

## 1. Racial Autobiography: Ainslie

My childhood was spent in suburban Fremantle, pre-America's Cup when most of the town was working class and majority migrant factory workers and fishermen. My parents were first generation migrants (ten-pound Poms) and in our immediate neighbourhood we were the only English-speaking first-generation migrants around. We were also the poorest and had ten children to raise. We had almost no extended family in Australia. By contrast all the families in our neighbourhood who were of Italian, Portuguese, Yugoslav and Spanish descent had large extended families and vibrant cultures. We felt very different and isolated.

Before I understood about "White Privilege" I would have disagreed that my family as white English speakers of British descent had any particular advantage in our neighbourhood. We had such reduced means that all the migrant families around us were better off. Despite being poor, I understand now that what gave us privilege was entrée to the System and a home environment that valued and promoted the approach to education that would ensure our future in Australian society. By the time I had completed high school there were six of us at home, my father had retired and we were living in State Housing. As a white person with access to education and cultural currency to navigate the education system I had the opportunity to change my social situation. In other countries race is not the only determinant of whether a person can make it educationally; in many places a college education is extremely expensive. What I'm saying is that given that finances were not an obstruction to me becoming educated, the fact that I was from an Anglo family afforded me cultural privileges I might not have otherwise enjoyed.

At the end of High School I went to Malaysia. I lived with a Hokkien Chinese family of seven in a three-room concrete house in the middle of a rubber plantation. I was there because I had become friends with their daughter my age through a pen-pal column. This visit was probably the defining cultural and racial moment of my life. West Malaysia where we lived was quite rural then and there were almost no white people there – or at least I never saw any. I went to a Muslim school with my Chinese "sister" and I learnt Malay, but everywhere I went there were people pointing, staring and commenting. I was somewhere between a celebrity and a freak. I was totally different, but people admired me and treated me in such an open and loving way. Whenever I went out with my "sister" we would be stopped by the police because they thought I had money and she was not dressed appropriately in a Hijab (she was Chinese but constantly mistaken for a Malay as her skin is dark). I witnessed discrimination in their society and in my school. The Chinese had to do twice as well as the Malays to get half as far. The Indians had to do three times as well to get a third as far. When I voiced my sense of injustice about this my non-Malay friends shrugged and said "it's their country". They didn't like it but they seemed to accept it. I was engaged for a while to my pen-pal's older brother. He owns a company that has to have a Malay "director" who is paid and named as such, but does not actually work there. If they did not have him the company would find it hard to exist and impossible to win government bids for funding. I felt guilty about the way people were treated and I sensed my "power" as well as a certain responsibility to do something about it. I thought the answer was to treat people equally – to see and treat everyone the same. I was so naïve. I was motivated by not wanting to be accused of doing the wrong thing rather than wanting to do the right thing. Later in my life other things happened to move me towards thinking differently, but the catalyst for that was my relationship with my Malaysian "sister" coupled with my later experiences of systemic racism. Once I came to appreciate that I needed to *listen* to and appreciate another person's perspective, instead of assuming I already understood, I finally began to see rather than just *treat* others as equal.

Throughout the eighties many catch-words associated with race emerged. It was the age of "multiculturalism", "assimilation" and "melting pots". When I studied Education at University these were the terms and ideals that were promoted. In one University class we had a panel of people

representing different cultures to address us and tell us how to behave with cultural sensitivity in the field. There was a quite prominent Aboriginal lady whose sister was on the panel. When her sister began to speak the lady stood up and began yelling about historical and current injustices towards her people. She pointed her finger at all the teacher trainees in the room and accused us of genocide. She said white people should never teach her people – that we had no right to “shove our values down their throats”. She continued on for a long time to a dumb-struck audience. The faculty staff handled the situation by allowing her to finish and then making an announcement that anyone who felt uncomfortable could leave. Practically the entire lecture theatre emptied out. Afterwards many of the students spoke about the lady as if she were representative of her race. On my ESL teaching prac I watched teachers patronise and be condescending to new migrant families – often these teachers were ESL staff. They made snide remarks and generalisations in the staff room about certain groups of students and introduced “no speaking your language” rules in the playground. In the early 90s I accepted my first post as a teacher in a country town. I had a class that consisted entirely of Vietnamese students – mostly girls – who spoke little or no English. The Head of English actively campaigned to have my class moved to a pre-fab at the far end of the school away from the mainstream classes. She cited their native language, their smell and their high-pitched laughter as compelling reasons to move us.

