

Growing Lawless Hair in White Australia

by

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Abstract

A set of racial policies known as the *White Australia policy* steered Australian culture during and after its progressive dismantlement in the 1970's. White faces and hair textures dominated the human landscape and its norms when I boarded a bus in metropolitan Adelaide in 1960, aged three. In early 1969 it continued to be the pervasive norm - hair might be combed, cut, cleaned, conditioned, coloured or permed but the hair texture norm was that of a strict norm of the dominant white race and ethnic groups of Australia. Hair should be straight or curly but never *kinky* so my mother and a sister-in-law's twelfth birthday present was a hair relaxing kit imported from North America. The White Australia Policy was well gone in 1990 yet still I would be refused service at a cafe and large department store after stern disapproving scrutiny of my natural hair texture. In my first professional appointment, advocating land rights for Indigenous peoples, I received a written death threat from the Ku Klux Klan based in the Australian metropolis where I lived. I was visited at my home by black-clad thugs with Australian accents from National Action, a white power group. I was followed onto and out of a bus by white men with baseball bats who stared at me during the bus-ride. With pale skin, blue eyes and a thick Australian accent I have no other drop of race to signify I am anything but a White Australian.

Is African hair texture significant in Australia? This article explores violent hair-raising stories in an auto-ethnographic examination of having lawless hair in a domesticated habitat in Australia. Sociological perspectives and historical contexts within Australian Critical Whiteness Studies are deployed to examine the significance of one drop of difference in physical signification of race and ethnicity. I offer auto-ethnographic vignettes to speak to my experience and to invite the reader to consider an Australian experience of what it is to have one apparently unacceptable racialized feature: hair texture and whether it matters and what it might mean as a signifier of race and racism in a nation boasting to its Asian business partners that the White Australia policy is done and dusted.

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Introduction

The White Australia policy was a set of policies and cultural practices which made an indelible mark on the history and lived realities of race relations in Australia. While referred to as though it was one policy, it was in fact a set of legislation, institutional and cultural practices. It started in the overt actions of the first national Parliament of Australia which formed in 1901 to quickly enact the first legislation to restrict immigration into the lands of Australia (Burritt, Walker and Carter 2009, p.12). Prior to this development, Chinese workers had migrated to Australia in significant numbers in the 1850s and 1860s as part of the gold rushes of that period, reaching and then maintaining a significant population of 50,000 (Burritt, Walker and Carter 2009, p.15) with migration of Chinese workers continuing freely until 1901. The newly formed parliament debated the voting rights of Indigenous Australians, and of Chinese, Indian and other non-white permanent residents in the new Commonwealth: resulting in their exclusion from suffrage unless already entitled by state rights to vote (Australian Electoral Commission 2010). The Commonwealth of Australia formed from the federation of former British Crown colonies and its founding launched the nation-building of Australia. But it was predicated on racism and the constraint of the rights of non-whites - migrants from Asia and Indigenous Australians.

The Australian Electoral Commission (2010) has noted that the 1901 Australian parliament excluded the voting rights of Indigenous Australians, Chinese, Indian and other non-white permanent residents unless already entitled by state rights to vote. It did this through the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901 (Commonwealth)* which excluded non-European immigrants. It used discretionary powers to prohibit 'undesirable' immigrants. Its steering mechanisms were a dictation test and fines on shipping carriers that brought 'undesirables' into Australia, the latter of which became a very effective mechanism to exclude non-Europeans (Jupp 1995, p. 208). Jupp has argued that it was a deliberate isolation of Australia from its Asian neighbours and based on notions of white racial superiority (Jupp 1995, p. 207). The creation of White Australia was the prime intention of the White Australia Policy (Jupp 1995; Singh 2000) which was supported by both sides of politics in the emerging white nationhood of Australia (Jupp 1995), one which celebrated nation-forming of an Anglo-Celtic identity.

