

# Deconstructing White Masculine Privilege: Racism, Cultural Diversity and Creative Writing

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## Introduction

This paper explores a 'reflective' creative writing process that underpinned the writing of "Preston Girl", a work of short fiction. "Preston Girl" tells the story of a young couple who struggle to overcome the challenges of racial and cultural difference in their relationship. These factors influence the decisions both characters make about their careers, the directions of their lives and the nature of their relationship as it progresses over time. The narrator of the story is a young, ex-Christian guy born in Melbourne who is a talented cartoonist working in a supermarket and studying part time. He meets and falls in love with a young Muslim woman from Pakistan. She is whip-smart, funny and completing a higher research degree while she struggles to find work and experiences overt forms of racism and discrimination in her day-to-day life. The story is not autobiographical, is narrated in the first person, and uses humour to prevent a sentimental and romanticized depiction of their relationship.

In this paper I provide a critical reflection on the writing of this story and how theories relating to race and cultural diversity informed and inspired the creative work and were combined with the craft and techniques of fiction writing. Both the short story and the critical reflection on the writing process aim to explore and deconstruct the notion of white masculine privilege in relation to racism and cultural diversity. The short story is not included with this essay as it is in the final stages of drafting for submission to Australian creative writing journals. However, this paper provides the necessary summary information about the story relating to plot points, themes and character developments as part of its analysis of the reflective creative writing process. The purpose of this paper is to provide a research and writing model for students, researchers, teachers and writers interested in creating anti-racist stories and narratives in a range of media.

## The Impact of Stories and the Media

As a writer and dramatist working across a range of media, including newspapers, magazines, film and websites, I have become more keenly aware of the role stories play in the ongoing discourses concerning racism and cultural diversity in Australia. The negative or stereotypical representations of people from a variety of racial, cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds have an impact on our understanding of racism, and our attitude towards the multicultural society that makes up Australia. 'Stories' in this sense can mean narratives within numerous types of media. For example: a news report about Sudanese youth appearing in current affairs television programs such as those screened in Melbourne in October 2007; films Strictly Ballroom, Loaded and Romper Stomper; works of fiction such as Archie Weller's Going Home: Stories or Thomas Keneally's The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith; or even a sequence of photographs in an online multimedia exhibit like the recent "From Sudan, In Australia" (<http://www.theage.com.au/multimedia/2008/sudanese/index.html>). Stories have the potential to initiate change, address issues of social justice and encourage empathy with different points of view, lifestyles and ways of seeing the world. However, stories can also have the opposite effect. They are often constructed in a way that privilege certain assumptions, values and ideologies that reinforce the status quo in regards to race relations and the way we imagine the culturally diverse mix of communities within Australia. Stories lacking complex racial and cultural representation can become a way of building racist sentiment, as Wilson, Gutierrez and Chao argue in the American context. "Media effects research is less definitive than other areas of communication research. Nevertheless, studies have shown that negative, one-sided, or stereotyped portrayals and news coverage in the media very often reinforce racist attitudes in prejudiced members of the audience and can channel mass actions against the group that is portrayed stereotypically." (Wilson, Gutierrez and Chao, p. 47)

In writing the story "Preston Girl", I wanted to challenge what I saw as racist mainstream attitudes and to present a complex representation of a young Muslim woman from Pakistan. I could see the potential for positive representations of race and culture in storytelling, particularly for young people. "Children in both minorities and the majority are particularly affected by entertainment characters portraying minority groups. In contrast to the effects of negative portrayals, programs portraying better interracial understanding and cooperation among people of different races can stimulate positive attitudes and behaviour, especially among children." (Wilson, Gutierrez and Chao p. 47). While my target audience with "Preston Girl" is young adults and university students, here we can

see the wider need for and benefits of stories with positive and complex portrayals of cultural diversity.

