

Teaching Indigenous Studies: Considering racialized assemblages and the Indigenous educator's body in tutoring spaces

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I coordinate and teach our core teaching topic in the School of Education, EDUC 2420 *Teaching Indigenous Australian Students*, as well as teach, at the master level, EDUC 9400 *Critical Indigenous Pedagogies*. I also coordinate AUST 9000 *Indigenous Research Methodologies* with guest lectures in all of our teaching topics.

Abstract

This paper looks at the experiences associated with teaching Indigenous studies in an Australian university. It employs the concept of racialized assemblages in relation to Indigenous academics and pre-service teachers when teaching about Indigenous students. It also investigates the university's ethical obligation of teaching in this complex space. In the lecturing and tutoring, the Indigenous educator's body is 'raced' and 'othered' within the dominant Western discourses of knowledge production. This paper challenges and disrupts Western epistemic knowledge practices of racializing Indigenous body and supports a praxis of Indigenous humanness for the Indigenous educator.

Keywords

Indigenous studies, racialized assemblages, Indigenous humanness, knowledge production, pedagogy.

Introduction

Teaching Indigenous studies in the higher education sector is important for understanding some of the critical features that impact upon the lives of Indigenous communities and their children within schooling. Herbert (2012, 36) provides some insight into teaching pre-service teachers Indigenous studies as an "opportunity to deliver quality education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students". I am an academic and lecturer within the Indigenous Centre situated at a university in Adelaide, South Australia.

The centre consists of Indigenous academics who teach Indigenous studies into various disciplines within the university. Several Indigenous studies topics are electives and allow students the opportunity to enrol as part of their degrees. However, the topic I teach and coordinate is core to several majors within education and is undertaken both at the undergraduate and master levels.

This mandatory, educational topic informs pre-service student teachers about issues associated with teaching Indigenous Australian students. Pedagogically, it uses a critical race theory (Ladson-Billings 1998) framework to teach social justice through a process of unpacking racialization and the social construction of race and whiteness (hooks (sic) 1994; Shor & Freire 1987, 180-187). The foundational knowledge of the topic is the concept of race, racialization and white race privilege. Race emerged during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to stratify a framework in which humanity was classified as a stage for Europeans understanding of difference.

Western concepts of 'the great chain of being' (Moreton-Robinson 2015; Wynter 1999) underpin Western notions of the development of human life, with Europeans at the top of hierarchy, closest to God, and Indigenous peoples at the bottom, signifying the stages of human development. This construction of 'race', through an oppressive lens, combines with the development of racist ideologies and policies, legislated to deny Indigenous people's rights to land and culture. The process of colonization continues to structure Australian society and whiteness as privileged in this racialized assemblage that shapes the teaching environment in Australian universities. Racialization and the impact of colonization on our lives have resulted in events, practices and segments that make up the assemblages that force Indigenous peoples to conform to the dominant hegemonic values considered 'normal'.

Alexander Weheilye (2014, 1) posits 'racialized assemblages' as the "layered interconnectedness between political violence, racialization, and the human." The topic uses sets of readings and tutorial/workshop activities to formulate students' understandings, practices and experiences as potential teachers to consider the issues associated with Indigenous students engaging in schooling. (Blanch 2009; Gunstone & Heckenberg 2013; Rigney & Hemming 2014). I acknowledge the voice of bell hooks (sic) (1994, 207) when she states that "education must engage in a process and practice of freedom, and there is always possibilities, even whilst there are limitations, we must demand of ourselves ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress."

Thus, in my engagement with predominantly non-Indigenous, pre-service teacher students, I anticipate that they will strategically develop and implement units of work that reflect the learning outcomes of the topic. I expect that many non-Indigenous, pre-service teachers enter this educational topic with preconceived ideas of Australian society as being multiculturalist, where there is a presumption that *all* is equal. Medak-Saltzman (2015, 12) states that "such excuses normalize how power is exercised in the production of knowledge and how colonial ideologies have become enmeshed in certain (haunted) ways of thinking about the world."