Lawless (2012, p. 36) has argued in a study of race relations in the twentieth century in Australia that:

The White Australia policy successfully created a white Australia yet it did so in the presence of Indigenous Australians and other non-whites such as Chinese Australians who as Shen has shown in her study of Chinese-Australian autobiographies, yearned to be invisible in this period (Shen 2001, p. 67). Rendered invisible, whiteness is the dominant norm in these narratives of the first fifty years of the century (Kendall 2008, p. 9). As Singh has argued White Australia politics have a limited view of Whiteness as a racial dynamic. White cultural identity, Whites as a racialised group and White racism are fuzzy topics (Singh 2000, p. 124). Whiteness studies theorises about race from the perspective that whiteness deserves scrutiny as a form of racial and ethnic identity, and is a relatively new academic discipline in Australia (Carey and McLisky 2009, p. ix).

The White Australia policy would not be finally dismantled until 1975 with the advent of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Commonwealth)*. A newly elected progressive government used this Act to remove race discrimination from immigration selection (Curthoys 2003, p.

62). Australian governments had already progressively dismantled some components of the White Australia policy, with perhaps the first significant policy shift bringing the introduction of the Colombo Plan in the 1950's. This was a British Commonwealth aid programme to third world countries which had been proposed by an Australian diplomat in 1950 and included bringing Asian students into Australian universities. Another influence was a cultural shift, slow to develop perhaps, seen in the cultural influence of political activity such as protests by university students about immigration policies as early as 1961 (Curthoys 2002, p. 16). Race discrimination was removed from immigration selection (Curthoys 2003, p. 62) when an Australian parliament passed the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Commonwealth)* (Jayasuriya, Walker and Gothard 2003, p. 62; Shen 2001, p. 127). This finally removed the last of the policies and legislations that had made up the White Australia Policy, but cultural realities persisted, as will now be explored using critical auto-ethnography. The White Australia Policy is used in this paper to foreground the hegemony of whiteness in Australia, and acts as a device to not only represent the political and cultural normalisation of whiteness in Australia, but also to explore if physical signification of racial identity through hair hegemony governs representations of whiteness. This paper has a research question: does hair act as a hegemonic signifier of race in Australia? Does hairmatter?

Methodology

Critical auto-ethnography is an emerging research methodology that enables researchers to explore biography and auto-biography to illuminate and reveal social and cultural issues and realities. It has grown out of auto-ethnography as a research methodology (see Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006, Hesse-Biber 2008) but locates analysis and other features of research design from the critical theory perspective. The critical theory perspective is one which is not value-neutral but which explicitly sides with social justice for minorities and marginalised groups within society; names difficult realities (such as racism and sexism); and makes calls for social change (Adams 2017, p. 79). Critical auto-ethnography has developed as an emerging methodology to the point where international conferences dedicated to it are now held (Fitzpatrick 2016). It enables intimate story-telling and disclosure to illuminate, portray and analyse social realities. I present several auto-biographical vignettes to explore hair-raising events in an Australian context during and after the dismantling of the White Australia policy.

The Stories

Vignette 1: Don said there aren't any in Australia

White faces and straight or lightly curled hair textures dominated the human landscape and its norms when I boarded a bus with my mother in metropolitan Adelaide in 1960, aged three. Even at the age of 3 I knew I looked different: I had natural afro-textured hair, blue eyes and pale skin. I had been teased into knowledge of hair difference by other children and my siblings, learning that textural hair difference was significant enough to warrant mockery. I was sitting next to my mother on a short bus trip from Norwood to Adelaide when two white women boarded the bus. They looked around the bus: There it is! said one, and they gleefully strolled down the aisle towards us. One pinned me down to the seat, the other produced scissors, and the scissor-bearer urged the other to hold me still Don't let her kick me!. My hair was cut and she held a coil aloft with the cry I told him there was a little nigger on the bus but Don said there aren't any in Australia!. Before, during and

after this attack neither woman spoke to my mother or me. I looked up at my mother and saw her contorted face and fear: she put her finger to her lips and made the shush signal. Obedient, I said and did nothing but straightened myself up and crouched doubled-over in my seat. I recall other women on the bus staring at me, and that some had gasped. But none spoke up, for or against the attack. My mother and I never discussed this experience.

