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The epistemology that maintains white race privilege, power and control of Indigenous studies and Indigenous peoples' participation in universities

Bronwyn Fredericks

Abstract

This article represents my attempt to turn the gaze and demonstrate how Indigenous Studies is controlled in some Australian universities in ways that witness Indigenous peoples being further marginalised, denigrated and exploited. I have endeavoured to do this through sharing an experience as a case study. I have opted to write about it as a way of exposing the problematic nature of racism, systemic marginalisation, white race privilege and racialised subjectivity played out within an Australian higher education institution and because I am dissatisfied with the on-going status quo. In bringing forth analysis to this case study, I reveal the relationships between oppression, white race privilege and institutional privilege and the epistemology that maintains them. In moving from the position of being silent on this experience to speaking about it, I am able to move from the position of object to subject and to gain a form of liberated voice (hooks 1989:9). Furthermore, I am hopeful that it will encourage others to examine their own practices within universities and to challenge the domination that continues to subjugate Indigenous peoples.

Introduction

Indigenous Studies in Australia and indeed the world has witnessed a growth across all levels of education over the past twenty years (Grieves 2008; Gunstone 2008; Moreton-Robinson 2005a). The term Indigenous Studies within this paper refers to content which encapsulates Australian Aboriginal Studies and/or Torres Strait Islander Studies (Nakata 2006: 265) and studies that may include references to Indigenous peoples in other geographic localities. Once located within anthropology and history, Indigenous Studies may now be found, taught and researched within all faculties in a university and across numerous disciplines including health, education, politics, law, geography, environmental

science and business (Moreton-Robinson 2005a). It is now a cross-disciplinary endeavour and seemingly is a site of collection and redistribution of knowledge about Indigenous people (Brady 1997; Nakata 2006). Gunstone in his recent discussion paper on Indigenous Studies explains that in the current climate Australian institutions are:

urged that the teaching of Australian Indigenous Studies must involve Indigenous people in curriculum development and delivery of Australian Indigenous Studies; this involvement should not just occur for the purpose of increasing the number and diversity of the voices heard, but rather should also occur to address issues of power, governance and control of what is being studied and taught (2008: xxi).

Martin Nakata focusing on Indigenous scholarly involvement within Indigenous Studies, states that “Underpinning Indigenous academic involvement in Indigenous Studies is a definite commitment to Indigenous people first and foremost, not to the intellectual or academic issues alone” (2006: 266). In other words Indigenous people must be involved in Indigenous Studies and the programs must address Indigenous peoples’ issues and the systemic power inequalities and white hegemony in the academy. Indigenous people have been involved at a number of universities where there are initiatives to embed Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum (Hart 2003; Nakata 2004; Phillips 2003; Phillips and Lampert 2005). There have additionally been on-going discussions and forums, workshops and conference sessions on the colonising practices of western research methodologies and the call for Indigenous methodologies which challenge the imperial basis of western knowledge and the images of Indigenous ‘Other’ (Smith 2005; 1999). In response to these discussions, presentations and papers, Aileen Moreton-Robinson (Queensland University of Technology) and Maggie Walter (University of Tasmania) have developed a Postgraduate Master-class Program in Indigenous Research Methodologies that moves beyond critiques of Western research paradigms to defining and explaining Indigenous methodologies that are accountable to Indigenous communities. The Master-class was offered in 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009.ⁱ The suggestions and strategies put forward for Indigenous Studies and the on-going discussions across numerous Australian universities have also been coupled with the development of official university documents in the form of Reconciliation Statements, Welcome to Country or Acknowledgement to Country offerings, Indigenous recruitment or employment strategies and university wide anti-racism and anti-discrimination policies and procedures.

With all of this activity in universities in terms of official documents, one could be lead to believe that there has been a dramatic change in how Indigenous Studies, Indigenous epistemologies and Indigenous peoples are regarded. How is it then that, being an Indigenous person within the academy can be explained by Phillips as an “on-going struggle against colonial domination” (2003: 3) and described by Miranda as “a heartbreaking endeavour” (2003: 344)? Miranda in discussing the position of Indigenous academics in the United States of America states that some have become:

disgusted and exhausted by the constant battles; some have graduated with degrees only to find that non-Native scholars fill many of the positions in Native Studies; others have simply turned their tremendous gifts and energies in other directions, discounting the university as a place with potential to make a difference (2003: 344).