In Malaysia and in Geraldton I thought I was the minority. Even though Geraldton is a majority white community I taught, lived and socialised with the Vietnamese. I helped the community with their English, their farming, their celebrations, their police interviews, their medical appointments and their visits to Centrelink. I almost thought I had become one with them and their culture and had little to do with my own. However, I was always a visitor and an outside observer. I was in the minority only in terms of numbers. I still belonged to the majority culture. The reason I could help them was because I could use my membership in the “white club” to their advantage.

Cultural filters run deep and just when I think I have escaped from the assumptions of my culture which lead to prejudice I have an experience like the one I had a few months ago. I was struggling with a trolley at my local supermarket. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a dark-skinned hand and without really looking at the man I assumed he was one of the African trolley collectors that work there. I did not really look up but said something like “oh good, you’ve come to relieve me of my trolley”. Then I did look up and I saw that the man was a distinguished Indian man in business dress who had also come to return his own trolley. He said “no actually” and smiled wryly at me. I was so apologetic and ashamed. I am sorry for what I did but it made me realise how deep the veins of cultural assumption run. It is my privilege and my responsibility to own up to these moments and to be a strong and vocal advocate for breaking down racism within myself as well as around me. I also recognise that the path to cultural competence is a journey – even when your intentions are right you have to work on achieving and maintaining that competence daily.

What I focus on now is racial equity not racial equality. Equity recognises and values difference and makes the world more interesting and vital. In the words of a race scholar I respect, “equity allows me to give to others what they are individually entitled to regardless of their race. Authentic within myself, I can treat others authentically.”

## 2. Racial Autobiography: Glenn Singleton

I grew up in an entirely Black community in Baltimore, where the only initial images of Whiteness I saw were on television. By fourth grade, I was attending YMCA camp for two weeks in the summer, where I recall being fascinated by the hair texture and different bodily odours of White campers. There was in my young mind a difference between White kids and Black kids, but I never gave it too much thought. My family loved Hilton Elementary School, so much so that when we moved out of the attendance zone, they continued registering me as a student there by using my grandparents' address.

Today, I realise how important it was to my educational success that we would often see my teachers in the shopping centres, at social events, or at church on the weekends. As a student then, this form of omnipresent accountability brought distress to me when I was caught misbehaving in school. Most of my teachers were not shy about "airing the classroom laundry" to our parents, and our families truly welcomed the information and responded accordingly. Never did I question whether my teacher understood me, my family, or our Black culture as this was a shared experience.

By fifth grade, Baltimore was required to desegregate public schools. The entire community was abuzz about the possibility of our having to be bussed away from Hilton Elementary and leave our highly qualified Black teachers behind. Fortunately for us, Hilton was an experimental site where some teachers rather than the students were forced to relocate. My fifth grade teacher, Fran Finnegan, became the first of many interracial relationships in which I would be involved. Mrs Finnegan was said to be a wonderful suburban teacher, but in retrospect, she clearly lacked the cultural proficiency necessary to advance our gifted class. She said it did not matter to her what colour we were, but unfortunately, we could not share her perspective. She was really White in our eyes and subject not only to our curiosity but also to our childish malice. I guess the many years of family and community members returning from their workplaces having unfavourable experiences with "the (White) man" – who I later discovered could also be a White woman – had sunk into our consciousness creating a sense of distrust of and dislike for our struggling White teacher.