My brunette hair is afro-textured. It has coils, spirals and corkscrews: it is difficult to comb with a fine-toothed comb and breaks easily. It is dry, dense and thick. My siblings and parents had thick curly hair: not kinky curly like mine but wavy and curly. During my childhood and until mid-adolescence my mother cut my hair herself, and she often puzzled over how to cut it, how often and its texture. She sought advice from a curly haired woman who suggested it be wetted each day before brushing. Wide toothed or afro combs were unknown and unavailable in the fifties and sixties in Australia; brushing with a cheap plastic brush was my only daily hair grooming ritual. Hudson (2017) has described how to treat afro-textured hair: she has also described some aspects of hairstyle discrimination in the USA where certain hairstyles are forbidden to, for example, women in the military. I knew nothing of this as a child: white norms were pervasive, I was very unusual, and attracted attention: strangers would stare at me, and frequently many would, without asking permission or even acknowledging me, touch or even grab at my hair. And I have lost count of the number of times I have been asked Where are you from?.

I was both highly visible and invisible: my personhood, gender and humanity made invisible by frequent references to me as it rather than her, and many experiences of being touched on the head without my consent. That touching was a mix of curiosity and hostility: decades later I still cringe when people ask me if they can touch my hair and I usually refuse all such requests. I remember the faces of those that touched without consent: stern glares and frowns, a hostile gaze from white Australians. I am not able to compare ethnographic stories or offer you alternative stories from other like-featured Australians: no-one looked like me! I was much later in my life to sit with Indigenous Australians who presented a seminar on how no Australian image of women presented them with a mirror that reflected them to themselves: I was silent at that seminar but I felt I lived something of their experience, the knowledge that the only images mirrored back to me about being a woman were not like me, a sense of exclusion and marginalisation with media imaging of women, and the only image like me was my own alone in my own mirror. While I resonated with their experience, I said nothing of my experience to Indigenous women who initiated and explored media analysis and racialized identity in the 1980's.

In the nineteen sixties in Australia the perm became popular: curly was in for white women – but not kinky, never kinky – no-one but me wanted that. In early 1969 hair in Australia had a pervasive norm - hair might be combed, cut, cleaned, conditioned, coloured or permed but the hair texture norm was that of a strict norm of the dominant white race and Anglo-Celtic majority ethnic group of Australia. Hair should be straight or curly but never kinky. No Australian mirror except my own held an image of kinky hair. And in the streets I would continue to have my hair touched and grabbed, although for some years I did not again experience as serious a physical and psychological assault as that experienced on a metropolitan bus in front of silent witnesses when I was three years old.

Vignette 2: *The Hair Relaxing Kit*

*In early 1969 my mother and a sister-in-law's twelfth birthday present was a hair relaxing kit imported from North America. This gift needed weeks of preparation: it had to be ordered from North America and shipped to Australia. I learnt during this process what **relaxing** meant: it is nothing to do with being calm but rather an odd reference which seemed to imply that my hair was wild, crazy and tense! I puzzled over the word as did my family: what did relaxing the hair mean? It meant chemical **straightening**. My wild lawless hair needed domesticating and taming! I panicked at the last moment, protesting I did not want my hair relaxed but I was disciplined to be respectful to my mothers' kind intent, and the chemical treatment applied on my birthday to my birthright. My natural wildness asserted itself a few days later and my natural texture sprang back in defence of itself, rejecting curly for natural kinky. I was pleased: I knew myself again, because I knew and liked my wild lawless hair. I was lawless by name – and by hair texture.*

The White Australia Policy was well gone in 1990, having been officially dismantled by 1975, but my lived experience is different: its influence continues in a persistent marginalisation because of one difference. Its persistence can be found beyond an auto-biography. In 2002 Peter Davis, a right-wing mayor of Port Lincoln, a large regional town on the Eyre Peninsula of South Australia, espoused that refugees could be used as live target practise at an Australian Army base (ABC Eyre Peninsula, 15 November 2010). His voice and image were widely portrayed in the media and his views both supported and critiqued by the Australia public.