My first step in writing my story was to consider the position or point of view from which I was imagining the world of my fiction and my characters, and in turn the way in which I was narrating the story through the voice of the main character. I had to deconstruct the lens through which I saw racism and cultural diversity. This was intrinsically related to my position as a writer having published work in a wider media machine, an employee in a large bureaucracy, and a former student of secondary and tertiary environments. These environments, and other life experiences, have shaped and created a white and masculine perspective which is privileged in relation to other identity constructs as they are played out in media, institutions and other spheres of influence. The world I was trying to represent in my story had partly grown from an 'imagined national culture' which, as Stratton argues, is disseminated and repeated in a myriad of ways: "The national culture itself is expressed through, and most importantly reproduced by, a unified education system, print media including books and newspapers, and the mass media." (Stratton, p. 34) This in turn meant that in writing my story I had to be careful to avoid normalizing a white and masculine view of the world which is consistently placed at a mythologized 'centre' of mainstream Australian society and others 'minority' groups. Both Stratton (Stratton, p. 134) and Babacan (Victoria University Connections, 2007) identify the persistence of this identity construct, the latter identifying this identity construction with 'Simpson and his donkey'. "There is an attempt to construct an Australian identity in a particular way. Indigenous Australians are invisible in these debates and Australia history is portrayed as mainly white. For example, the creation of an Australia identity based on images such as Simpson and his donkey build a particular image – mainly white and masculine – of what it means to be Australian. This is a highly homogenous image and excludes many sectors of the Australian populace." (Victoria University Connections, 2007)

A reflective creative writing process, one in which I considered my own point of view as a writer with particular values, assumptions and agendas, enabled me to write from a more open ended and innovative perspective. I was able to recognise a 'privileged white and masculine' construction of identity, its pervasive influence throughout various forms of media and the Australian consciousness, its mythic status as a 'centre' of mainstream culture. This was an important platform for writing complex representations of racism and cultural diversity.

## **The Art of Story: Creative Writing as Research**

In the Australian university sector creative writing has been established as a recognised field of academic work. Students are able to complete undergraduate courses in creative writing and then pursue higher degrees by research such as MAs and PhDs. It is possible, given applicants meet the necessary entry

requirements, for a creative work such as a novel, epic poem, collection of short fiction or film script, to constitute the major component of an academic thesis. Researchers such as Brophy (1995) and Dawson (2005) have traced some of the history and evolution of the creative discipline and inherent tensions related to teaching creative writing and the function of creative writing research in the academy. While the nature of higher degrees by research in the creative writing field vary across different institutions (a useful list of Australian writing courses and degrees offered can be found at the Australian Association of Writing Programs website: <http://www.aawp.org.au/courses>) a common format for research degrees is a creative component accompanied by an 'exegesis'.

There has been considerable debate concerning the nature and role of the exegesis in creative writing research degrees. The academic journal TEXT devoted a special issue to this ongoing dialogue (Illuminating the Exegesis: <http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue3/content.htm>), but for the purposes of this paper, I define an exegesis as a long essay that explores and outlines the research processes underpinning the writing of the creative piece. Some writers and academics approach the exegesis in different ways, for example contesting the apparent reliability and/or objectivity of the exegesis in relation to the creative product, and constructing alternate forms of writing for the degree, such as 'meta-fiction' or 'ficto-criticism'. However, I modelled the reflective creative writing process for "Preston Girl" on my PhD experience, which was more conventional in form. My new piece of short fiction has been informed by my reading and exploration of theories relating to race and cultural diversity. In a sense, this essay is the exegetical component of my writing process and is meant to accompany my piece of short fiction.

A key feature of the writing process for "Preston Girl" was the fusing of the techniques of storytelling with my understanding of theories relating to racism, cultural diversity and the white masculine identity construct. As a writer I have a strong commitment to the craft and art of writing stories. During my undergraduate degree and work with various editors at newspapers, magazines and websites, I have learned about and implemented specific narrative techniques such as: use of voice and point of view (e.g. 1<sup>st</sup> person, subjective 3<sup>rd</sup> person); dramatic structure; characterisation; metaphor; pace and tension; imagery; humour; and, active visual description. These are only some elements of my approach to the craft of writing fiction, and many writers approach the act of writing and story construction in different ways.

In my experience, there is no set formula or single method for creative writing. Many writers develop their own writing process, although there are numerous texts and resources available for the teaching and study of writing including: Grenville's The Writing Book, Stein's How to Grow a Novel, Disher's Writing Fiction and Booth's The Rhetoric of Fiction. In relation to writing from a dramatic perspective, and for use in both film as well as print mediums, McKee's Story, Field's Screenplay and Egri's The Art of Dramatic Writing are useful references.

Stories themselves are also an important 'how to write' resource. For the purposes of writing "Preston Girl", the works of various writers were important references in relation to their use of the short form. These included Etgar Keret, Tom Cho, Peter Carey, Beverly Farmer and Kevin Brophy among others. Additionally, cinema was an important resource for me during the writing process, particularly Ryan Fleck's Half Nelson, Ang Lee's Ride with the Devil and the Spike Lee films Do The Right Thing, Summer of Sam and Inside Man. All these texts and narratives helped to form the cultural landscape from which I could draw inspiration in terms of thematic content and the craft of storytelling. Some dealt with issues specific to racism and culturally diverse communities, others were used only for their use of the short form.