As a class, we were quite aware of Mrs. Finnegan's racial foibles, and we also knew from experiences with Black teachers prior to fifth grade what it felt like to have a teacher who truly knew and liked us! To her credit, when most of the White teachers departed Hilton after little more than a semester, Mrs. Finnegan felt an unexplained need to hang around. But when the White teachers vacated, Mrs. Finnegan was forced to get to know the Black teachers, which I believe enabled her to begin figuring us out and improving the quality of her instruction. What a shock it was to hear my mother refer to good old Fran as "Sista Finnegan."

Given our success at Hilton Elementary School, I often wonder why I was "strongly encouraged" by my mother to attend a private high school. I recall feeling torn between the excitement of Park's extravagant campus and a desire to walk to school with my neighbourhood friends. The message I received explicitly from home and implicitly from the Park School community was "If it ain't White it isn't Right." My best friend, Jimmy, and I were sent together, so I wasn't alone, except for the fact that Park School administrators never allowed us to be in the same classes. It seemed to me that Jimmy was responsible for diversifying one half of our class, and I the other. We would huddle for lunch each day and for class photos once a year. Jimmy's athletic prowess eventually earned him distinction as he could adapt his football and baseball skills to soccer and lacrosse, the only options available to Park students.

The theatre called out to me when I was forced into summer school before seventh grade. Performing arts brought all kinds of lasting identity changes and transformed me into a dancing

cowboy in Oklahoma and a racist White gang-leader in West Side Story. These were the major productions as I cannot recall the numerous short acts, in all of which I needed to discover a new White persona. In the classroom, mastering the advanced curriculum mirrored the theatrical requirement that I *think and act* White. Park was quite impressed with my ability to imitate their culture so precisely in such a short time. I received the highest award for my contribution to life on campus. My award in my family and neighbourhood was a feeling of alienation and internalised White supremacy creating long-lasting self-hate.

By senior year, my family was convinced that I would be the first to attend college, but beginning a Black college tradition at Morehouse, Morgan, or Howard was out of the question as my counsellor felt an Ivy League university such as Penn, Brown, or Cornell would bring greater prominence to Park School and, in their minds, my family. I was indeed proficient in Whiteness and ready for the next level.

At Penn, I made the choice to embrace the White community and neglect all things Black. I befriended White students and eventually pledged a “very White” fraternity, Sigma Chi. I found nothing wrong with shouting “All Honour to His Name” as my overtly racist White fraternity pledge master read the names of the known White supremacist founders. My initiation was just short of a Klu Klux Klan rally complete with white hooded robes, fire-lit torches, and a cross burning- defined as the blazing symbol of the fraternity.

In my first job as an advertiser in New York, I received a painful wake-up call from my slumber in Whiteness. My boss, Fred Dubin, recognised my talent and wanted to see me promoted on a prestigious account. Our client, however, did not share my boss’s vision for my future. Although I was told that I was not promoted because of my age, Fred allowed me to listen in on a conference call as the client revealed that my colour was the concern. The client couched his racism in terms of economics, and specifically that he feared the “market-place” might not respect my colour. I left advertising soon after this incident but was still in denial about my ability to achieve Whiteness. In retrospect, I believe I returned to Penn to be an admissions director because I knew how **to be White** at the university.

Travelling to New England to recruit for Penn served as a second wake-up call. Not only did the largely White high school educators and Penn alumni disrespect me racially, but I was often not considered to be the “real” Ivy League admissions director. I watched talented students of colour come to Penn and not fit in culturally.

Five years later when Penn moved me to California, I initially believed the hype surrounding the wonderful diversity in California. I guess I was amazed to see how close together the different races lived, worked, and played. I also learned quickly that it was not “politically correct” to talk about race in the Golden State. Although the East was incredibly segregated by comparison, I felt safer being Black in Philly, Baltimore, and New York City. In California, I could never quite figure out how people felt about me racially.

Since my move to the West, I can name thousands of times in which race has dramatically impacted the outcome of a situation. From attending Stanford, to purchasing my first house, to buying cars, to being seated in restaurants...those situations I once believed would no longer happen once I earned my degrees and entered the middle class. Some friends are still quick to suggest to me that I am “playing the race card.” Today, I just get quiet when these occasions arise. In my mind, I know that if I were truly playing the mythical race card from a deck of 52 cards, I would have played all of my cards by the end of seventh grade!

