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Critical Indigenous Studies in the Classroom: Exploring 'the Local' using Primary Evidence

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Abstract

Part of the mandate of most Indigenous Studies faculties/departments is to critically examine the historical and contemporary relationship between Aboriginal and settler societies. However, the multidisciplinary of Indigenous Studies scholars and scholarship means that such critical examination can and does vary widely by institution and even between faculty members within the same institution. This article positions three pedagogical choices—studying 'the local', the use of primary evidence and the use of discourse analysis—as promoting the integration of disciplinary methodological differences while imbuing Indigenous Studies with a distinctive disciplinary trajectory. Moreover, I demonstrate how a particular emphasis on local Indigenous/settler relationships denaturalises the structures of racism anchoring the *white privilege* characterising power relations in colonial nation states like Canada.

Introduction

This article stems from a change I made in the way I taught my Indigenous Studies courses. It is rooted in my growing frustration with the kinds of knowledge and critical thinking tools my students were *not* leaving my classes (and their degrees) with. As in most Indigenous Studies courses in most Indigenous Studies academic units, students at the Faculty of Native Studies at the University of Alberta¹ are required to write a formal research paper. For most of my first five years of teaching, students wrote essays on a wide array of topics (pre-approved through an essay proposal). Typical of all courses, essays ranged in quality, but what I found particularly exasperating was not the dearth of their analysis or their lack of writing lucidity. Rather, I realised that I had unwittingly created a *grammar of intelligibility* (to position the issue in baldly Foucauldian terms) through which, on the one hand, a distressingly large cross-section of my students (re)produced constructions of racism that positioned it as both aberrational and highly visible and on the other, an equally distressing cross-section had begun to 'de-empiricise' their papers through an excessive reliance on Wikipedia and textbooks from other courses, as opposed to journal articles, book chapters and (god forbid) entire books.

In the context of attempting to correct these two structural flaws, encouraged by my evaluative schemes, this article tethers Michel Foucault's poststructural observations (Foucault 1970; 1972; 1981; Hall 1995) around the issue of discourse analysis with various discussions which I loosely frame under the umbrella of critical Indigenous studies to explore how I attempted to introduce to students racism as normalised, pervasive and relational.

Regarding the latter issue, I use Australian Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson's discussions about 'white possession' (2001; 2003a; 2003b; 2004; 2006) as a vehicle for exploring the ways in which white privilege has been both made invisible and, insofar as it remains so, rendered effectively outside of most students' analytical toolbox for understanding the operation of the deep relationality of racism in contemporary Canadian society.

The article is broadly organised in five parts. Part one briefly sets out my original writing assignment guidelines and explains their pedagogical purpose. I explain how the structure of my assignments encouraged students to choose extreme examples of racism that, although legitimate, do not constitute its usual guise(s). I present several common thesis statements submitted by students as part of their major essays to demonstrate the effect of doing so. Parts two, three and four theorise the disciplinary problems with the original assignment guidelines, in the context of the following points: first, discussing the Indigenous Studies goal of uncovering the unacknowledged power of unearned but naturalised *white privilege* in the reproduction of contemporary colonialism in Canadian society; secondly, the utility of discourse analysis for challenging (and suspending the legitimacy of) these dominant, racialised representations of Indigeneity and the additional utility of *primary evidence* in doing so; and thirdly, emphasising *local issues* as a particularly effective way of laying bare this privilege and for fostering what Fiona Nicoll has referred to as a 'retrospective consciousness' (2004, para. 29). In part five, I present the new guidelines to explain how these theoretical issues play themselves out in student essays by several examples of relevant thesis statements. I will begin, however, with an explanation of why my initial formal writing requirements had encouraged students to explore extreme, rather than mundane, examples of racism.

