Untangling Whiteness

Education, Resistance and Transformation

by

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Introduction

I am a lifelong teacher and learner, and have taught for almost three decades in the primary and secondary years, community college, and universities. I taught at a private school, underfunded and risk-of-closing public schools in three US states, a small liberal arts college, and large public universities in both the United States and Aotearoa, New Zealand. What I have come to understand in all of these teaching roles is that learning from and with students is the only way education is truly meaningful and has the potential to be life-changing and liberatory. No one (educators or students) comes into a classroom community objectively or without life experiences. Everyone understands concepts differently and learns in diverse ways. We all have varied racialised experiences, come from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, participate in multi-faceted religious and political education, as well as embody different ways that we understand our roles and purposes in the world. In other words, teaching and learning are steeped in subjectivity, diversity, and interconnectivity.

I identify and have been socialised as a white, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender, middle-class Jewish, European American female who lives and teaches sociology and social policy in the settler colonial country of Aotearoa, New Zealand. My complexity as a human being is instrumental in how I engage in any form of learning and teaching. The lens of resistance I connect and work to embody is the global movement to challenge and undermine white supremacy. Contextually, I situate my teaching and learning is the university classroom; spaces that are often tense and are currently challenged around the world. Most important, I write this book as a way to directly interrogate the assumption that teaching and learning about race and whiteness, particularly within the university context, can be condensed to one course, one workshop, or even a few trainings. It is a life-long process of learning that may begin in one university classroom, but must continue as part of who I am as an unfinished and undetermined being. I understand that every reader of this book is on their own path of untangling theories of race and whiteness. Thus, the theories and concepts will resonate in particular and unique ways depending on upbringing, education, experience, and levels of comfort/discomfort when discussing and learning about such content.

Untangling and interrogating racism and whiteness are context and content-specific. Although a definitional or descriptive understanding may be a good

starting point for learning about them as concepts, the way they manifest is very much socially constructed and intertwined with the history, culture and politics of ones' social and geographic location. I unpack many concepts as they relate to race and whiteness at length throughout the book, but for the purpose of grounding ones' thinking from the outset, I briefly define a few key terms so that readers can situate and make sense of them from here on. These definitions are just the starting point for what will be intricately fleshed out and discussed within the book. I have chosen four specific terms that are used often in each chapter. There is some overlap in ideas throughout the four terms, as they feed into and rely upon one another in their manifestations and how they are actualised individually, structurally, and institutionally. After these brief descriptions, I provide a short discussion of how whiteness and race are situated and conceptualised in Aotearoa, New Zealand, the country in which I currently live and teach.

Whiteness: Whiteness is understood as a default status or descriptor as it occupies a space as 'normal' and 'neutral.' It is seen as 'raceless' and 'clear.' Whiteness also relies on how it is socially constructed within a society that positions people the highest (idealised) on a racial hierarchy, as well as whom on the racial hierarchy are considered 'white' at any given point in time as well as ones' geographic location. For example, Jewish, Italian, and Irish people in the United States in the early 20th century were considered not-white. Whiteness is a concept of interworking and interconnecting practices and meanings that reinforce a dominant position of racial formation.

White Supremacy: White supremacy as a term is often equated with physical violence and horrific, unspeakable brutality from groups intent on reinforcing the supremacy of the 'white race'. I do not refute this definition, but extend its meaning throughout the book to include other forms of violence and harm through a *system*, a *matrix,* and a *web* that reinforces and upholds racial power and privilege as it manifests through its practices, policies, philosophies, etc. This harm is maintained and sustained through the suppression, dehumanisation, and marginalisation of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC).[1] By extending the definition of white supremacy, it becomes more difficult for white people to abdicate the responsibility of reaping the benefits of being part of a system that privileges them whilst suppressing and harming other.

[1] In this book I use BIPOC to acknowledge the racial and ethnic diversity within marginalised communities.

Race: Race is understood as a classification system that is based on phenotypical characteristics. In addition to race being based on physical appearances, it is also very much socially constructed, relying on stereotypes and assumptions within a racial hierarchy that are specific to ones' social and geographic location. 'Having race' is often framed and understood as only for those who are considered 'not white,' or for racialised 'Others'. Whiteness is seen as opaque (hence, without race) in its hegemonically (often not questioned) agreed-upon societal definition. The social construction of one's race can also be seen and understood by how someone is racially defined in one geographic location (Person of Colour) but is racially defined differently in another geographic location ('no race' or white). Further, the way one racially self-identifies may be different to the race they are ascribed by others.

