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# Teaching Black and Teaching Back

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Aboriginal studies as a field of academic enquiry predates the relatively recent development in Australian universities of Aboriginal lecturers teaching and researching in this 'field'. Hence, there is a long history of 'Aboriginal studies', the nature of which has been framed and bounded by non-Aboriginal scholars (Attwood, 1989). Like many other Aboriginal academics, I find myself in teaching environments where students are conditioned to seek scientifically 'objective' knowledge about Aboriginal Studies or validations for their own uncritical 'common sense' notions of what such studies should be, or even who they think 'Aboriginal' people are. I have always felt uncomfortable with the role of the *professional academic* as it has historically developed from a comfort zone of White racism and privilege and has contributed significantly to Aboriginal dispossession.

Much of the following discussion will draw upon my own experience as an educator of mostly non-Aboriginal students. This is by no means a comprehensive discussion, but nevertheless a means by which I am able to discuss some of the tensions in teaching practice that confront me each time I present 'myself' in class. Contemplation about whether what I do is effective for my people and community, and for the bigger struggles confronting us as Aboriginal peoples in a colonial condition, is always present. I intend to demonstrate how critical race theory (CRT) works to inform educational practice and how educational practice can be transformed through consideration of that theory. CRT is vital to my work and is measurable to some extent by its ability to contribute to these wider struggles for rights and recognition of Aboriginal peoples and communities.

The 'bigger picture' of Aboriginal rights is always central to my practice as an educator. This can, at times, be in conflict with the immediate, culturally imposed concerns of fulfilling institutional expectations with regard to student outcomes at the micro level and the modelling of desired professional attributes. The focus of the discussion therefore will be the nature of the tensions between personal achievement, collective vision and its epistemological foundations. Indeed, of critical race theory in the practice of *teaching black* and in providing space

for the central role of Aboriginal consciousness in such teaching.

## Teaching Black – why operationalise Critical Race Theory?

bell hooks, the Black American writer and race theorist, proclaimed that:

The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created. The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labour for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom' (hooks, 1994, p.207).

The underpinning of educational practice with critical race theory can be regarded as a theory of transgression where educators deliberately move beyond the 'normal' (White) boundaries of academia. These include the 'traditional' form and sequencing of content, 'acceptable' teaching approaches and 'standard' assessment methods, to challenge and displace students' dominant epistemological and ontological beliefs about themselves, and the world they share with Aboriginal peoples.

The overarching significance of my place and privilege to stand in front of an audience of undergraduate and predominately non-Aboriginal students to speak of the diasporas and history of my people haunts me today as it did in the first university class I was directed to teach. I knew then, as I still do, that there are better orators than me out there in the community, doing it hard and trying to convince other audiences less captured than mine about the same issues, who deserve this privilege more than I.

There are broad ranging and complex issues that confront Aboriginal teachers in professional roles that are dominated by non-Aboriginal processes, theories and notions of 'best practice' in relation to equity and social justice. Ironically, because of my university education the Academy positions me as 'more deserving' of this role than those other, more deserving people in the community. The Academy can only recognise and reward that which it knows. It would not know where to

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begin in credentialling the expertise of Aboriginal community educators. Aboriginal knowledge and knowledge systems are central though to how we as Aboriginal academics frame our teaching.

The privileging of Aboriginal knowledges and perspectives in this way does not imply the absence of 'academic rigor', rather that the stance and position of myself as teacher is explicitly claimed in order to attend to the constructions of non-Aboriginal racism and its impact on black suffering. This privileging must be woven through academic enquiry with clear goals in mind in order to interrupt the dichotomous belief that we are either primitive (exotically different) or civilised ('normal'). White students longing for an experience of postmodern primitivity where an *educated black* speaks 'their' English, knows their theories and even grades their papers, recreates the same comfort zone that CRT is attempting to disenfranchise and disrupt. Teaching in this way does nothing in performative terms to transform them, raise consciousness, and to rupture the very nature of westernised knowledge that condemns Aboriginality and Aboriginal people to be academic subjects and research fodder.