Formal writing assignments: from colonialism to white possession

Before

The Faculty of Native Studies at the University of Alberta has been in existence, in one form or another, for several decades. During that time, the unit has been headed by a variety of scholars with divergent expertise and professional backgrounds. However, our current complement of professors is largely social science oriented in approach and disciplinary 'pitch'. In a fairly recent curriculum review, we decided to make formal writing assignments mandatory in all relevant classes,ⁱ which now contain essay requirements of various lengths. These essays are research papers in all respects and require multiple, peer reviewed sources. My introductory Contemporary Native Issues course contained a formal writing assignment consisting of a 3000 word essay. Near the beginning of term, students were required to submit a 300 word proposal containing four broad guidelines/orienting questions:

1. What is the purpose of your paper?
2. How does this topic link to a culture of capitalism?ⁱⁱ
3. Does your paper focus on an issue affecting Aboriginal people after 1969?
4. Does your paper focus on a Canadian Aboriginal issue?

Question 1 was meant to encourage students to think broadly about their empirical topic, while getting them to focus on taking a specific position. Question 2 was to encourage students to think more conceptually about how they planned to position the power of capitalism/colonialism in the constitution of modern Indigeneity. In other words, how did their essay address what it means to be Aboriginal while living in a culture of capitalism? Taken together, these first two questions comprised the essay's thesis statement. Questions 3 and 4 were added the second time I taught the course as a way to make the marking more uniform.

Students were allowed to choose an empirical topic of their choice but their conceptual parameters made comparison across these varied empirical contexts more straightforward.

I have taught two major kinds of introductory courses: one a broad, contemporary course for Native Studies majors and the other an historical and contemporary survey course for non-Native Studies majors who wish to take a Native Studies course. For the first five years, students wrote essays that fell broadly into two major categories.ⁱⁱⁱ The first included general issues that were thought to impact all Indigenous people in Canada. While many of their essays were interesting and well-written, they almost invariably lapsed into overly broad generalisations which required little investigative effort and which tended to reproduce dangerously simplistic stereotypes about 'the Aboriginals', 'the Natives' and even occasionally 'the Indians'. The second major category included topical choices either in the news during the course's timeframe or which displayed some of the more extreme examples of racism in Canadian society, such as the Oka Standoff and the Starlight Tours.^{iv}

My pedagogical concern with this second group of topics wasn't that they failed to represent examples of Canadian racism against Indigenous peoples. Rather, my concern was that students—even thoughtful ones—were unconsciously perpetuating the idea that racism is (*only*) aberrational or highly visible. This positioning is wholly at odds with how critical race theorists have theorised the unconscious *normality* of racism. That is to say, to the extent that Canadian society is racist, this racism is neither peripheral nor isolated; instead, it is normal and pervasive, and represents 'business as usual' (Delgado and Stefancic 2001, 6). It remains deeply embedded in our society's institutions, the day-to-day practices of our citizens, and the stories we tell ourselves for why people act as they do. So much so, in fact, that our ability to comprehend racism seems limited to those rare moments when it rears its head enough to shock the nation. Most of the time, however, we live lives that include an unconscious use of racism and racist practices but with little or no understanding of their harmful effects. This is not to suggest that extreme examples of racism are not 'racist', or that such incidents are of little pedagogical value. Rather, it is to suggest that such examples are not how racism *normally* operates.^v

Lacking an awareness of our racism is hardly distinctive; it is indicative of the views tacitly held by most Canadians, transmitted through our parents, peers and media as rational understandings about how the world works. That is, it operates as a form of 'common sense' and as such, sinks below the level of consciousness. Bourdieu (2000, 98) explains this to mean a:

stock of self-evidences shared by all which, within the limits of the social universe, ensures a primordial consensus on the meaning of the world, a set of tacitly accepted commonplaces which make confrontation, dialogue, competition and even conflict possible, and among which a special place must be reserved for the principles of classification...

Thus, most racism consists of the myriad words, phrases and private and public discourses uttered unthinkingly on a daily basis by even the most well intentioned people with no problematisation of their usage. Importantly, this is also what makes racism so hard to change: although we have not been explicitly 'taught' it, we use it unproblematically—indeed, largely unconsciously. We are thus often quite defensive when we are called into question on words or phrases that raise its spectre. Although I endorse such an understanding of racism (and will have more to say about this, below), my essay requirements had produced invisibility around the issues of the pervasive, but largely unconscious, normality of racism.