Considering that teaching can be transgressive and transformative, I want to go beyond the boundaries of expectations within the classroom when teaching Indigenous studies, driving the convergence of race, racialization and white race privilege to centre an attempt to unpack colonialism and how it is exercised both within schooling and Australian society (Moreton-Robinson et al. 2012). To convey the intersections of race, racialization and white race privilege, my relationship and engagement with students will be examined and

conceptualized within the context of ‘racialized assemblages’ as discussed by Weheliye (2014).

I take an Indigenous, feminist standpoint (Moreton-Robinson 2013), whilst identifying Nakata’s (2007) ‘cultural interface’ to show how teaching spaces within universities can be problematic and contested. However, I am also aware that such spaces can be sites of possibilities and third spaces (Blanch 2009a; hooks (sic) 1994; Worby, Rigney & Tur 2000) that allow for new understandings where the intersections of race, whiteness and racialization provide opportunity for pre-service teacher students to demonstrate self-awareness in their roles as learners and educators.

Indigenous Standpoint

I locate myself. I am Yidindji and MBabaram of the Atherton Tablelands in North Queensland. I have worked within the education sphere for well over 25 years; in the 1990s as Aboriginal Education Worker, then as a secondary teacher working with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and, currently, within the higher education sector (for the last 13 years). I argue that my experiences as an educator within these various spaces of education equip me to critique the ways that race, racialization and white race privilege inform my teaching and my humanity in such spaces.

Throughout my teaching and lecturing career, I have continued to develop my standpoint (Moreton-Robinson 2013) and, more recently, observing Nakata’s (2007) concept of the ‘cultural interface’, to contextualize my experiences as an Indigenous academic. Nakata’s (2007, 197-199) ‘cultural interface’ draws attention to the complexities that reside within the teaching and knowledge production sites that “constitute points of trajectories that are multi-layered, multi-dimensional, a space where time, place and different systems of discursive regimes converge.” This approach acknowledges the elements that bring together Indigenous ‘lived realities’ to the educational space, where time, place and difference converge. It is essential that I embark on strategic overtures to propose a new lens by which to inform my analysis and how I analyse the theoretical components of knowledge production from Western epistemic understandings to an Indigenous, theoretical gaze (Hart et al. 2012; Nakata 2007). As an Indigenous educator, academic, community member and all of the components that make up who I am, I take into the teaching space and relay Indigenous Australian experiences in the realm of our social, economic and political areas of life.

Indigenous Educator and the Teaching Space

The contested spaces of knowledge production can be understood as being the ‘cultural interface’ (Nakata 2007, 199). The relationship between ourselves and the students in the cultural interface reveals the ways we resist, explain and self-regulate ourselves, understanding the complexities that come with teaching Indigenous studies to mainly non-Indigenous students. Entering the dominant white space, I engage in a process of decolonizing to disrupt and challenge the space, to create a space that can be identified as black/Indigenous space. Enactment of an Indigenous space allows for a performance in which I have the choice to share or not share particular knowledge pertaining to Indigenous peoples.

Teaching Indigenous studies brings with it collegial relationships with non-Indigenous teachers and, as Gus Worby (2016, 1) suggests, “when Indigenous academics teach alongside non-Indigenous academics, opportunity arises for an engagement with play and

'a reconciling practice in education that addresses everyday working relationships'. Addressing the everyday workings of education means entering colonized spaces, contact zones which, at times, can appear dangerous due to clashes and where conflicts meet (Pratt 1991). Challenging such educational spaces enforces a process of disruption to enable the teaching space to become Indigenous space, where "sites of exchange in terms of social and political action that allow for resistance, intervention, transformation and reconstruction" can occur and, as Worby, Rigney and Tur (2006, 418-423) further state, to "shift the continuum where respect is negotiated and accepted." I have an appreciation of my sense of self; I trust that my historical ontology will inform my teaching and how I know who I am in the everyday scenario. I argue that knowing who I am makes me better able to provide insightful opportunities for students working through the confines of knowledge production in Western, epistemological structures that is normalized as being all-knowing, thus, allowing for a reinscribing of university spaces.

