I'm Not a Racist, but...

In my Brisbane high school, one of the set texts we read in the early eighties was a book called <u>Black Like Me</u>. It told the story of a white man who took medication that turned his skin dark, after which he travelled around the US experiencing life as a newly black person. He was sent to the back of the bus, denied access to toilets and drinking fountains. White strangers felt they could call him 'boy' and ask him prurient questions about his genitals. Being black, so went the message of the book, wasn't pretty and being white held privileges that were rarely examined by the white population. <u>Black Like Me</u> was, and remains, a best-seller in the US.

As a teenager, studying this text, I was only dimly aware of my aboriginality. When my best friend in grade nine saw my summer-dark legs and laughingly told me I "looked like a nigger" I was shocked by the word without really being hurt by it.. Mentally I inhabited a kind of racial limbo. I was typically white in everything but an awareness of having an Aboriginal grandparent whom I'd never met. Had I grown up thinking of myself as a Murri, I may well have punched my best friend out. Or at least had some better rejoinder to her than to feebly protest her racism. But the word nigger slid over me, and what allowed it to slide so easily was the whiteness I was privileged to enjoy, courtesy of my relatively pale skin and a hidden family history.

In an interesting twist to the whole episode, my high school English teacher stated openly to the class that she didn't believe that the events of the book had actually happened. The racism, she said, was all a fabrication, made up, presumably, in order to...well, come to think of it, she never said why. But her scepticism was loud and unequivocal. At fifteen, I knew her stance to be wrong, but had no language to frame it, other than a vague sense of her underlying anger. Now, I would say she was defensive in her whiteness; her sense of what was Normal, what was right, had been assailed. And because the book was written by one of her own, a white man, she was doubly tortured. Denial of the white race privilege that had been exposed was her only option. (Australian racism was never mentioned, of course).

What does this episode say, remembered two decades later? Well, comfortingly for a writer, it says first that books can sometimes survive even the most hostile of interpretations by teachers and hit their intended target. But it also points to the way that whiteness – and blackness, and Indigeneity – are not simple facts, but complicated relationships. To be white you need non-whites to distinguish yourself from. If we were all white, there would be no such thing as whiteness – class and other markers would be used to create a hierarchy of privilege. And whiteness isn't a simple binary relationship of white vs black, either. There are shades of whiteness as well as of indigeneity.

Whiteness is about self-identity and about culture, as well as about the cruder forms of privilege which come with being "normal". I'm Aboriginal, but with olive skin and dark hair I still enjoy some of the benefits of being thought to be white. Were I to be arrested, the cops wouldn't automatically assume I was Aboriginal. In the busy cafe, in the shopping centre, facing the bank manager or the real estate agent, my

Aboriginality isn't obvious unless I choose to make it so. These are the privileges of 'normality' most white people never become conscious of, unless they marry black.

Walking the same white world with my blacker kin, the perks of colour twist in on themselves in ever-changing ways. In Ocean Shores or Brunswick Heads, its not uncommon to get an unasked for discount on a takeaway meal, if my 'exotic' black nephew is with us. (And yes, I do send him in to pay for exactly that reason). In Byron he might be assumed to be a tourist, Arab, Israeli or perhaps black American. But should we go to Casino or Kyogle the looks are very different. And while Arab, Israeli and black American tourists have homelands to return to, my exotic nephew lives in an unexotic shack without power and until recently without windows. A lifestyle definitely not unrelated to his Indigeneity, and the other side of the coin to the slightly cheaper takeaway meals he still can't afford to buy unless he's with me.

Writing this, I've just returned home from the Brisbane Writer's Festival. Back in the city of my birth, my co-panellist was a French-Australian writer who spoke about going to school in upper-class Sydney, being regarded not quite as a 'wog' like the Greeks and Italians, but not as acceptably white as the English either. Being French, she occupied a kind of middle ground between the two. She was grateful not to have been consigned to utter 'wogdom' but nevertheless, with the olive skin of her Spanish grandfather, she was bullied, and told by Australian kids she would never speak or write English 'properly'.

Every human life inevitably contains pain. And there is perhaps little to be gained by having suffering competitions. Yet I winced, hearing this author speak, remembering that my uncle had to pretend to be Italian in order to make his way in white society. I remembered that as a young woman my mother radiated an air of 'don't ask' and was sometimes assumed to be Indian. My older brother was, in that hothouse of Australian racism and bastardry the Army, known as 'Dave the Greek'. Thus the Southern European version of whiteness that the French writer had thankfully escaped was, for my family, the promised land. For her, the label 'wog' was a step down the ladder of white privilege; for us, it was a lifeline up to a life lived outside missions and reserves, a life of wages that were paid to us and children who weren't removed.

Whiteness is above all a system of imposed normality. Its operation creates pale, blue-eyed winners, and the rest of us. Whiteness goes way beyond skin colour to include language, accent, customs, religion, gender relations...it defines what's seen as normal, and by putting some of us outside that box, allows discrimination and hatred to flourish. And in the nature of the most entrenched ideas, it is invisible to white people themselves. But if you're white, imagine this: you wake to a world where only one in ten Australians are white. The Constitution and all the other laws are written in Bundjalung. The teachers of your children, the shopkeepers, the cops, the bankers, your neighbours, are all black people, who speak English (their second language) poorly if at all. Its a world where most white people are unemployed, there are white ghettos, and where white people who die in custody had it coming. Where "White Studies" is a fringe subject at university, not like the serious studies of History (Indigenous history, that is) and Aboriginal Science. Where whites who succeed are held up as an example to their people, and those who don't are simply confirming the

low expectations that the majority hold for your lot. Where you see faces unlike your own all day every day in positions of power, and you know the jails are full of white criminals and misfits. Where you see what is done daily to white people, and you protest, but where all too often you hear the standard, ingrained, meaningless reply, "I'm not prejudiced against white people, but...."