In addition to reproducing racism as aberrational and highly visible, however, student essays fell into a second, equally troubling, category.

Students—again, even good ones— were producing excessively general, ‘de-empirical’ analyses about any number of seemingly random issues relating to residential school abuse, the over-representation of Natives in the criminal justice system, or the healthcare or child welfare system. Naturally, the first couple of years I blamed this on poor high school training. However, after four or five sections of classes over a period of several year produced similarly structured papers, it appeared that my essay guidelines were more to blame than I had thought. That is, I had insufficiently signposted the essay requirements such that, left to their own devices, my students uniformly collapsed the enormously differentiated experiences of Indigenous people into single, dominant narratives about ‘capitalism’ or ‘the Canadian state’.^{vi} That is to say, the analytical categories I provided them encouraged them to trade actual analysis for accepted platitudes, and empirical specificity for generalised, textbook truisms. Indeed, introductory textbooks (not to mention Wikipedia) became favoured referencing sources.

To give two examples of the ‘over generalised’ and ‘aberrational’ themes, a typical thesis statement about the former might look something like: ‘This paper purports to examine the factors that lead to lower education levels, potential consequence on individuals and communities in relation to a culture of capitalism and finally it will discuss ways in which education levels can be improved’ (thesis statement #1, 2005). This thesis statement is both clear and concise but it fails to explain the variation in education policy across Canada.^{vii} Additionally, it did not actually examine any policy; rather, it used peer-reviewed sources that had already funneled this analysis. A second example: ‘The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the degradation of women by Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals throughout history and policy in Canada’ (thesis statement #2, 2005): again, an interesting, well written and even timely topic, but one which contained very little discussion of the specific aspects that govern or impact Indigenous women in general, let alone those in a more local context.

Alternatively, students chose to write on ‘extreme’ topics that stood out to them because of their intensity and/or perceived rarity. For example:

In this paper, I will examine the aspects of the capitalist and colonial system in Canada that make the use of direct action, particularly roadblocks, in the course of land and resource conflicts an option for Aboriginal people. As well, I will highlight the ways in which the *Indian Act* historically discouraged and hindered Native people from using the legal system, the ‘sanctioned’ option for conflict resolution in Canada, as a forum for conflict resolution ... The Oka Crisis of 1990 will be examined as a case study (thesis statement #3, 2005).

This student discussed the historical context within which Oka can be understood but learned nothing about similar situations (though on a smaller scale) happening in his or her own city or province of study. More troubling, however, the student was able to position the Oka Standoff as a ‘real’ example of Canadian racism/colonialism. In doing so, he or she was able to (perhaps unconsciously) disavow his or her own complicity in racism (‘I wasn’t there, this has nothing to do with me’). Understanding racism in this manner is at once a *mis*understanding of an important facet of how racism normally ‘works’. These kinds of essay topics effectively effaced the extent to which we were all implicated in and benefited from (or suffered in) the dispossession of Indigenous peoples and the white privilege that both precipitated and marked it. Several critical Indigenous studies theorists, whom I turn to now, have discussed the issue of white privilege with particular sophistication.

Native studies: denaturalising white privilege and demonstrating white possession

Given the relative newness of the discipline of Indigenous Studies, we should not be surprised that commentators have imbued it with numerous meanings, agendas, goals, protocols and prohibitions.

In the context of this discussion, however, I want to focus on the principles usefully explicated in the work of the critical scholarship in Canada and abroad, which is centrally concerned with laying bare the normalised and unearned *white privilege* within which students learn about Indigenous issues and many academics write about them.

White privilege is the flipside of racism and emphasising it reveals the deeply relational character of colonial hierarchies. The effacement of white privilege in Canadian scholarship obscures this relationality. Likewise, the tendency of students to focus on the aberrational and highly visible aspects of racism allows them to locate themselves ontologically outside of it. In doing so, they effectively 'recoup their innocence'.