The use of conflict was an important writing device for "Preston Girl". Here I was able to draw on the conventions of drama, specifically character motivation, and combine this with my reading of theory relating to racism and cultural diversity. "Preston Girl" is driven by character conflict. As the romantic relationship moves beyond a superficial 'honey moon' phase, both main characters desire different things from their lives. They begin to make crucial decisions about their careers and lifestyle. The pressures rising as a result of the differences in their racial and cultural backgrounds make it hard for their relationship to grow in positive ways during this process.

The life of the narrator in story is quite easy. He benefits from the privileges of being white and male in a society where racial and cultural diversity might be the reality of the world in which he lives, but is not reflected in the institutional structures that he deals with on an everyday basis. It's easy for him to get a job, deal with Centrelink, interact with his friends and navigate his way through a complex education system. His girlfriend, on the other hand, experiences racist and discriminatory behaviour in the workplace, at university and while out socialising with friends. It is also much harder for her to find a job that enables her sustain herself while she studies. As represented in the story, these negative factors associated with racial and cultural differences make negotiating and building a future together more difficult. Eventually, the couple break up as a result of the strain, caused by white masculine privilege. In terms of the craft of drama and establishing character motivations in a story, here we can clearly see the link between the theory relating to racism and cultural diversity, and the craft of writing story in terms of the use of character conflict to drive the story forward. Both theory and drama have been combined in a reflective writing process designed to present complex images of racism and culture.

## **A Framework for Understanding Racism and Cultural Diversity to Write Short Fiction**

My understanding of racism and cultural diversity for the purposes of writing short fiction grew not only from my reading of media theory, but also historical

accounts of racial and cultural discrimination, and biological, essentialist and postmodern approaches to the subject. Finally, I also drew on my own experience working in a support, administrative and research capacity for the past five years within a research department that engages with a range of culturally diverse communities in Melbourne's west.

At the beginning of this essay, I explored the implications of a white masculine identity construct in relation to media and story construction. However, this issue also resonates for me beyond the experience of being a story teller. Roughly five years ago, I used to live, work and study in environments where dialogues around racism and cultural diversity were rare. I like to think of this now as a cocoon, a kind of privileged state of being which is reinforced and sustained through various institutions, attitudes and sites of cultural expression in public and personal spheres of life. As Cashmore and Jennings identify, a consequence of this is that it can be hard to see how racial and cultural privilege functions and its impact on how we understand racism and cultural diversity:

*... it is difficult to recognize racism because it is so imbued within a system of white-skin privileges. The social, cultural, and political order that supports such a system becomes normalized in the world-views of some groups, and therefore, the argument that racism is pervasive is both abhorred and challenged. Racism is abnormal, on other words, while white-skin privileges, while unacknowledged, represents the norm. The latter might be invisible, in a sense, because it represents a way of thinking, a socialization process that is not abrupt but rather constantly at play. (Cashmore and Jennings, p. xiv)*

For me the reflective and creative writing process of "Preston Girl" was an important step in my understanding of race relations and cultural diversity – namely, that I carry 'privileged baggage' and see the world from a subjective position that normalises white masculine values, often unconsciously. It's like a default setting for seeing the world and is reinforced by economic, social, cultural and institutional factors. We can trace this in a historical sense, and the impact of this systematic repetition of white masculine privilege and how it sets parameters and boundaries for the experience of racism. In a 20<sup>th</sup> century context, Stone and Dennis explore the importance of not only the self determined nature of culturally diverse groups, but also how the 'outsider' shapes and defines these groups (p. 57). Stratton in *Race Daze* offers a sharp insight into how racist attitudes morph and change over time in an Australian context in both his analysis of Pauline Hanson's re-packaging of racist attitudes in the late 90s (p. 63), and the representation of racially and culturally diverse groups in Australian films since the 1970s (p. 36)

With regards to scientific and biological perspectives on racial difference, I found that these positions were at odds with my intentions in writing "Preston Girl". My goal was to deconstruct white masculine privilege and to explore through story

the modes of discrimination and forms of exclusion that negatively impact on a romantic relationship. These positions are problematic in that they are used to reinforce and justify the status quo with regards to racial inequality. Tucker argues that when scientists conclude a group to be 'genetically inferior' this had led to the support of right-wing political groups, fascists and racists. There are distinct political consequences of the scientific research:

*The question of genetic differences between races has arisen not out of purely scientific curiosity or the desire to find some important scientific truth or to solve some significant scientific problem but only because of the belief, explicit or unstated, that the answer has political consequences. (Tucker, p. 382)*

Recent reports by Victoria University researchers, Refugee Access and Participation in Tertiary Education and Training, Communicating with Victoria's Emerging African Language Communities and Relocation of Refugees from Melbourne to Regional Victoria also highlighted the challenges that many newly arrived people face in engaging with various institutions, such as accessing and engaging with tertiary education and essential health and support services. While these reports focus on people of different racial and cultural backgrounds from the main characters in my short story, these were important sources of contextual understanding for the real barriers facing recently arrived people with regards to economic, language, religious and lifestyle differences.

I approached postmodern ideas relating to racial and cultural difference with a certain degree of caution. On the one hand I did not want to be caught in an essentialist mode of thinking for writing my story which could reduce the characters to stereotypes. I didn't want the characters to be one dimensional and portrayed in a way that reinforces culturally diverse people as constantly at the edges of a 'white and masculine normative centre'. At the same time, I wanted to assert and represent very real racial and cultural differences, but in positive ways. As Richmond argues I was caught in the dilemma of resolving the local and particular with the universal:

*"Taken to extremes, postmodernism leans towards nihilism and the rejection of all claims to knowledge as 'truth'. Objective truths are replaced by hermeneutic truths, which are entirely subjective and relative to the point of view of the interpreter. This argument fails to distinguish between instrumental and expressive knowledge... Issues such as private property ownership, territorial claims, torture and the death penalty, the status of women, the rights of minorities, the preservation of lifestyles, the survival of languages, the practice of religion, and freedom of expression are caught in the paradox of universalism versus particularism." (Richmond, p. 90)*

So I wrote from a position similar to Stratton's in *Race Daze*, whereby: "Australian culture... is polymorphous and rhizomatic; that is, it takes multiple

forms and is endlessly varying, developing from the ground up and always, ultimately, out of the control of government and bureaucracy. There is an ideology of national culture that thinks of it as a unified and homogenous whole.” (p. 36) I tried to combine both universal and specific characteristics relating to racial and cultural difference in both characters, and to show them changing as people in different ways over the course of the story.

Finally, my own personal experience working and studying in the university sector was an important source of information for writing my story. I have worked with a range of people from different backgrounds in a large bureaucracy in Melbourne’s west for the past five years. Often, it has been difficult processing day-to-day financial and administrative matters for staff from a range of racial and cultural backgrounds. These include staff payments, travel arrangements, reimbursements and other matters that require complex paperwork (written in English) be completed, often according to tight deadlines. I argue this becomes more complex due to organisational systems which are generally based on a white, English speaking and Western style of engagement with employees. I have found it necessary to adopt a culturally sensitive approach to my own work, which is an ongoing learning process as I meet and engage with new people and cultures, and this provided a unique platform of experience from which to write. As Tatum argues, this is one way of increasing understanding of how racism works within institutions:

*“... certain kinds of experiences (increased interaction with people of colour or exposure to new information about racism) may lead to a new understanding that cultural and institutional racism exist. This new understanding marks the beginning of the Disintegration stage.” (Tatum, p. 319)*

These different theoretical perspectives and personal experience regarding racial difference and cultural diversity directly influenced the writing of my story (and my own understanding of these discourses) in two significant ways. Firstly, the narrator of the story goes through this deconstruction process in the story. He comes to understand how white masculine privilege is a factor in race relations and that it influences the way he behaves in and perceives the relationship with his girlfriend. Secondly, creating complex characterisations of the narrator and his girlfriend was of vital importance. By showing the full range of their personality traits, the likes and dislikes of these characters, their shared sense of humour and compassion, the similarities in their approaches to their study and professional careers, the common experiences they have as young people living in Melbourne, allowed me to draw on the racial and cultural backgrounds of both characters, show how they change over time, and yet not reduce them both to stereotypes.



## Conclusion

In this paper I have demonstrated how a reflective creative writing process can construct an innovative story that deconstructs white masculine privilege and creates positive, anti-racist representations of racially and culturally diverse people. In particular, I have shown how specific writing techniques, such as character motivation and complex characterisation, can be fused tightly with theoretical learning relating to racism and cultural diversity. The practical and theoretical become intertwined in a constructive way in order to recognise and acknowledge white masculine privilege, and also find ways to combat racist and discriminatory representations of a multicultural and multiracial Australian society, and in turn move beyond homogenous, white and masculine images of Australian identity.

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