Her position resonates with the words of Hart, an Indigenous Australian, when he states that our lectures are “about unpacking and exorcising the everyday, garden variety racisms that the majority of white Australians bring consciously and unconsciously to learning” (2003: 13) and that we find ourselves increasingly “in ideological wars where fidelity to the struggle is being tested by mostly neo-conservative non-Aboriginal notions of liberation” (2003: 14). Others such as Phillips (2003) also see universities as sites of growth and change for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Personally, even though I know that our experiences as Indigenous people within universities often reflect the experiences we have as Indigenous people in broader society, I still get surprised and angry when it is other academics who espouse notions of justice and equity with whom we experience tension and conflict in asserting our rights and cultural values.

In this paper I demonstrate how the racism and the devaluing of Indigenous people is less bloody than in earlier Australian history but it is still perpetuated by non-Indigenous people with privilege and power, including academics who have control of Indigenous Studies and who can demonstrate an understanding of what hooks terms “book knowledge” (1994: 16). In particular, I explore how social control and cultural dominance operate, and are deployed in inter-racial relations and subject positions within universities which continue to marginalise and oppress Indigenous peoples. This will be done through presenting an experience as a case study and analysing it utilising critical race theory and whiteness studies. I wish to name my experience and raise objection to the practices as described in this paper in an attempt to move from the position of being silent to speaking about it in an

attempt to interrupt white privilege and to reject the paradigm of control and certainty (White and Sakiestewa 2003). I seek to move from the position of object to subject and to gain a form of liberated voice (hooks 1989). I encourage others to examine their own practices within universities because as Miheuah asks “if we do not take charge and create strategies for empowerment, who will?” (2003: 326).

Setting the Scene for ‘Inclusion’

In September 2005 I was invited to join an academic panel that would review an Australian university’s courses in the field of Indigenous Studies. Initially I said yes to the invitation thinking that it was a respectful recognition of what I could bring to the review and that it was a genuine gesture of inclusion. The following week I received a letter (26th September 2005) thanking me for accepting the invitation and information relating to the membership of the review panel; a schedule for the two day face-to-face meeting (17-18th October 2005); copies of the course study guides and all the resource material; a copy of the university’s graduate attributes guidelines; and a copy of the university’s generic skills guidelines. Based on the materials and the terms of reference, I anticipated that it would take two to three days of preparation work if I was going to be actively engaged with the curriculum materials. This coupled with the two day workshop equalled approximately five days of work.

Pamela Croft then contacted me and made me aware that she was also invited to be a member of the review panel. Pamela is another Aboriginal woman and holds a Professional Doctorate in Visual Arts (DVA) (Croft 2003). Pamela advised me that the university was not offering any payment for our work nor was it prepared to offer any other benefits that they may have been able to offer. At that time I was not employed and was a registered recipient of unemployment benefits. I was living on \$220 a week. Pamela was self-employed. We could therefore not participate without personally incurring costs. The costs included declining other work that may have come up for me that week and travelling to and from that university. I made contact with the university-based academic who originally rang me and discussed the matter. I was told that no payment would be offered however, lunch, morning tea and afternoon tea would be provided each day and dinner on the first evening. I was made to feel like I was ‘money hungry’ despite gifting my time freely in the past to a number of universities for educational activities and events. I believed what was being asked of me in this instance was too great to ask without attributing a remunerative value or any form of reciprocity. That is, the gift that I was asked

to provide was too great to ask for considering that there was no developed relationship of hospitality or reciprocity (Kuokkanen 2003). From Kuokkanen's (2007) perspective it is also the continued taking for granted that limits the development of hospitality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. In this case, I believe I was being taken for granted.