Australian Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson argues that 'whiteness' represents an 'invisible norm against which other races are judged in the construction of identity, representation, decision-making, subjectivity, nationalism, knowledge production and the law' (2006, 388). More materially, she argues elsewhere how, in operating both ideologically and as an imbricated practice, whiteness 'confers privilege and dominance in power relations between white[s] ... and Indigenous [peoples]' (2001, xxi), just as it marginalises. This 'conferred privilege and dominance' of whiteness has been echoed more locally in a North American context by various writers demonstrating how *status quo* relations tend to conceal the very racialised hierarchies of privilege and marginalisation necessary to sustain them.

Perhaps among the earliest and still most well-known articulations of the power of white privilege of North American society includes the frank discussion of Peggy McIntosh (1988), who famously argued that contemporary white privilege operated like an 'invisible weightless knapsack' of unearned advantages that whites unthinkingly drew upon in their daily lives to maintain or increase their social position, all the while misrecognising their position as the result of their own hard work. Olson (2002, 512) argues similarly that 'the simultaneous sense of equality and privilege that marks whiteness persists as one of today's most formidable challenges to a more democratic society'.

Joyce Green (2006) argues that these unearned advantages that whites draw upon are accompanied by the classic liberal ideology of meritocracy, in which many whites think that because they 'made out okay', anyone (like Aboriginal people) who does not must possess some kind of individual deficiency, be it cultural (i.e. cultural differences which prevent work ethic) or structural (i.e. lack of education). Peters (2000) argues in fact that Indigenous people—particularly those of us in urban areas—have long been constructed as problems to be overcome rather than partners to be dealt with, particularly as we have *become* more urbanised. In this sense, white privilege in Canada—as in all colonial nation states—is dependent upon congealed relations of *structural racism* which differentially benefit white people, but who, by virtue of their privileged place in the hierarchy, remain largely unaware of its existence and thus see social relations as 'just the way things are'.

Because the effects of racism are unintended by individuals, and because most people in the dominant community are well intentioned and truly believe that their privilege is solely the result of their merit and diligence, the existence of intentional systemic patterns of discrimination and privilege is denied by most members of the settler population (Green 2006, 592).

The issue of intentionality (or lack thereof) is an important one for understanding the invisibility of white privilege and the widespread understandings of what racism is and how it operates.

As discussed earlier, like all liberal nation states, Canada tends to position racism as irrational—as both aberrational and, the rare times it happens, highly visible. Borrowing from the tenets of critical race theory, however, a critical Indigenous studies pedagogy must be committed to

revealing its pervasive normality. Indeed, if racism constitutes 'business as usual', so does unacknowledged and unearned white privilege: the latter cannot exist without the former. The problem, of course, is that neither is constituted as such (harkening back to our earlier discussion about myths of meritocracy). Thus, critical Indigenous studies is important because it denaturalises taken-for-granted, 'whitestream' assumptions that constitutively shape the social relations of power in Canada. Additionally, it seeks to unmask the racialised/normalised relations of power that reproduce these assumptions.

As I will go on to argue, a particularly effective methodology for unmasking and denaturalising such assumptions and discursive and material relations involves the use of elementary discourse analysis.

From 'thing' to 'construct': the utility of discourse analysis

By discourse analysis, I am referring to a form of social analysis rooted largely in a Foucauldian tradition of *denaturalising* concepts (Foucault 1972). Discourses constitute a form of power/knowledge that produce meaning through communication and which operate according to certain rules of formation that render some statements legitimate or 'true' and others nonsensical (Foucault 1972; 1981). In *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972, 49), Foucault makes a point familiar to many post-structuralists, that discourses need to be understood as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak'. That is, the ways we speak about things does not simply or straightforwardly *represent* a certain understanding of social reality: it *produces* it.