Racism: Racism is an individual, structural, and institutional philosophy, presence, and practice that is intimately connected to the essence of how a society functions and behaves. Racial groups are hierarchically ordered in relation to their proximity to whiteness. For this reason, in order to uphold racism, (in its many manifestations), there must be an agreed-upon understanding to how whiteness is positioned on the racial hierarchy. This hierarchy is directly connected to social positioning and practices that esteem the superiority of whiteness. Racism is the active behaviour, policies, and practices that manifest in regard to ones' racial categorisation. Racism is also subtle and covert in that it relies on philosophies that are deeply steeped in structures and institutions that uphold and prioritise whiteness whilst demeaning and dehumanising groups and individuals who are not white.

Although brief, these definitions begin the process of grounding and understanding the many theories, ideas, and concepts that interconnect and rely upon one another to uphold and sustain the whiteness of the university and society writ-large. What follows is a short discussion of how whiteness is understood, discussed, and actualised in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

Whiteness in Aotearoa New Zealand[2]

Though a detailed history of whiteness in Aotearoa, New Zealand, is beyond the scope of this introduction, it is important to briefly contextualise it so that readers may better understand what I refer to when discussing the importance of context, location and/or geographic location in terms of how whiteness

[2] Elements of this section are drawn from (Norris, de Saxe, & Cooper, 2023)

operationalises in education and society. As Elers and Jayan (2020) note, "[W]hiteness continues to mark itself as an invisible standard through which racialised others are measured" (pp. 238-239). Whiteness, through the very act of being 'unseen' itself, can silence and erase BIPOC experiences and worldviews, thereby enabling white supremacy. This process is evident in Aotearoa, whereby whiteness is upheld by the enduring impacts of European colonisation of Māori, the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa. As Azarmandi (2022) argues,

> Race as an idea has enabled the complex racial formations and projects that have worked overtime to reproduce race-based power structures that in Aotearoa New Zealand privilege and benefit Pākehā,[3] primarily through dispossession of the Indigenous people in the process of colonisation (p.134)

Throughout many of the chapters, I draw on seminal Māori scholar and activist Awatare and her book *Māori Sovereignty*. Published in 1986, it was and is a ground-breaking analysis of conceptualising whiteness in Aotearoa. Awatare argues that white systems determine the limits by which Māori can, in fact, govern Māori, illustrating the omnipresent nature of whiteness. Its power lies in the normalcy and invisibility of whiteness, which engenders white supremacy that has largely been under-theorised in Aotearoa, New Zealand.[4] Awatere's analysis of Māori initial encounters with British forces is often discussed from the position of Māori mass dispossession that led to generations of deprivation. Donna Awatere's astute attention toward the institutionalisation of the white body has received less attention, but nonetheless is crucial to understanding the forces Māori encounter in pursuit of self-determination. Whiteness could not have accrued the level of perpetual benefits without a sustained focus on Māori as being a problem, or problem people (see Gordon, 2013). Awatere's attention here is similar to the question W.E.B. DuBois posed in 1903: What does it mean to be a problem? DuBois, as Gordon (2013) notes, does not speak about being Black but rather its meaning, which demarcates the line between identity and

[3] Pākehā is the Māori word for white New Zealanders of European descent.

[4] There was certainly a rich oral tradition that was acutely aware of what I am referring to as white systems and imperialism. From very early on Māori developed a nuanced understanding and awareness of what whiteness represented and how it was operationalised. Such an awareness is best seen in the teachings, songs and prophecies of leaders like Kingi Tawhiao, Te Kooti Rikirangi. See Judith Binney's (2012) historical biography of the life of Te Kooti Rikirangi called *Redemption Songs*.

liberation. Identity, as described by Gordon (2013), "calls for the question of a being's relationship with itself," and liberation is concerned with questions of 'ought' and 'why': Who is to be liberated? (p. 65).

The ways that British colonisers positioned Anglo-centric ideals and knowledge in Aotearoa as superior to tikanga me te ao Māori (Māori culture and worldview) forced many Māori to assimilate to Pākehā values, thus dispossessing them of land, culture and language (Came-Friar et al., 2019). Subsequent breaches of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, (the Treaty of Waitangi; the founding document between Māori and the British Crown in Aotearoa),[5] and a misremembering of the country's history of colonisation (Jackson, 2019), continue to have negative effects on Māori communities and other communities of colour. Understanding the operations of whiteness and racism in Aotearoa New Zealand can help to make sense of the inequities between Māori and Pākehā that are evident across social determinants (Bécares, Cormack & Harris, 2013; Harris et al., 2006).