Turning now to the other people listed as members of review team. Of the 10 names on the review team, 7 belonged to people working for the university conducting the review. From this, 6 were non-Indigenous people. This included 2 women, one with qualifications in education and the other qualifications in nursing and education. There were 4 men who collectively had qualifications in humanities, psychology and sociology. Among this 7, there was 1 Indigenous man who was working in the Indigenous centre of that university. He was also formally enrolled in a research higher degree program in that university and one of the non-Indigenous men on the review panel was one of his research supervisors. There was one Indigenous man from a university in another part of Australia also listed as a member of the review panel. He had qualifications in education and also worked within an Indigenous centre. There were additionally two Indigenous women's names on the list, Pamela's and mine.

In relation to the Indigenous Studies content, three of the non-Indigenous men had mixed responsibilities for the Indigenous courses/subjects/modules. That is, coordinating the major and individual courses or being a contact person. Two of these have received grant monies, researched and written in the field of Indigenous Studies. The Indigenous man on the review panel who was employed in that university does not have any responsibility for the Indigenous Studies courses and as already stated is based in the Indigenous centre of that university where Indigenous student support and Indigenous tertiary preparation programs are provided . This university is not, as explained by Nakata (2004), a place where Indigenous Studies programs are "Indigenous run, managed and taught" or "increasingly under the nominal authority or management of Indigenous academics" (5). It is as Hart (2003) asserts, "within the domain of mostly non-Aboriginal academics" (14) and where they can be in a "whole series of relationships with Aboriginality without ever losing the relative upper hand" (15). In this regard, this university has failed to do what Gunstone explains they need to do, "address issues of power, governance and control of what is being studied and taught" (2008: xxi). Lastly, as 7 of the people were employed and based within that university and their wages were covered by that university they were

remunerated while they participated in the review. Some in this group were also tenured employees.

Beginning to Dissect 'Inclusion'

Within this university, non-Indigenous people are remunerated to talk about Indigenous peoples, cultures, knowledges and histories and to gauge how much knowledge and understanding others will gain about Indigenous people. As such they hold what is considered 'legitimate knowledge' that underpins and maintains their power within the university (Alfred 2004; Henderson 2000; Martin 2003; Smith 1999). The people that clearly *owned* Indigenous Studies within this university were non-Indigenous people. As will be demonstrated, the processes of the review and the terms in which Pamela and I were invited to participate excluded us from holding any form of ownership, even temporarily and would lead to what Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2005b) would describe as a further investment in the white possession of Indigenous Studies in that university. Had I participated in the review under the conditions set down for me, I would have maintained the discrepancies of power and control between the paid non-Indigenous employees on the panel who talk about, write about and who are given authority to control information within the university about Indigenous people and the authentic Indigenous voices of Indigenous women who were offered no value other than what Gareau calls a "targeted resource" (2003: 197) and Khan terms a "native informant" (2005: 2025). We would be undertaking this position in order to legitimate the academic processes of non-Indigenous people. This amounts to a recycling of the colonial power gained through colonisation and a distinct difference between those with institutional privilege and those without. Indigenous Studies and Indigenous people are objectified and reproduced as objects within this context and are what Moreton-Robinson (2008) would term 'epistemological possessions' of the non-Indigenous people involved in the review and by this university. I also noted that what was spoken of, as a form of gift or thanks by the contact person, was food, which in fact resonated as a reminder of the past as if food rations were being offered from the coloniser to the colonised (Rintoul 1993). In short, my participation without payment would have affirmed "white domination and economic success at the cost of racial and economic oppression" (Moreton-Robinson 2005b: 26).

Through my telephone discussion with the university-based academic who had originally contacted me and on critical reflection, I knew that Pamela and I were being expected to give our knowledge, skills and abilities in Indigenous Studies for 'our people' based on