Herein lies one of the major tensions for Aboriginal lecturers who are placed in a dualistic role of 'expert' as defined by White notions of empirical evidence and 'objectivity', at the same time as being advocates for the broader struggles. These struggles are informed by the contextual nature of our role as Aboriginal teachers within the university and the often polarised political culture that surrounds this context. The fear presents itself that teaching will perpetuate a *knowledge cleavage* between those who are empowered and skilled to declare the injustices to the humanity of Aboriginal peoples and those we are advocating on behalf of, and who we seek to empower with that same voice. Indeed the coming of voice for Aboriginal lecturers can be a cathartic and sometimes traumatic experience.

Initially, I thought the nervousness surrounding this catharsis came from a fear of non-Aboriginal students sitting in judgement of what I had to say and that I would be judged against other non-Aboriginal lecturers. However, now I think my fear was that I would not do justice to the topic at hand. That I would not present the whole picture and that because of this it would not transform students' thinking about Aboriginal people and things toward a more progressive and liberating nexus. This liberation through

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CRT would emerge from students developing an appreciation of their own critical understanding of race theory, anti-racism practice and scholarship where we are *all* positioned as subjects in the social and historical text of cultural enquiry.

From my observations and deep conversations with other Aboriginal academics [personal discussions with Fesl, Foley and Phillips, all in 2003], it appears that we all share this deep anxiety around how to position oneself in teaching environments where White students' expectations are about 'higher learning, scholarship and academic rigor'. Yet one of the most pressing, fundamental issues that we discover in

our lecture theatres is about unpacking and exorcising the everyday, garden variety racisms that the majority of white Australians bring consciously and unconsciously to learning. Here the emphasis is not just upon students receiving knowledge but, rather, creating new knowledge by providing the means for a critical ontological incident to occur which compels previous assumptions to change (Taylor, Tisdell & Hanley, 2000).

#### **Teaching back**

It has become clear to me that liberation from the often ignorant "knowledge" of Aboriginal people, history and humanity was, and is, tied up with the liberation of my own people from colonial racism. I do not have the privilege of White academics who are able to proclaim the world as their theoretical oyster. To claim this in a place where 'class theory' Marxism and democracy are valorised and a denial of White racism is naturalised as an acceptable component of domination in the world, past and present. These 'colour blind' theoretical paradigms continue to dominate and what follows is that a stated need to challenge western social theory for what Aboriginal people have to say or proclaim as *their* epistemological belief is often relegated to being quaint, belonging to the antiquities, non-theoretical and 'primitive' (Muecke, 1992, p. 4).

Idealistic as it may sound, making this important connection becomes a crucial point of discovery and connection between myself and the learners I am charged to educate. It is indeed, as hooks (1994, p.207) has suggested, 'a space that remains a place of possibility ... and a place to transgress'. The often shocking reality of this idealism is that I must teach in an institution where the acquisition of knowledge - and not the exploration of

attitudes and beliefs - remains the primary goal. At the same time, we find ourselves contesting in a range of disciplines the anthropological, racist, authoritative constructions of Aboriginality that also can be found in abundance within text books in university libraries.

Despite the emergence of strong Aboriginal authors now providing a powerful challenge to the writing of the old 'experts' (Cowlshaw, 1992, p.20), the actual practice of teaching Aboriginal studies remains within the domain of mostly non-Aboriginal academics from a wide range of academic disciplines. Here we find a plethora of academic work being undertaken where contact with Aboriginal people is no longer a requirement of the scholarship through which non-Aboriginal academics stampede to 'discover their whiteness' (Moreton-Robinson, 2000).

Postcolonial and postmodernist arguments claim that a brand new day of social and intellectual thought has arrived. Yet the colonial study of Aboriginality, reproduced through the traditional tools of knowledge acquisition such as text books, continues to inform the intellectual capital of contemporary Aboriginal studies.

Aboriginal educators in Aboriginal studies are increasingly finding themselves in ideological wars where fidelity to the struggle is being tested by mostly neo-conservative non-Aboriginal notions of liberation. Postcolonial studies are becoming a celebratory cover-up of a dangerous period in Aboriginal peoples' lives and especially a cover-up on the 'hows' and 'whys' relating to the genocide of Aboriginal people past and present. The possibilities of developing a dialogical approach to teaching and learning becomes encapsulated and circumscribed by its loyalty to post colonialist theory, not to real world situations.