### 3. Racial Autobiography: Christine

I am Chinese-Singaporean, and have always lived in Singapore. English is my first language. As my parents were from Malaysia, they studied Malay and English, rather than Mandarin. My family is Catholic and influenced by the western ideologies of our religion. I attended schools with an English background and heritage. Until recently, western culture has been more influential in my life than Chinese culture - my '*Chineseness*' has been limited to whatever Mandarin I needed to get by in school and the celebration of Chinese festivals e.g. Lunar New Year.

At the schools I attended, there were subtle undertones in the student culture that it was 'not cool' to be Chinese. The students comprised largely English-educated upper and middle class Singaporeans. While our common 'Englishness' bonded students across racial lines, it came at a cost to our diversity. Students from these schools were notoriously bad at their mother tongue and we Singaporean-Chinese even saw ourselves as a different race from students from mainland China.

Chinese form the racial majority in Singapore, with Malays and Indians comprising the minority. The impact of multiracialism on Singapore society is difficult to define. The Government advocates 'multiracialism' because it is necessitated by our multiracial population and sensitive geo-political situation: predominantly Chinese Singapore is surrounded by much larger Malay-Muslim countries. The Government's influential brand of multiracialism pervades most aspects of public life and has given Singaporeans a 'common' culture beyond race differences. The result is that while racial lines have successfully been blurred, Singaporeans have been accused of losing their individual cultural identity. Further, this focus on 'similarities' has neglected the importance of substantive equality through catering to difference.

Growing up in Singapore, I experienced "romantic multiculturalism". We have four national languages, we study about past racial riots and we even celebrate "Racial Harmony Day". I equated anti-racism with racial blindness. I believed that our education and public service systems were firmly merit based, simply because I hadn't heard anything to the contrary. Racism was the stark White-Black divide in the US and other western countries, not the reality of Chinese, Malay, Indian and other ethnic groups living in such close proximity in Singapore.

International experiences triggered my racial awareness and desire to develop my Chinese identity. In doing community service in Kolkata, India I went from being in a majority of yellow-skinned people to being surrounded by dark-skinned people. I was actually surprised I noticed the sensory difference because I had thought of myself as racially 'blind'. I met international volunteers from a variety of racial backgrounds and enjoyed interacting with them. I slowly became aware that they saw me as representative of my race. When I could not adequately answer some of their questions about my cultural heritage, I was deeply embarrassed.

Attending the World Youth Day in Sydney was a similar international experience, but on a much larger scale. Surrounded by all the world's races, I was excited whenever I met any Chinese people. I recognised that we had many commonalities despite living in different countries. Finally, I was proud to be Chinese.

I did not expect to go through any culture shock in Perth. After all, western culture was not foreign to me. However, when I found myself surrounded by a predominantly white population, I started to feel very conscious of my Asian appearance and my Singaporean accent. I instinctively gravitated towards fellow Singaporeans and other international students. Interestingly, I realised that what intimidated me was not that I was of a different race to others, but that I was in the minority. I could interact easily with students of a different race than me who were also ethnic minorities in Perth.

Even after being here for some time, I still find sitting at 'white' tables in the dining hall somewhat intimidating.

My experiences with 'Whiteness' in Perth vary widely. There are those who are welcoming and interested in my culture, those who are racially 'blind', those who simply are not interested and those who are only comfortable with me and my friends if we're being 'white'. I once travelled as part of a group that comprised Chinese, Indian, Iranian, Egyptian and Caucasian people. As we travelled, we listened to music at a high enough volume such that other cars could hear it. When we switched from English songs to Iranian songs our Anglo Australian friend was so uncomfortable that he insisted that we switch back to English songs. I was very surprised because he had never shown any race-related discomfort in our interactions.