As an Indigenous educator and academic working actively in rescripting the teaching space, at the forefront of my consideration is the development of a space that allows for productive learning; a space that must be safe and ethical. Teaching about complex issues that come out of teaching about race, racialization and white race privilege (MacGill & Blanch 2013, 143-147) comes with a burden, paradoxically shared with a love and hope that the receiver gains an understanding of Indigenous people's participation as sovereign first peoples. The relationship between learner and teacher is rife with emotions that, at times, can leave both parties feeling exhausted and needing to breathe deeply, because of the projection of deficit views that some students carry with them, and the work that I need to do is to respond as an educator. These contested views require critique to shift such notions where, as Bunda, Zipin & Brennan (2012, 942-944) suggest, "Indigenous ways of being is systematically rendered" as being less than human (Weheliye 2014) within the space of the university.

Racialized Assemblages

In critique of the ways that teaching Indigenous studies is rendered on the borders of academia, I propose Alexander Weheliye's (2014) application of 'racialized assemblages' as a guide to consider when unpacking my teacher/academic role. I have come to a place in my teaching where I am searching for greater analysis and understanding of the Indigenous academic in the university space and how the teaching of Indigenous studies is perceived and experienced. I consider the theorizing of 'racialized assemblages' (Weheliye 2014, 4) and what it means to be human. I consider my Indigenous humanness as being a key to my performance in the teaching space when teaching Indigenous studies. My sense of self exists within the scope of my relationship to my Indigenous colleagues, my family and other community members who contribute to the knowledge communicated in the teaching and how I transfer that knowledge.

Thinking through notions of assemblages in relation to constructing race and racialization, I contemplate Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari's (1987) concepts of 'rhizomes' and the ways that the structure of imperialism, as an assemblage and arrangement, is invisible to the 'seeing' eye. The operations of colonialism works through a network of systems and sets of relations that function as a force that continues to project tenets of colonialism, as coined by Antonio Gramsci (1971) "the dominant culture in power, propagates its own values and norms, so that they become the *'common sense'* of all" (Hoare & Smith 1971). Such colonial beliefs progress through the powerful institutions of education and racialization to produce the definitions by which we are known within mainstream Australia. Our bodies are colonized; interpreted through the lens of a mainstream gaze that

perceives Western discursive accounts of our lives (Foucault 1977, cited in Danaher et al. 2000). In this article, I want to journey through the ways that Weheliye theorizes racialized assemblages to further develop my understanding of my Indigenous/black body and the racialized assemblages that it carries into teaching spaces.

Entering the cultural interface where Indigenous ways are not recognized within the university and teaching spaces, there are moments in the teaching of Indigenous studies that a double-consciousness is at play for me, as the Indigenous academic. Double-consciousness, as defined by DuBois (cited in Weheliye 2014, 20; see also Fanon 2008), is where one begins to understand self through the eyes of the audience in which Western ways of 'being' is in competition with Indigenous ways of 'being'. There are moments when I feel that there is an expectation to conform to these racialized assemblages. Indigenous peoples are specifically coded, within Australian society, with binaries such as inferior/superior and civilized/uncivilized.

I am the Indigenous embodied representative of my community and 'country'; I claim my standpoint. In complex teaching spaces, I acquire support from the knowledge of and about my 'country', I know who I am in and out of 'country' and within my being. I carry 'country' with me wherever I go. Moreton-Robinson (2015, 14) provides a clear analysis of this and highlights how 'country' is defined in the contemporary: "In all of life's histories, Indigenous peoples are related either by descent, country, place or shared experiences. I agree and claim that when I enter the space of teaching I am first nation; my people come from a particular geographical location and we maintain our connection to country and I am human.

Teaching Indigenous Studies

When teaching Indigenous studies, key concepts under investigation and in much need of discussion are race, racialization and white race privilege. This work is needed to break through barriers of forgetfulness, ignorance and to assert the right of the Indigenous academic to be in the teaching/learning space. The trajectories of race, racialization and whiteness are convoluted in teaching Indigenous studies, but often take centre stage as the topic engages with knowledge about Australia's First Peoples within a largely non-Indigenous student body. Teaching Indigenous studies explores and investigates the experiences of colonization, its violence and its impact upon our bodies, ways of demarcation and the ongoing trauma that resides in how the social determinants continue into the contemporary for Australia's First Peoples.