Hall (1995, 205) explains that discourses represent topics in a particular way and as such, knowledge is produced about that topic and gets used to influence social practices as though those representations and accompanying knowledges were 'real'. And while this is not to suggest that, for example, a rock would cease to exist if we stopped calling it a rock (although I note that Pluto is no longer the rock it once was), the social significance we attribute to concepts, the ways we talk about them and the way we link them to other concepts, powerfully shapes our understandings of their meaning and uses. Indeed, the myth of meritocracy I discussed earlier exerts a powerful impact on how many white people think about and understand how the world works and in this context, how they misrecognise their own privilege.

Insofar as discourses constitute particular forms of representation:

[d]iscourse analysis ... denaturalizes the concepts ... upon which it shines its light: it shows them to be just that, concepts, rather than things occurring naturally and from outside, as it were, in the life of societies. By showing concepts to be social/discursive constructs, this procedure delegitimizes them; or at least, within the confines of analytical space, it *suspends legitimacy* (Andersen and Denis 2003, 375, emphasis in original).

One of the more powerful ways that a concept's legitimacy may be suspended is by revealing that it possesses history and social context. Establishing this is important for understanding how the contemporary critique of existing social relations is possible and why it is important. Discourse analysis has perhaps been especially useful in the veritable cottage industry of critiques of colonialism which have sprung up over the past forty or so years. Anticipated in Canada by such works as Harold Adams' *Prisons of Grass* (1975), Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* (1973) and Harold Cardinal's *The Unjust Society* (1969), the most widely felt impact of discourse analysis on critiquing colonialist social structures is probably Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978).

Said's analysis lays in demonstrating the ways in which the diversity of cultures, countries, linguistic and phrenological groups tied together as 'Orientals' were rendered uniform in their

difference from European norms of humanity. Said demonstrated that, despite the absurdity of many of the knowledges about the Oriental, the notion nonetheless retained a 'discursive consistency' which operated as 'a form of cultural praxis, a system of opportunities for making statements about the Orient' (1978, 273). In this way, Said (338–90) argues, one discursive system—that of 'the West'—was given precedence and thus exercised hegemony over that exercised by 'others'.

Of course, all of this can be a bit heady for an introductory course. Thus, in the context of introducing discourse analysis at a lower level, one can do worse than to employ Stuart Hall's useful reconstruction of Foucauldian- and Said-inspired discourse analysis to emphasise three related propositions as an introductory methodology:

a) *Discourses constitute ways of representing certain subjects or topics* and as such are arbitrary and contingent. This is often a difficult ontological position for students to find themselves in, since, even when pushed to think, they rely on calcified scripts which emphasise the Canadian state's innate 'goodness' and deep tolerance of racial and ethnic diversity.

b) *Knowledge is constructed according to those representations*—dominantly (but not only) in the educational curricula, which tends to produce scripts like that just discussed.

c) *Policy decisions are created which rely upon and thus reflect this knowledge* (in Canada, for example, the *Indian Act* was the source of fundamentally damaging policy decisions which differentially affected those coded as 'Indians').

These three steps shaped the analytical construction of student assignments: to take a piece of government documentation (for example), suspend the legitimacy of its categories, then to poke holes in it and suggest alternative formulations which relied on different (and in many cases, oppositional) understandings of Aboriginality. The use of primary evidence was particularly important in this context because it provided ready-made discourses to analyse, it allowed students to study local issues for which no academic research had been carried out and, as I discuss further below, it required students to locate their own positioning with these broader social relations (or at least, that was the intent).

Much of my work and that of numerous friends and colleagues is carried out using one form or another of discourse analysis such that nothing discussed so far necessarily makes this Indigenous Studies-oriented. That is to say, I could conceivably carry out my own research in any number of academic disciplines or departments. Moreover, Native Studies is experiencing the multiple personality disorder endured by all nascent disciplines; in my own unit, we hold long (seemingly interminable, actually) and sometimes raucous discussions about what Native Studies is and what its boundaries should entail. In many cases, these discussions are enormously complicated by the gaps and differences in disciplinary training, gender, race and generation of our faculty. In the next section, I will explain in more detail the utility of discourse analysis for Native Studies pedagogy in the specific analytical context of 'the local' as a particularly effective means of building what Fiona Nicoll (2004, 29) has elsewhere referred to as a 'retrospective consciousness'.