Being in the racial minority in Perth has engendered a sense of pride when others ask about my cultural heritage. I feel a sense of belonging when I relate to Chinese people (regardless of nationality). While I was in the racial majority, I had no need for a racial identity and prided myself on racial blindness. I think that the cultural apathy of the majority and contrasting racial pride of the minority are the basis for systemic racism. Cultural apathy on the part of the majority leads to an inability to appreciate the value of diversity and the systems put in place by the majority 'pressure' the minority to fit in with the dominant culture. The process of achieving racial equality requires committed effort on both sides - by individuals in the dominant race simply because they can get by without racial 'consciousness' and the minority race has to avoid defensiveness that results in prejudice towards the dominant race.

The first time I encountered the concept of systemic racism was in a unit I undertook at UWA. Initially, I identified with the ethnic minority, because it was presented to us in the context of White dominance. I remember thinking that Singapore was more multiracial than Australia because I had never experienced systemic racism, nor heard any complaints from my friends of other races. I realised later that my perception of Singaporean *equality* was defined by my limited (privileged) racial experience: thus it was flawed in the same way as that of an Anglo-Australian in Australia or an Anglo-American in America.

Informally polling my Singaporean friends suggested that friends from minority races were more acutely conscious of race while most Chinese friends were racially apathetic. I started questioning the notion of 'merit'. I realised that even though the education system was accessible to all, some races do better than others because the values of the system are defined by the values of the dominant race. In this way, though overt racism is scarce in Singapore, true merit is elusive. The dominant race becomes the dominant class, and a vicious cycle of systemic racism results.

#### 4. Racial Autobiography: Ebony

For as long as I can remember, I have been the recipient of stereotyping, systematic racism and Australia's mythical equality. For my twenty years of life so far, my experiences, life opportunities and relationships have all been shaped by my racial mixture. My ancestry is a very mixed one. I can not hide from racism no matter what, being that I am a mix of both Aboriginal and African American descent. In present day Australia, to me, there is no escape from the discrimination and racism that 'the other' has always endured. By other I mean people who are not of the white dominant society. The colonialist thinking of the past is present everywhere in my eyes - there is never a day where I am not subject to racism, or fighting for people with similar heritage.

I find that no matter what, I am torn between my ethnicity and assimilating in order to survive and succeed as a Black woman in Australian society. I have learnt to use this internal battle to my advantage as it provides me with a sense of 'fight' that in a way fuels every thing I do. As an Aboriginal- African American, or '*Niggergine*' as I have been called, it's so much more difficult to 'achieve' as we are not equal in terms of status or in the eyes of the law or the wider society in general. Based on the colour of my skin, I am born at a disadvantage. This is not a myth: the myth is that all Australian citizens are born equal. Though I have been born into a position of disadvantage from a racial perspective, I have been lucky that my parents and grandparents decided to be the orchestrators of their own lives, but many of my people have not been able to do this. So, in a sense, I have been born into a position of advantage not through wealth, race or status, but through discipline, cultural knowledge and heritage and a strong foundation of love.

All that is 'me' - culture, tradition, law, Aboriginality, the essence of my personality, self image - at times must be put aside if I am to be an educated, working, active member of society, the opposite of everything mainstream Australia believes and Aboriginal stereotypes portray. This is a dilemma I am faced with daily doing a law degree. It is not my law, the law of my people that has governed for more than forty thousand years, but instead white man law that I am studying since my people's law is not recognized. My writing and oral skills are assessed not by the Broome Creole, or the broken Aboriginal English I have spoken for my whole life, but instead by standard Australian English, and when I am complimented on my intelligence, how well spoken I am, or how articulate I am, this is always followed by 'for a black person'. I was once awarded an A grade in an essay in high school, the teacher approached me and asked if the work was original as if she could not believe that I as a black student could produce work of such a standard. My mother was then questioned to verify my story. To succeed I have had to change the way I talk, I have had to try much harder than the rest of the white, middle class, private school youth in my classes, and I am forever bearing the flag of my people, in ways that an Anglo Australian can never understand. It is sad to think that everything I've achieved, in a way, has been my own way of overcoming the adversity that unfortunately is my birthright as a black female in a country built on the racism, dispossession, discrimination and oppression of my people.