I recognize teaching spaces as contested spaces, with complexities and contradictory epistemic knowledge that engages with Western understandings of the "aborigine" and the knowledge developed from these understandings. I maintain that there is a requirement that students undertaking Indigenous studies grasp the ways that the social construction of race and the definitions resulting from the concept of terra nullius (nobody's land) inform non-Indigenous peoples and their understanding of Aboriginal/Indigenous bodies and knowledges encountered within academia.

Moreton-Robinson's book *White Possessive: Property, Power and Indigenous Sovereignty* (2015, xi) illustrates that "race is a socially constructed phenomenon, and is busy doing its work in Australia, measuring Aboriginality by the shade of skin color." She uses the concept of 'possessive logics' to denote a mode of rationalization and the ways that white possessive logics operationalize their discourses of ownership as being common sense and argue that "our bodies are racially marked" (Moreton-Robinson 2015, xii). Following on

from these insights, I reason that what must be contextualized within the consciousness minds of all students undertaking Indigenous studies is to understand the ways that my/our body/ies are racially marked and unmarked. Our bodies in the Australian landscape are always under surveillance. I know and experience this and using Weheliye's (2014, 3) theorization of the survival strategies endured out of black experiences, I suggest that Indigenous life experiences are also fundamental to what it means to be human in modernity and how I go about accomplishing the task of teaching in Black/Indigenous Studies (Weheliye 2014).

However, contemplating what it means to be human in the knowledge production/teaching spaces as an Indigenous lecturer and imparter of knowledge can be hard work. It requires a realization that not seeing the Indigenous person as a human rests within a whiteness framework and whiteness pervades the educational space in complex ways. I argue that the discursive rhetoric of Australian sovereignty rejects my sovereign body and the racialized assemblages that privilege whiteness continue to inflict trauma on the Indigenous body. This can be invisible to the students I teach, but is made visible in teaching Indigenous studies.

In disrupting to make whiteness visible, as stated above, I shift and challenge white, educational space to black space (Worby, Tur & Blanch 2014, 3), where I play with the ideas, thoughts and theories that allow for new discourses and new meaning-making. I follow McLaren (2011, viii) "towards a decolonizing epistemology ... inclusive of a new language of educational critique and transformation, a new way of thinking about knowledge and a new way to frame conversations about how we process." Producing new knowledge and discourses is an ongoing process and involves a "writing forward, writing back and writing Black" (Worby, Tur & Blanch 2014, 1-3). This project is a shared one with colleagues who are supportive of me. It is in these spaces that I build upon the commitment I have, within the higher education sector, to incorporate teaching Indigenous studies with a new language to inform my teaching.

The formulation of a new teaching language provides an opportunity for examining Wynter's (1999, cited in McKittrick 2015) idea of '*Being Human as Praxis*'. First nations and Indigenous scholars (Baker et al. 2015; Byrd 2011; Simpson & Smith 2012) engage with racialization and, what this means for Indigenous academics and educators entering the teaching space, provide insightful analysis when we teach about ourselves. Wynter (1999) travels through the work of Frantz Fanon and focuses on his statement that "beside phylogeny and ontogeny stands sociogeny" (Fanon 2008, xv; Gagne 2007, 253; Wynter 1999, cited in McKittrick 2015, 16). This is when the violence on the body of the colonized, the psyche and the culture of the colonized, is brought to bear, but is seemingly considered civilized by the colonizers' ideologies. The complexities that derive from colonial ideologies through discursive regimes converge in particular ways when conversing about Indigenous issues. Wynter's (1999, 1) journey through Fanon's book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) suggests that "Fanon calls into question our present culture's purely biological definition of what it is to *be*, and what it is *like to be* human". I consider this realization to be of paramount importance when moving through the world and in my engagement with students.

Encountering the Indigenous Body

Encountering the Indigenous/black body can, for many non-Indigenous students, be experienced for the first time when undertaking Indigenous studies. There is a huge responsibility on our part and often we, as Indigenous academics, have to challenge *deficit*

views of Indigenous people and national government policy discourses that are framed within a racialized, white privilege context. Teaching in the Western system engages in epistemologies of ignorance. Erik Malewski & Nathalia Jaramillo (2011, 1-2) argue that

ignorance is a necessary by-product of knowledge production and needs conceptualization and exploration, making the unknown known, turning the gaze upon itself to find alternative and positive ways to disrupt the 'way that things have been' to the 'way that things can be'.