Native Studies and 'the local'

Let me begin by stating that my focus on 'the local' is not at the expense of national or international issues or links. Indeed, part of my own research examines increases in national and international Indigenous organisations' 'statistical literacy' over the past thirty years. However, I have found 'the local's' pedagogical value for understanding and uncovering white privilege and

denaturalising the conditions under which that privilege is sustained, extremely useful. A majority of my students are white, middle-class youth with little knowledge of the interrelationships between Aboriginal and settler societies and usually no knowledge of the way they and their ancestors have benefited from these relationships. Thus, as important as it is for students to understand the impact of colonialism on the disruption and attempted destruction of Indigenous forms of sociality, it is equally important to understand who perpetrated those disruptions and destructions and more importantly, who benefits from them.

My introductory Native Studies course has proven useful for determining gaps and blind spots in the way that students analyse the social world and my specific use of 'the local' especially so.

In a nutshell, local issues effectively reduce the ability of students to position racism and privilege as 'someplace else'. Colonialism, racism and privilege are not only intimately tied together, they are part of a set of relations that we are all implicated in and for which we all bear responsibility. Requiring the examination of local issues brings this to the fore in a way less likely in situations where they study the far north or particularly intense situations like those which have unfolded in Ontario and Quebec (particularly, but not only, the Oka Standoff in 1990).

Another way to explain this is to say that focusing on local issues is a useful way, as Nicoll (2004) succinctly explain it, for non-Indigenous people to 'own' their relationships with Indigenous people. Writing in an Australian context and speaking as a non-Indigenous person, Nicoll (2004, para. 27) argues that '[t]he invasiveness of patriarchal white sovereignty in this place has always deprived Indigenous Australians of the opportunity to decide whether or not to enter into a relationship with us'. On the other hand, non-Indigenous students are privileged in this relationship and as such, are often able not only to dismiss or enter into such relationships at their leisure, they can choose when and how to do so.

Nicoll argues further that the problem is precisely that non-Indigenous people 'often come to awareness only when Indigenous subjects are able to demonstrate the negative *effects* of our representations or actions' (2004: para. 29). In this sense, we can do worse as educators than to build within our students a 'retrospective consciousness' that seeks to skirt the (always looming) individualised guilt that seems to accompany this consciousness-raising in favour of a collective—and public—discussion. Raising an awareness of the privilege whites are born into by virtue of their whiteness and fostering a concomitant sense of responsibility they bear by virtue of that privilege, should constitute an important element of the mission of critical Indigenous studies. Examining local situations focuses these issues in a manner that produces an effective intellectual discomfort and hopefully, opens new possibilities for thinking and acting.

In the interests of building a critical awareness of white privilege and of critiquing liberal constructions of racism, I substantially redesigned the formal writing assignment requirements in all of my classes to include two phases (and here again I offer an introductory Native Studies course evaluative scheme as an example). Phase one consisted of a paper proposal containing three components:

- a) A 300-word paper proposal that addresses a topic both *contemporary* and *local*. The course outline explains the local focus by emphasising the fact that 'at the very least, you ... will leave this class with a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the Aboriginal peoples of this geographical area'.
- b) A five-source peer reviewed annotated bibliography containing a two-sentence summary of the material and a one-sentence explanation of how the student intends to use the source in the paper.

c) A five-source primary evidence bibliography which consisted of any websites, organisational brochures, court cases, newspaper accounts, archival documents, etc. the students think would help them validate their theoretical argument, also containing a two-sentence summary of the material and a one-sentence explanation of its proposed use in the paper (introductory Native Studies Course Outline, 2006/2007: 3 of 8).