'goodwill', 'community service' and for 'white people who wanted to learn about us'. The university staff involved had based our possible participation on their epistemological framework of us as Indigenous women with doctoral postgraduate qualifications (Croft 2003; Fredericks 2003). Our possible participation was constructed through our Indigenous embodiment as racial and gendered objects and based on their desire for us to be the Indigenous 'Other' albeit with doctoral qualifications: the symbols of attainment and credentials of the academy. We were defined as both subject and object through our Aboriginality and offered a positioning of subjugation and subordination. From the review team's perspective this is what would add value to the review, provide legitimacy and advantage to the university and the non-Indigenous people. The non-Indigenous people were positioned as the experts and knowers and offered the on-going positioning of authority, legitimacy, domination and control. We were being asked to perform the role of female Indigenous academics, who, would be used to service the non-Indigenous academics in the same way that Indigenous people were required to service non-Indigenous people in colonial history (Huggins 1989; Rintoul 1993). As explained by Moreton-Robinson (2008) by placing us in such a service relationship also positions our Aboriginality "as an epistemological possession to service what it is not" (86) and to "obscure the more complex way that white possession functions socio-discursively through subjectivity and knowledge production" (86). It also diverts our attention from our own and community priorities to the priorities of the dominant society. The situation represented a form of identity politics that is rooted in Australian colonial history and that has contributed to the ongoing historical, legal and political racialisation and marginalisation of Indigenous peoples.

If it was only our 'authentic' Aboriginality that the university wanted, then, other Aboriginal women would have been asked, for example Elders, Traditional Owner representatives, leaders in specific fields or community members from the community in which that university is physically located. If it was our qualifications in terms of our disciplines then we would also not have been included because in other circumstances, staff in that university, have explained that I could not work within the field of Indigenous Studies, because I did not have an "academic pedigree" (Deloria 2004: 25) in Indigenous Studies. That is, I did not have undergraduate and/or postgraduate qualifications in Indigenous Studies. This is despite being recognised by the field by being granted a National and Medical Research Council (NH&MRC) Post-Doctoral Research Award in Indigenous Health (2006); a Visiting Fellow position in Indigenous Studies in another university

(2007); and membership of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) (2008).

Saying No

What I have been told in the past and the evidence associated with the review is riddled with contradictions considering that not all the people currently responsible for Indigenous Studies in that university have qualifications in the field of Indigenous Studies. Somehow in this instance and in others, non-Indigenous people are able to undertake a process of metamorphosis, which allows them to teach within the Indigenous Studies domain and maintain the artificial barriers that continue the racism in academia (Galvan 2003). All the while they are able to develop and grow their academic curriculum vitae's to prove their worthiness to teach Indigenous Studies. Moreover, the whole argument that 'you don't have to be one to teach Indigenous Studies' is negated when the issue of needing an Indigenous person arises for the purposes of equity, cultural diversity, representation, to sit on a committee, be a resource to assist in connecting students to community groups, or in this case to be a member of a review panel (Deloria 2004; Mihesuah 2004). In this there is a difference between authority and authenticity and legitimate and illegitimate knowledge.

If Pamela and I had agreed to do what was asked of us, what would have resulted is that we as the only two Indigenous women would have given our time, skills, abilities and specific knowledge in Indigenous content for free and all the other members of the review panel including the non-Indigenous 'Indigenous experts' would have been paid for their time, skills, abilities and specific knowledge in Indigenous content. It is also laden with all the other complexities that accompany messages of devaluation and disregard. Had we participated given the situation then maybe we might have found ourselves deeper within the system that marginalised us and that seeks to constantly use and take possession of us. In this we share the experience that so many other Indigenous women experience, that of being deprecated (Moreton-Robinson 2000). The Indigenous man from that institution who participated in the review colluded in this deprecation, whether unwittingly or not by participating in the playing out of the scenario that witnessed the reproduction of racialised and institutionalised power and privilege. I wanted to resist cooption to a position of intellectual servitude to members of the dominant society and believed that if I did participate that I would be expected to do little more than play the role that Deloria terms, a "house pet" (2004: 29).