As an Aboriginal and an African, not a day goes by when I am not subject to some sort of racism. Things as simple as using public transport, shopping, hanging with my friends in public or going to school, often end with experiencing racism. When I was at a bus stop with an African friend, a driver yelled 'Nigger' and a whole list of profanities starting with the word Black. When I go shopping, I often get followed by shop assistants and security guards, as if I am going to steal, simply because of the colour of my skin. During school, I was constantly in trouble for racially motivated fights, being deemed the troubled student, not because I started the fights, but to me, because I was a black student who would not stand for being called a 'Boong', 'Nigger' or 'Coon' everyday of the school year. I learnt that I could not do this as I would be succumbing to the stereotypes about black people - I would become the social degenerate or criminal that is so often painted of Black people in the media.

I find it amusing that I experience intra-racism within the black community, one based on country of origin, skin tone and the connection you have maintained with your original culture or language. As a result of my lighter toned brown skin, darker skinned Aboriginal and African people call me by the name for like people from the eugenics based assimilation policies and 1905 Act of the past, a 'Half Caste', my African friends refer to my colouring based on the African Apartheid model, to them I am not Black, instead I am 'Coloured' or 'Mixed'. I am no different from any other Aboriginal or African in the eyes of a white man. I have the same problems as any other Aboriginal or African person in Australia, the difference is that I have the worst of both worlds in a way as I am discriminated based on both ethnicities.

I feel torn between two worlds in a way and my dilemma: Tradition/Aboriginality vs. Assimilation. To be successful and black there is a price as you must leave what you know or who you are, or at least hide it, and adopt the mainstream 'culture'. Everyday I must become a chameleon of sorts, changing the way I speak, my mannerisms, the way I express myself, so I can do and achieve what comes naturally to a white person. So, if I suppress my Aboriginal identity whilst at school and in the professional arena, I will be rewarded by having a good job, a better lifestyle, success and greater status. This difficult 'catch' is that I must assimilate to succeed, I must lose my 'blackness', my Aboriginality, my Afro-centrism which is what I pride myself on, it is my whole identity. While achieving 'whiteness' can let you attain privilege, it can see you ostracized by black people. As a result of this push for 'whiteness' in order to be successful, I find that there is a conflict within the aboriginal community, especially when it comes to educating ones self. I feel, when I am around my own people, there is a sense of ostracizing toward those who are educating themselves. They are called 'white', and it is as if an education or better job shows your 'whiteness', and in turn a rejection of tradition, custom, language and all things black.

I can be well spoken by white standards and I can speak Creole with my family and friends and have learnt to use both to my advantage. I have come to the conclusion that I will decide how I will act in different situations and I will choose which polarity I will use to my advantage. I will not succumb to the status quo whether it is from 'white' influence or that of my own people. This gives me a sense of empowerment - I can talk or act how I see fit and not respond to the pressure to assimilate or alter my 'blackness' or 'whiteness'. **In the end I am my own person, a Djungan-Gooniyandi and African American woman from the Kimberley.**

## 5. Racial Autobiography: Thara

I was born in Singapore, and I consider myself to be an embodiment of the cultural melting pot that this nation-state promotes itself to be. I am of Chinese, Javanese, Bugis and Dutch descent; an Asian with a White surname, and a Muslim with the face of a non-Muslim. I grew up going to Sunday school, my Chinese teachers often mangled my name, and have had to answer questions ranging from, "Where are you from?", to less polite versions of, "Why do you have such a surname when you look so Chinese?".

Singapore is a multi-religious, multi-ethnic society, with most of the key religious denominations represented. The Singaporean government promotes religious tolerance and this is reflected in the major public holidays recognised by the government such as Chinese New Year, Buddhist Vesak Day, Muslim Eid-ai-Fitr/Mubarak, Eid-ai-Adha, Hindu Deepavali as well as Christmas Day and Good Friday. All schools in Singapore have assembly activities celebrating these diverse holidays, so children in schools are exposed to religious observances which they themselves do not observe. There is also 'Racial Harmony Day' where students are encouraged to try the trappings of other races, and also play traditional games.