Phase two of the assignment included the formal written paper which required the use of all the sources listed in phase one, as well as three sources from the course text and/or course pack (this overall amount of sources has created an enduring bitterness among students). In that context, students could analyse any *local* relationship between Aboriginal people and the Canadian state they found interesting. In a subsequent essay 'explanation supplement' I asked students to think about their topic in the context of choosing a particular example of Aboriginal *representation* and then examine its historical and social context to see what, if any, gaps and silences characterised its current manifestation. In this way I introduced to the students an elementary form of discourse analysis and explained its importance both for social analysis generally and Native Studies-oriented analysis more specifically. The results have been spectacular.

For example, while previous papers (again, even the good ones)^{viii} tended towards highly visible, non-local events, these ones showed the benefit of a sustained discourse analysis of local issues. For example, one student wrote:

This paper will focus on the relationship between Aboriginal people and the Canadian criminal justice system (CJS). More specifically it will look at the manner in which traditional healing practices have been incorporated into the CJS. With a focus on local initiatives, this paper will discuss the Tsuu' Tina First Nation Court, Stan Daniels Healing Center, and Pe sakastew Center. The programs themselves will be examined, as will the framework within which they are incorporated. It is the author's belief, and the thesis of this paper, that although such initiatives might appear revolutionary and emancipatory in nature, they remain couched within a discourse of assimilation. This assimilationist discourse is maintained by allowing healing practices to operate *only* within the framework of mainstream justice policies. As such, dominant ideals are both maintained and reinforced, limiting the scope and effectiveness of traditional healing practices in the CJS (thesis statement #4, 2006).

This paper is impressive not because the student engaged in something local but rather, because he or she did the legwork to actually dig into the 'on the ground' policies and programs which comprise these initiatives, rather than simply taking an academic's word for it. Indeed, this particular student even went so far as to provide a legitimate critique of several peer-reviewed sources that had failed to take into account explicit policies. A second paper examined Alberta educational initiatives geared towards Aboriginal students living in the province:

Recent statistics from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada report that almost 40% of treaty students attended provincial schools in Alberta. (Bell, 25) Though all of Alberta Learning's recommendations have value in the context of improved learning outcomes, it is the two recommendations regarding 'cultural programming' and 'governance' that we will follow from 'document to delivery' (thesis statement #5, 2006).

This student, then, examined the 'gap' between representation and reality of the discourse put out by our province's post-secondary department, concluding that:

The discourses regarding 'First Nations involvement' and 'governance' remain a representation of Western-based practices, and hence, are effective in the power these

government documents hold over the 'appearance' of improved educational opportunities, but not in their implementation. The 'voice' of parents, elders, and Native children remains a mute, symbolic gesture (student paper #5, page 10 of 14).

The essays written under these new guidelines are more empirically nuanced and more theoretically sophisticated than their predecessors. They have benefitted me, as well, in the sense that I have gained a wealth of knowledge about local Indigenous issues and situations that, despite having taught in this general area for more than a decade, I knew little or nothing about. Moreover, I admit that I take no small pleasure from receiving essays from conservative students who, though they disagree with me on nearly every issue in the course, nonetheless approached their essay with a willing spirit using the methodological tools provided. As I explain in the conclusion, however, there is still one (tough) nut in all of this that I have been unable to crack, and that is, getting non-Indigenous students to admit (let alone reflect on) their privilege.

Conclusion

At the outset of this article, I intended to explain how the recent changes in the formal writing requirements for my classes contributed to the ongoing production of a critical Indigenous studies field. Having now written this article, I'm not sure whether I have actually accomplished this goal. Some students have enjoyed the essay guidelines; others have complained loudly (and formally through course evaluations) about the increased workload of my essay requirements. I suppose one thing I can take away from this is that the new guidelines seem to have produced an increased *investment* from students on both sides of the rail, whether they enjoyed the assignments or not. I will happily take this rather than indifference most days of the week.