There is a dismissiveness of our experiences as colonized Indigenous peoples within our educational curricula and, from my experiences in teaching and relationships with non-Indigenous teachers/lecturers, an uncritical sense of 'normal' in teaching about race and how race constitutes 'being'. Our topic may be the first time that students have participated in lessons that discuss and unpack 'race' as cultural and social construct notions of how race, racism and white race privilege can be found across curricula and disciplines within universities. This is a challenge for non-Indigenous students and the teaching environment can be a space of discomfort (Boler & Zembylas 2003, 111) when students begin to recognize the gap in their own knowledge systems and allow for ruptures to the "norms and differences that require students [to] move outside of their comfort zone." Teaching through a 'Teaching for Resistance' model (Brougham 1994) and a 'Critical Race Theory' framework, as Ladson-Billings (1998) contends, necessitate feelings of discomfort, but produce further development of understandings of the intersections and connections of race, racialization and white race privilege, enabling a shift that is transformative. Whilst the shift might be small, it is an important one and supports positive student contributions to the topic and their teaching practices when they leave the topic. There is hope.

I argue, however, that what can be missed in the teaching/lecturing space is the performance of teaching and the processes that transpire within the lecture theatre in the context of teaching Indigenous studies. The concepts associated with teaching practice include the visual representations, body movements, facial expressions, the lowering or raising of voice and how voice is projected; each component is symbolic of how the Indigenous academic or guest speaker structure the importance of the information articulated within the realm of teaching. To clarify my thoughts, if students are not engaging in our lectures in person or online recorded versions of our lectures, what is occurring for them, I contend, is a continual gap in their knowledge through lack of performative engagement. Questions emerge such as 'what does this say for what we teach and how we teach?' How can we provide a clear analysis of racialization and its continual impact upon our world view/lived realities today? These are the questions I carry into the tutorial classes and bring to the attention of students to develop, within the performance and bodily encounter in the tutorial room and lecture theatre, understandings that can be explicit in their engagement of the topic. I argue that to be in the presence of Indigenous academics is an essential, pedagogical act of humanness and a necessary engagement to effect change.

The tutorial classes are the spaces where I spend additional time unpacking race, racialization and the racism that is at play within educational institutions. It is the space where I engage in the *mechanics* of assemblages and highlight how the network of systems within power and knowledge construct particular ideologies concerning Indigenous peoples. I strategically teach by providing the materials and teaching resources to dictate the information students need and I draw from what I know, trusting my knowledge as protection against the uninformed knowledge produced about Indigenous families and communities. I situate myself through understanding that I am a colonized body and I am teaching in the colonizer's language, however, what occurs in the

classroom is the dismantling of the master's script to engage students in counter narratives (Ladson-Billings 1998, 19).

Indigenous ways of knowing, within the confines of academia, are positioned outside of Western categories of knowledge systems and are not appreciated within the landscape of a university. This renders the academic scholarship as being all white, which denies how racialization plays out and the ways that racialization signifies the 'raced' body. This makes it easy for non-Indigenous scholars to not deal with the Indigenous body or Indigenous ways of being (Smith & Simpson 2012, 1-30).

I put my body on the line, knowing that it can be disturbing at times within the classroom when students resist my body, my voice and my humanness. As an agent for change within the sphere of education, I engage in dissection, wherein I lay bare all of my Indigenous human self and am never sure of what I will get back from students, or whether I am able to put myself together again. However, what is important in moving towards seeing my humanity in academia is the teaching of foundational knowledge that premises Indigenous studies as an intellectual project. Racialization, race and whiteness is enmeshed within a system's fundamental core to sets of socio-political relations and displays of power structures that affect racialized assemblages that constitute the Indigenous body. These power structures continue in contemporary times to exhibit notions of dispossession, exploitation and violence predicated on the concept of sovereignty and nationalistic, thematic ideals (Moreton-Robinson 2015; Smith & Simpson 2012; Weheliye 2014) of Australian sovereignty. I stress that white Australians must recognize and comprehend that their bodies are also 'raced'. They emanate white race privilege transfers in teaching spaces and inform their engagement with the intersections of race, racialization and white race privilege as they participate in the classroom (McIntosh 1990, 31-36; Tannoch-Bland 1998, 33-38).