Vignette 3: *service refused*

A white woman serving in a café, branded as a national chain of fine coffee, refused me service saying that Peter Davis had the right idea about people like me. Her colleagues were puzzled by the reference and asked her what she meant and showed genuinely shock when she explained: another young white woman turned to me and said she would be glad to serve me and asked for my order. People turned to each other and asked what had happened: several spoke to me, saying they were dismayed or disgusted by the first white woman's words. I took the coffee, sat and drank it in that café: my presence a defiance of that dreadful ugly act, that people should be used as target practice by the military. I was shaken, yet defiant and the next day returned to make a formal complaint but found the first white woman no longer worked there. I had a similar experience in a large popular department store, at their mezzanine bakery: a hostile gaze at my natural textured hair followed by pointed refusal to serve me despite several customers pointing out I had not yet been served. I persisted said I had not been served yet. Two well-dressed white people behind me discussed it and asked each other quietly: is this racism? Yes, they agreed, and one offered to be a witness if I wanted to make a formal complaint. I did not, I explained it happens frequently and I was used to it and I take it in my stride, but they said they were offended and they would make a complaint to the store manager about what they had had to witness. They left to do so without making their own purchase. I considered the incident overnight and returned the next day to make a complaint directly to that white woman but was told she had left the job and would not be returning. It happened again and again in rural towns and in the metropolis: hair texture provoking refusal to allow me to use a public toilet, refusal of service by hairdressers,

open mockery by hairdressers during a haircut, references to me in animal terms such as being sheep-like and to be shorn with shears, or having hair that would cut the hairdressers hands because it was steel wool.

Is hair texture alone enough to provoke racism and marginalisation? Does hair matter? Is just one drop of racialized difference significant? If yes, what does that tell us about the fiery provocative reality of race and racism in Australia? What is the significance of my experience as an ethnographic account? Australia did not espouse the one-drop rule of the United States of America, in which even the slightest feature of an African heritage would result in racial categorisation as African and in a nation in which miscegenation was outlawed: nor did Australia espouse the pencil-drop test of apartheid South Africa in which a pencil would be used to test the Afro-texture of hair to categorise the racial profile of a citizen under the *Population Registration Act*. A measure of hair-texture and race was how easily does a pencil fall from one's hair – apartheid finished in 1994 but does hair texture matter in modern South Africa with persistent effects on culture? We need to ask that of our South African sisters and brothers and I raise the question for others to answer.

In the 1980's and 1990's there was a major resurgence in the public mind of race and racism, and the rise of right-wing white power groups in Australia. Some perpetrated criminal acts which were policed and prosecuted. Some entered my life, as they did the lives of other Australians.

Vignette 4: facing the right

At work in 1980, advocating land rights for Indigenous peoples as part of both a professional and personal commitment, I and others in the Pitjantjatjara land rights support group received a written death threat from the Ku Klux Klan based in the Australian metropolis where I lived. The letter claimed to be from the Grand Master of the KKK in Australia and threatened to give supporters of land rights the land in which to be buried 6-feet underground. I was visited at my home by black-clad thugs with Australian accents from a white power group but I was much more fortunate than others: I was able to talk them into leaving. Later after receiving threats from a colleague I was followed onto and out of a bus by white men, blue-eyed men with baseball bats who stared at me during the bus-ride and bounced the bats up-and-down while staring me down. Fortunate again, I escaped physically unharmed but rattled and alarmed. I was walking down a city street when black-clad and tattooed men called to me from a car lined up at the traffic lights about my ugly hair: they jumped out of the car to approach me but just behind them three other young white men saw what was happening, jumped out of their car and chased them off, checked I was Ok and ran back to their car which was holding up traffic at the crossing. I never saw them again but remember them well.

Facing down right-wing and Australian white power groups was frightening but I was fortunate: others in the anti-racist groups I was affiliated with suffered bashings.

Reflecting on Stories and Questions

These stories of violence may or may not be hair-textured: sometimes the lines blur, just as sexism and racism are entwined like a hair-ball, one cannot readily tease apart the components in the interlocked realities of discrimination and political and cultural violence. I am pale pink-skinned, blue-eyed and proudly sport a natural afro, and afro-textured hair. I

have taken up stances as an anti-racist activist and pro-diversity proponent in an Australia dominated by whiteness and still riven by its racist history and continuing racialized current affairs. Hair and a thirst for social justice propelled me into a deeper sensitivity to race issues and to racism, and to a decision to stand up against racism in myself and in my society. I have presented several critical auto-ethnographic vignettes that invite the reader to consider their own answer to this lawless wild undomesticated question: Is hair texture significant in Australia? And what is that significance of this possible signifier in a country whose character continues to be haunted by the cultural persistence of the White Australia policy?

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