Overall, the most difficult part of this process remains getting non-Indigenous students to think about how they benefit from these social relations and getting Indigenous ones to think about colonialism in a less binary fashion. Regarding the issue of benefitting, students appear to have simply transferred whatever critique existed from the course's earlier focus on 'capitalism' to whatever set of discourses they chose to critique. That is, discourse has become the new culprit, just as 'capitalism' had in previous iterations of the course. Students have yet to come to terms with the responsibility *they* possess in these relationships, institutions and discourses. Most frustrated are the working-class white students, who do not see any form of privilege that accrues to them by virtue of their whiteness (nor do they write about it).

I do realise that only so much can be accomplished in three hours a week in the face of students who have lived for two decades in a city/province/territory/country in which such issues have been largely (if not totally) effaced. Thus, with Nicoll (2004), perhaps it is enough at an introductory level to get students to think collectively and publicly about their relationships with Indigenous peoples, rather than individually, which tends toward privacy, guilt and inevitably, bitterness. While Native Studies as a discipline has sought access and convey Native perspectives, to conduct research that benefits Native peoples and/or community and has applied a wide methodological lens in doing so (see Innes 2010), we have not focused enough on the *relationality* of Indigenous/settler relationships and on the manner in which 'whiteness' impacts our Indigeneity. Asking students to denaturalise local Indigenous/settler relationships represents an important step toward combining traditional aspects of North American Indigenous Studies with Australian based ones in that it asks them both to understand the historical context of these relationships *and* their position within it.

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ⁱ This did not, for example, include such classes as Introductory or Advanced Cree Language.

ⁱⁱ The course was specifically designed to examine 'what it means to be Aboriginal while living in a culture of capitalism'. In addition to a course pack, the class text used was Richard Robbins, *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism*. This past year I removed this from the course, as the cost of the textbook was becoming prohibitive, and moved toward a more explicit discussion of discourse analysis. However, the basic tenets of requiring students to use primary evidence and explore local relations have remained in place.

ⁱⁱⁱ I should point out that for the past seven years all students have been required to email copies of their essays to me. This facilitates their marking (using the MS Word 'review' function) and it appears to prevent them using parts of their essays in other classes than mine, and vice versa. Moreover, it also means I have a stockpile of all the essays, which accords my argument slightly more empirical stability than it might otherwise possess. Additionally, I have contacted each individual student whose essay I have used here for permission to cite their work.

^{iv} The Oka Standoff refers to the conflict between Mohawks of Kahnawake and Kanasatake outside of Montreal, Quebec and various levels of the Canadian state (see York and Pindera, *People of the Pines* for a discussion of these events). The Starlight Tours refers to an informal process by which city police officers in Saskatoon drove 'troublesome' Native detainees to the edge of the city and dumped them out of the car, sometimes stripping them of their coats and shoes. Several frozen bodies of Native men had been found over the past decade (see Reber and Renaud 2005).

^v One of the reviewers argued that white privilege is not always invisible; he or she positioned violent incidents of racism as examples of whiteness 'consciously and viciously reassert[ing] itself as it attempts to regain the centre'. I agree with this argument, but, at least in a Canadian context, I do not see this as exemplifying the *normality* of racism. Along these lines, the same reviewer argued that as much was to be learned from such extreme examples as more quotidian ones. Again, I agree in principle with this argument. For me, however, discussions of racism in Canada begin and end with such extreme examples such that many students use it as a way to 'recover their innocence' by disavowing such extreme acts, along the line of: 'Well, I don't do—or believe—in *that*, so I am not racist'.

^{vi} For example, students wrote about '500 years of colonisation' despite the fact that in parts of what we now call western Canada they never encountered Europeans, let alone colonialism, for the first 300 of that 500 years; likewise, students wrote about the 'inherently nomadic' character of traditional Indigenous societies, despite their diversity; or the power of spirituality for 'Aboriginals', in which a lack of spirituality evidenced the internalisation of colonisation.

^{vii} This is particularly stark in Canada, since each of the ten provinces has control over its educational policies. This makes for a wide diversity of educational policy practices.

^{viii} As thesis statement examples, I chose the top five per cent of papers (by mark) for the 'before' and 'after' assignments.