The poignancy of understanding white race privilege borders on the contours of racialization and the institutional apparatuses that pride themselves and their citizens on an all-white nation. This has happened, firstly, through denying the existence of the first peoples in Australia, before the arrival of Europeans, by the fictitious concept of terra nullius, a designation that defined the acceptability of murdering and stealing lands. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015, 132-133) states "the implementation of enacting forms of techniques that subjugate ... a historic-political field constituted by certain elements, a myth of sovereignty." Moreton-Robinson further postulates that there is a belief that the first peoples of this country have become absorbed into the nation and exist as part of the imagination of the nation of Australia. The discourses transmitted link with the key ideas drawn from Weheliye (2014) and Wynter (1999, cited in McKittrick 2015, 1-89) about the theorization of race, what race is and how we, as Indigenous peoples, perform particular ways of being as 'raced bodies' that discipline our bodies in modern society. Challenging and disrupting the stereotypical, visual representations and language of racialization provide progressive understandings of *self* as sovereign, to consider how our bodies perform resistance strategies and counter narratives to break Australia's racialized version of us, to our own understanding and positioning of *self* as sovereign, an act of Indigenous humanness.

I insert the words to a rap to give credit to the role of teacher/lecturer and academic within the classroom context and how this instructs my teaching performance to engage in counter narratives and dismantling of the master's script.

It so Hip to be Black, it's so hip to be black, it is so **hip** to be black
 Apparently that's a fact, white is the new black
 Intimidation, confrontation, condemnation, humiliation,
 Politeness of whiteness let me give you a witness
 To a policy of segregation denial of the human nation
 Racialization and categorization to put this in context
 Get this, blood quantum to define a peoples, a RACE: it's a Fuckin disgrace
 Full-blood, half-caste, quarter-caste, Fairer,
 And darker skin, the mixed breed. Please stand up the "true aborigine"

The inception, the Act and process of public discourse deceptive
 Unfettered semantics of how the right to free speech where anything goes
 Incite hatred, instead an offence makes no sense, incensed with the
 Shame of naming strands of blood definitions where exemption
 From Indigenous belonging, the presumptuous attitude
 Played out through generations and generations of dominant "gratitude"?
 Privilege through the propaganda of racial reality, its insanity
 The obsession, conception and the ploy of the Right to deny
 Us our identity, I mean what the hell, sell our soul to justify
 So-called freedom of speech, whose freedom and whose speech
 Rules a nation divides a peoples, but of course, only the powerful
 Can provoke racial discrimination to have voice of popular
 Debate it's a sham, a travesty, a farce, a parody, a joke whiter, blacker
 Heck what next, wait a minute, true fact is that the question was challenged
 And dusted busted gutsy, stand up those who know that they are simply
 Hip because they are BLACK. (Faye Rosas Blanch 2012)

Conclusion

In concluding this article, I argue that racialized assemblages occur in numerous ways and engaging in teaching Indigenous studies is performative. The configurations of assemblages within teaching spaces affect the performance and how the Indigenous body is perceived. My body carries its own racialized assemblages into university spaces and contributes to the relationship between students, colleagues and other non-Indigenous staff members. Through repositioning colonial, white-dominant teaching spaces into black/Indigenous space, the performance and visual representation of teaching allow for the intersection of identities, policies and power, both temporally and spatially, to construct deeper learning where such spaces provide intellectual debate for understanding the importance of Indigenous scholars, knowledge production and the relationships built. I argue for a greater awareness of how teaching spaces, as contact zones, impact the Indigenous and non-Indigenous bodies and I call for a process of decolonization that engages with Indigenous ways of knowing; to offer spaces for new conversations, new discourses and new understandings to emerge relating to 'being' as a praxis of humanness.

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