One way that whiteness and institutional racism are brushed under the rug is through Aotearoa's focus on being a 'bicultural' nation. In fact, this narrative is often disseminated around the globe, even claiming that Aotearoa has some of the best race relations in the world (Richards, 2020; Stewart, 2023). However, espousing biculturalism without confronting and dismantling tropes and stereotypes used to justify Māori continued oppression and dispossession is a continuation of the colonial project. Awatere argues that stereotypes of the 'Māori heathen' and 'savage' never vanished but strengthened under white colonial systems of confinement. Savages, Awatere writes, morphed into Māori as 'troublemakers,' 'ethnic parasites, and 'burden to white taxpayers' (p. 19). The creation of tropes plays out significantly in the gatekeeping systems: housing, education, employment, and criminal justice. Privileging whiteness and reinforcing racial domination strengthened over time through the persistence of negative stereotypes and prejudices among members of the core structure that cultivated a racially discriminatory consciousness that has both placed Māori in a permanent state of disadvantage and white people in a perpetual state of ignorance–oblivious to the institutionalisation of white supremacy. Notably, "white people have no real identity of their own apart from that which exists through opposition to the Māori" (Awatare, p.11). These

[5] For more information about Te Tiriti o Waitangi, see *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (Orange, 2012).

examples illustrate, for Awatere, a system operating effectively under a white supremacist system.

Through my observations and experiences living in Aotearoa for the past several years, I notice a general discomfort among people when talking about race and white supremacy in the context of Aotearoa and its history. For example, Stewart (2020) observes that "[R]acism" is a dirty word and a grave insult in Aotearoa, New Zealand, and many Pākehā react with anger if anyone raises the question of racism. As Azarmandi (2022) notes, whiteness and Pākehāness are not sufficiently problematised. In fact, there is often more of a focus on representation and belonging rather than a dismantling of the structures that have positioned certain identity groups as superior in a settler-colonial system. Additionally, though the education systems in Aotearoa are increasingly recognising race as a systemic construct that can be 'untaught,' (e.g. Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2022), whiteness still manifests in inequitable outcomes between Māori and Pākehā students, as well as other minoritised ethnic groups. For example, whiteness operates in teachers' deficit framing of Māori students' academic achievement, (Bishop et al., 2003) and through the greater educational capital and mobility Pākeha middle-class students tend to have due to historic privilege (Borell et al., 2018). Students who learn in education systems that centre Pākehā worldviews generally have fewer opportunities and experiences to learn in culturally responsive environments; consequently, these systems reinforce values and attitudes that centre and privilege whiteness and settler colonialism.

In an interview in June 2021, Chris Hipkins, Aotearoa's former Prime Minister (and former Education Minister), responded to a question about proposed secondary school curriculum changes by claiming that the term white privilege "generates a reaction from people that actually puts up a barrier to them genuinely engaging in a conversation about power imbalance" (Satherly, 2021). I presume people in Aotearoa generally avoid using terms such as 'white privilege' and race, as they are considered confrontational and divisive, thus using 'ethnicity' instead. However, the ways people use and relate to these terms undoubtedly differ depending on individuals' racial standpoint and positionality, as well as their comfort level and experience in discussing race and whiteness.

I present this short description of whiteness in Aotearoa, New Zealand, so that readers can understand the importance of context, history, and geographic location when learning and engaging critical theories of race and whiteness.

Although many of the scholars and concepts I draw from throughout the book come from a North American or British context, their meanings provide a useful framework and lens in which to untangle, make sense of, and analyse whiteness and how it is upheld and reproduced in Aotearoa New Zealand. These same theories and concepts can also be used as tools of disruption and resistance for actively working toward challenging and undermining racism and white supremacy. The importance of socially, geographically, historically, and politically situating oneself whilst reading the book is vital when working to move away from proclamations that white supremacy and racism aren't as bad as they are 'over there.' In fact, when I first started teaching courses in Aotearoa, many students would often proudly state, "At least things in NZ aren't as bad as they are in the United States". It becomes too easy to make such claims when diving into theory that originates in other parts of the world, and specifically discusses and situates the discussion 'over there.' I circle back to learning these ideas and theories as frameworks and lenses that can be used to make sense of something. Although the details and histories might differ, the language deployed to understand an idea is still applicable when working towards making sense of it at the individual, systemic, and institutional level. Thus, before reading on, I ask readers to orient themselves and take a moment to consider the context and geographic location of where they are so that each chapter resonates socially, politically, historically, and geographically.

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