skin.!" (Goodfellow 2014)

Goodfellow (2014) argues that there is "an acceptable face of mainstream, 'respectable' creativity" and that this face is white. She suggests that:

"To address this kind of institutional racism, we, as a society, should take a lesson from the person who made the crude but unmistakably clear racist joke. We need to stop skirting around racism in the UK and start calling it what it is. Only then can we disrupt the status quo that privileges white people and their creative products above others. So I'll begin: Britain is an institutionally racist society and society needs to find creative ways to do something about it." (Goodfellow 2014)

Although creativity, particularly in the business environment, is a broad concept, many educators and students tend to associate creativity with art. Therefore, it is useful to consider that Whiteness has permeated the art curriculum throughout our education in England. For example, Sarup (1991) reminds us that:

"In the West most of us are taught a certain story about the development of art: art begins with the Greeks, moves through Giotto and the Renaissance, to 'modern art'. There is an implicit notion of 'progress' in this view of art history which has been influenced, perhaps, by similar beliefs about science." (Sarup 1991)

When we think of creative people that we learnt about during our compulsory school education, or creative people that are idolised through the media, the likelihood is that the ones most foremost in our minds are white. Unless of course we are asked to think of primitive art, in which case we may think of African or Aboriginal Australian creativity. This is an example of Whiteness as cultural hegemony, which Sarup (1991: 44) explains as evidence of "racism in art" with numerous examples where communities are marginalised and labelled 'untypical' when they do not conform to the norms of Whiteness. For example, when a trainee teacher, with a narrow, ethnocentric view of music, faced challenges teaching at a girls' school in the East End of London, it was the predominantly Bangladeshi community that were seen to be the cause of the challenge rather than the narrow, ethnocentric music training that the trainee had been prepared with. In contrast, my thesis adopts a systemic thinking framework where teachers, students, inspectors and the communities in which they function are perceived to be a network rather than a hierarchy in which some stakeholders are entitled to a superior position.

Included in the concept of Whiteness is the assumption that we must communicate in English to be noticed and understood. There are umpteen examples of this, but a recent one that attracted my attention is when I watched the film “The Man Who Knew Infinity” (2015) which is based on the true story of the mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan. Ramanujan was often misunderstood by his Cambridge professor, Hardy. In one scene, Hardy sarcastically admonishes his student for their misunderstandings, saying, “Well, you don’t expect me to speak in Tamil, do you?”.

Ramanujan’s simple, reflective response to this was:

“No. I don’t. But **you** expect me to speak in English.”

That short, sweet sentence speaks volumes. The Whiteness of creativity means that it has to be represented in the English language, using symbology that is considered to be civilised rather than primitive; academic rather than intuitive.

While it is not within the scope of my thesis to explore the relationship between language and creativity, it is useful to note the findings of Gillborn (1990: 173) illustrating the impact of English not being the mother tongue of students going through a British curriculum. For example, the identity, self-esteem and level of confidence of the student in a context of Whiteness where they are considered to be an outsider because of their accent or bilingualism (seen as a deficiency rather than an asset), may well have an impact on the expression of their creativity as noted by researchers who have focused on identifying the typical characteristics of creative people, such as a high level of confidence and self-esteem. Both Gillborn (1990: 199), (Sleeter 2016) warn against adopting a ‘colour blind’ approach in education, pretending that we can forget about skin colour and race. On the contrary, Gillborn argues that, “evidence gathered in schools and classrooms demonstrates that (whatever we may believe) human beings are far from blind when it comes to questions of ethnicity.”

In a reflexive account of “‘whiteness’ in race-related research”, Troyna (1998: 95) notes that:

“Although interest in the status of ‘whiteness’ has assumed a particular shape and cadence within the ‘politics of identity’, questions about the role of white researchers in race-related studies have, of course, been a vigorous, contentious and enduring theme in social science and political discourses.” (Troyna 1998: 97)

Researchers such as Troyna find themselves having to explain their Whiteness in race-related research because as (Puwar 2004) explains, in that particular realm they are occupying a space that is not reserved for them. In contrast, I have found myself, as a non-white researcher, having to explain my non-Whiteness in a subject that is not specifically related to my own race and ethnicity.

My thesis does not explicitly focus on Critical Race Theory (Delgado, Stefancic et al. 2012) and the undermining pressures of institutional racism. Nevertheless, using a Systems Thinking conceptual framework, I am aware of the socio-cultural context of exploring creativity as a non-white researcher, being positioned on the margins of Whiteness.

Creativity, seen through the lens of Whiteness, is merely a fragmented picture of creativity. It is not within the scope of this thesis to explore a broader paradigm of creativity that transcends Whiteness with its “particular identifications and interests” (Gillborn 2008). Using Foucauldian terms (Foucault 1980), the extent of my ‘gaze’ in researching for this thesis is limited by the boundaries of Whiteness as a ‘regime of truth’.

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