The variety of religions is a direct reflection of the diversity of races living there as Singapore's religious followings are drawn by racial lines. The Chinese majority are usually Buddhist, Christian, Taoist or 'free thinkers' (the term used to describe those with no religious affiliation). The Malays are Muslim, Indians are Hindu or Christian, and the minority races are usually Christian or freethinkers. There are of course minorities in these races who do not practice the religion of the majority. In my experience, however, with race and religion being so interlinked, it is quite a challenge to try and separate my religious experiences from my racial experiences.

My experiences have been perplexing to say the least - while my appearance enabled me to 'fit in' with the majority, my religion put me in the minority. The only times I would feel conscious or out of place was when I received funny looks for wearing traditional clothes when out visiting relatives during Eid Mubarak. The fact that my father never wore traditional clothes did not help us to blend in with the Malay/Indian Muslim families who were also out visiting. But we did have fun messing around by speaking Chinese when in non-Chinese garb.

However, that said, the majority of people I met growing up did not bat an eyelid when they found out I was a Muslim. It was perhaps unexpected but to them; my religious beliefs, though inconsistent with my appearance, were just part and parcel of my being 'mixed'. I also consider that it may be the successful promotion of religious equality by the Singaporean government that allowed them to remain unfazed.

Religious debate in Singapore is watered down and diluted in order to maintain multi-religious and multi-racial harmony. Terrorism and its ill-effects is much emphasised, and differences between faiths are played down. There is deep appreciation of how cordiality must be maintained between religions, but a distinct lack of understanding of the religions themselves. I think this in itself has its failings because ignorance should not be the trade-off for religious harmony.

Because of my experiences in Singapore, I have never felt more conscious of being a Muslim than when I came to Australia. It was when I arrived here that I distinctly felt that being a Muslim was something not to be proud of. I hung out with Malay Muslims who wore the traditional hijab (headscarf). I felt the sting of judgement and criticism of strangers' stares directed at my friends in headscarves. This was when the post-9/11 and post Bali-bombing wounds were still relatively fresh.

My friends had to endure unkind words and gestures as they went about their daily business. Some even had bottles thrown at them as they walked to University! I had already experienced racial name calling, by drunks in Northbridge who told me to "go back to China"; I shudder to think what they would have yelled if I was wearing a headscarf. Some friends said how lucky I was, never being judged by my religion because I do not look like a Muslim, and how I could get away with things like eating/drinking during Ramadan, or having a drink (a mocktail of course) at a bar with friends if I was so inclined.

I have since made a conscious decision not to tell people my religion unless asked directly. I feel that I would be prejudged unfairly, as if being in the minority, race-wise, wasn't hard enough. It is quite sad that in a country which prides itself on giving everyone a fair-go, I have been made to feel that I should hide my faith. I never told my ex-landlady that I was Muslim, even though we would sometimes talk about religion and faith. Initially felt that I should tell her as we had gotten quite close, but an event during the last month or so of my stay there made me realise that I had done the right thing by keeping quiet. A news clip came on featuring Muslim women, with the usual attention-grabbing headline of 'Muslim women want right to wear headscarves'. I looked to her to see her reaction, and the first thing that she said was, "I don't understand why they wear the stupid things on their heads." I then tried to gently explain to her what the headscarf signified, but we were unfortunately (or fortunately) interrupted.

My decision not talk about my religion to people is now firmly cemented. It is only when I am asked a question about Islam or they make comments about Muslims that I try to help them learn more and understand the religion. However, even then I feel dishonest, acting like an impartial knowledgeable person, when in actual fact, I am part of that group.

I think it is quite sad that our lack of religious knowledge causes us to pre-judge people. While I agree with the general idea of 'tolerance' of other races and religions, I actually dislike the use of the term 'tolerant' when talking about race and religion. It suggests that there is something that we need to endure or put up with. Perhaps the words 'understanding' or 'acceptance' would be more appropriate? In an increasingly interconnected world, understanding and knowledge of different religious beliefs is only the start to becoming truly globalised.