The mystification of 'old' racism through a paradigm of postcolonial education theory may indeed appease those who lazily sidestep the rigorous effort required in examining the complex colonial condition that surrounds them. But for Aboriginal people the condition remains colonial and violent despite protestations and invitations to us invaded peoples to become 'post-modern' or 'postcolonial'. To name, yet mystify non-Aboriginal privilege and the westernised brand of *Australiana* in their representation of 'Aboriginality' and racism as part of a 'collective condition of all human beings', ignores totally the history that initially organised and named the 'Black other' as problematic. It is able to do this without ever needing to name what it means to be non-Aboriginal and a coloniser.

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While critics of anthropology (Cowlshaw 1992, 1999; Mueke, 1992) rejoice about the emergence of 'powerful' Aboriginal voices in the academy, the voices of Aboriginal lecturers has hardly made an impact on the glut of publications by non-Aboriginal people on Aboriginal peoples and issues (see for example, the AIATSIS library [www.aiatsis.gov.au](http://www.aiatsis.gov.au)). As Nakata (2001) bluntly stated, White academics still 'name the game', define the 'problems' and propose the 'solutions' to anything and everything Indigenous.

In my estimation, one of the greatest issues facing Aboriginal educators in universities is that we are being attacked from a second wave of White critical postmodernism. The desires and visions of utopian destinies - perhaps already assumed to be reached - where colonialism and its inherent racism are no longer in existence disregard the so called 'old arguments' about Aboriginal rights which are still trying to find foothold in popular thought. This new wave includes some Aboriginal academics who are readily embracing this future-vision, and making rigorous counterclaims to what they consider to be essentialist versions of cultures by Aboriginal people and communities. A rugged individualist line with a boot-straps approach to all social ills is called upon, thus abrogating any critical inspection (or introspection), commitment or credence to the historical legacy of struggle for rights by Aboriginal peoples. Political calls for 'Aborigines to take responsibility' (Pearson & Sanders, 1995, p.18) and to take charge of their destinies are beginning to emerge on a number of fronts. This is providing another wave of scholarship and enterprise for those who are mesmerised by the imagined post-colonial utopia. One which no longer requires historical analysis of the past as a means for understanding the present but rather a way to act within and through the imaginary without addressing the arguments about 'rights'.

This raises an important question for me as an Aboriginal academic and how I find myself in teaching domains where the outcomes agenda for student learning is increasingly being driven by contemporary political perspectives. So-called progressivist thinking is popular where Aboriginal approaches to teaching and learning as anti-racist and transformative pedagogy takes a back seat. My dilemma can also be contextualised as part of the broader ethical and political dilemmas facing Aboriginal educators across the spectrum of education sites. These relate to issues of how and why curriculum is developed as well as to the development of adequate theories for practice. Aboriginal teachers and educators

are attempting, under increased pressure, to remain committed to a broad vision of teaching and research that addresses and engages with issues of social equity and human rights for our people. Placed inside these complexities, and in the context of rapid economic and cultural change, the task of analysing and describing the intersections of Indigenous knowledge, professionalism and practice would require a larger exploration than what is permitted in the space available here.

Nevertheless there are salient issues that can be explored. The rationale and mode of transmittal must always be guided by a deeper understanding of how knowledge is transferred and translated through an often personalised view of Aboriginal history, politics and cultures. Hence the positioning of 'self' in the text, the lecture, and the assessment becomes a critical moment in teaching for Aboriginal academics that many non-Aboriginal academics fail to recognise. We straddle the divide of being both the subject of inquiry and the mode of instruction. We teach this knowledge all the while aware of not letting ourselves completely adopt the colonial posture of being 'objective'.

For the majority of non-Aboriginal academics, the privilege of their normative notions, where 'their world' becomes *the* world, means never having to locate themselves as 'non-Aboriginal people' inside the methodology of their teaching unless they choose to. Here, the 'Aboriginalist' depends on this flexible positional superiority, which serves to place the non-Aboriginal academic in a whole series of possible relationships with Aboriginality without ever losing the relative upper hand (Said, 1979, p.2). Here the dilemma of pro-Aboriginal studies educators is that they find themselves morally and epistemologically double bound by their own histories and Whiteness (Lampert, 2003). Many attempt to straddle this divide quite courageously and work supportively with Aboriginal academics. Many, on the other hand, are happy to enjoy the historical and contemporary spoils of Aboriginal conflict, and its preceding colonial studies, and spend their careers focusing on the 'new Aboriginality' contained within postcolonial theories in their particular field of study and teaching.

### **Teaching as professional practice and resistance**

The role of teaching for Aboriginal academics is not confined to being merely a professional vocation. For many it is a cultural and traditional practice of resistance to colonialism and bourgeois ideology and practice which is performed at the same time as having to act within those paradigms. The question is how to engage this resistance in order to transform these silencing

frameworks, without reinforcing them.

This raises other questions about how one is able to describe the place and positioning of Aboriginal teachers within Australian universities. It is clear that we play an important brokering role, when consulted, in mediating the development of new 'Aboriginalist' knowledge, research and ways of teaching. But does this readily fit into existing postcolonial and radical pedagogical theory?

As a discourse, postcoloniality ignores the Aboriginal histories which must be centred in any analysis of contemporary imperial relations with Aboriginal peoples and issues. The trend toward developing postcolonial paradigms and pedagogy in universities by mostly non-Aboriginal educators serves to stymie Aboriginal academics and teachers who are busily trying to eradicate modernist (anthropological) knowledge. Through this they are faced with the task of taking on how post colonialists are using similar approaches-

but only as a means of creating their own expertise and ethics in teaching and learning, research and scholarship. Here a vacuum is created through the reference to Aboriginal people within strictly 'cultural frameworks, formerly as primitive and inferior cultures and in more contemporary times celebrated as part of the diversity of cultures in the world – no longer inferior just different' (Nakata, 2002, p.2).

Explaining Aboriginal cultural change and difference has to a greater extent been taken up by postmodernist writers who desire a universality of all human conditions as explainable and rational but, as bell hooks contends, this does not hold promise for liberation.

Third-world scholars, especially elites, and white critics who passively absorb white supremacist thinking, and therefore never notice or look at black people on the streets, at their jobs, who render us invisible with their gaze in all areas of daily life, are not likely to produce liberatory theory that will challenge racist domination, or to promote a breakdown in traditional ways of seeing and thinking about reality, ways of constructing aesthetic theory and practice (hooks, 1994, p.92).

Many Aboriginal academics (including myself) are wary and critical of the positive spin given in postcolonial analysis of Australian society and culture. One of the main critiques is that it implies history no longer has an effect on the present and that history is only relevant for *understanding* the present, rather than in transforming it. The inclination within post colonialist approaches is to treat everything within a new global paradigm: a brave new world. For many Aboriginal scholars and teachers, addressing the first wave of 'colonialism' is still an urgent imperative that requires attending to before we indulge

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a 'post' colonial era. It may have arrived as a conceptual way of mapping a departure from traditional western ideals and the decentring of western ideologies, but for the invaded such as 'Aboriginal people' the social and political condition is still colonial.

Old racisms and ways of expressing racism may have become redundant and this has been celebrated by liberal thinking in university teaching. But what has taken its place? To those who advocate a post modern approach to education, these expressions have merely become more sophisticated in disguising non-Aboriginal racism and non-Aboriginal privilege.

### Teaching for whom?

If the focus of education and teaching is anti-oppression, we cannot shift our attention to a neutral or border ground, as the understanding of colonisation must be grounded to the experiences of the coloniser and colonised alike. Aboriginal people did not put the 'post' in postcolonial and as Aboriginal lecturers we can not afford to indulge in a postmodern cynicism that resorts to scientific rationality to solve what are essentially issues of rights and racism – old and new.

Traditional western pedagogy asserts that the educator also learns from the person being educated. No one can be considered definitively educated or trained. The dialectic here is between myself, the ancestor spirits and the students in a tripartite symbiosis. Without this ongoing and cyclical self reflection, it could be argued that non-Aboriginal academics teaching Aboriginal studies are merely teaching history where the linear progression of cause and effect provide the rationale for all instructions and teaching. The challenge we face as Aboriginal teachers is not simply ideological, but a challenge to put the intellectual case for our diverse epistemological traditions – our ways of knowing, learning, teaching and being - at the forefront of all education processes in this country.

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