I sought counsel from an Elder who explained that just because non-Indigenous people might know a lot about Indigenous affairs and Indigenous politics does not mean that they will support Indigenous people, our worldviews and our values over their own and it doesn't mean that they will not put Indigenous people down in the process. In essence they might protect and maintain their own interests in Indigenous issues by the denial and exclusion of Indigenous people and our sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson 2004a). Moreton-Robinson's (2004b) theoretical understandings are important to draw upon at this point. She explains that the protection and investment in white values and interests is rooted in the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty (2004b) and that there might be anxiety about dispossession which is "harnessed to instil hope through possessive investments in patriarchal white sovereignty" (2008: 102). As a result of their possessive investments in patriarchal white sovereignty non-Indigenous people can act against Indigenous sovereignty claims about our being, our knowledge, our culture and our land and show no concern for our rights or empowerment. They can act in ways that insulate themselves, their disciplines and institution in order to protect their privileges (Smith 1999) and can instate gatekeepers to guard their entitlements, creating a comfort zone and marginalising dissenting Indigenous voices (Rigney 1998; Stanfield 11 1993). I also came to the conclusion through my discussions with the Elder that I did not wish to reflect the image of me that was epistemologically defined by non-Indigenous people (Moreton-Robinson 2007) and enacted in the invitation.

I then wrote a formal letter detailing my concerns to the chairperson of the review panel and stated that I would not participate in the review. I asked for my letter to be circulated amongst the review team. I also sent my letter as an attachment to an email. I did not receive an acknowledgement of my communication or a reply via email or in a letter. Nor did I receive a telephone call from the chairperson of the review panel, or from anyone else on the review panel or from that institution. In not hearing anything or receiving a letter back from anyone associated with the review I came to understand that the review had nothing to do with engaging us with scholarly respect. By not telephoning and not responding to my letter or email I was further de-authorised, discarded and deprecated. I was again bluntly reminded that the invitation was on the university's terms and just how easy it is for institutions such as universities to dispossess and exclude us and for them to maintain power and control. In not communicating with Pamela or me, the university and those within it connected to the review, endorsed their positioning, privilege, advantage

and their rationalising of ownership. They didn't have to verbally say 'this is mine' or 'this is ours' because their actions and non-actions demonstrated the possessive logic of white sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson 2004b).

I experienced intense frustration at the lack of response from anyone on the review panel or the university and while I struggled with trying to understand the atmosphere of silence, the academics involved in the review benefited from their "silenced position by proxy" (Lampert 2003: 23). I wondered why did they not engage with us? Why didn't anyone contact Pamela or me? Was the Indigenous man a willing accomplice to these activities? Was it about their unwillingness to engage and to give up their privilege and power and their resistance to changing the status quo? Grieves (2008) in her recent work writes of the recognisable stress that Indigenous scholars experience within environments such as universities. She draws on the work of Williams, Thorpe and Chapman (2003) who explain how the relationship between whiteness and knowledge often creates stress on many levels for Indigenous workers (2003: 68-91). This was an experience of such stress. I was reminded of the arrogance of white privilege in that they would assume that we would be members of the review panel without payment and that we would perform the type of Aborigine that they wanted (Smith 1999). Moreover, they also assumed that perhaps we would be happy to be placed in the position of 'other' and may be even in some way we might have even been grateful for their benevolence. This is in opposition to non-Indigenous academics from that university and others who repeatedly, confidently and comfortably ask for monies for consulting with community groups, including Indigenous groups, and when applying for research funds to undertake research in specific Indigenous areas. In addition to this, non-Indigenous people are awarded kudos, creditability and seen as honourable (Lampert 2003) for their work with Indigenous Studies. Pamela and I were asking for no more than non-Indigenous academics would ask for in the same situation and for which they think they are entitled. We were asking for the same form of personal and institutional legitimisation and respect that they think they deserve.

Had I undertaken the role of panel member I would have fully engaged within the review panel process. I would have critically read the materials, contributed to the discussion and ensured that my participation was not 'token', and that I was not positioned as 'native informant'. I would have been in a position to offer valuable critique, put forward suggestions for change and raise issues relevant to the content. I knew if Pamela and I

didn't participate then we couldn't do any of this and that the people handling the review panel might say that they had asked Indigenous people, and that the Indigenous women they had asked didn't take up the offer to participate. It would be said as I have heard before, 'Indigenous people didn't participate' rather than 'the terms of the review made it difficult for Indigenous people to participate'. To talk in these terms maintains the comfort of the white people in their belonging within Indigenous Studies because they were or are 'only trying to...'. This type of statement and others of 'goodwill' and 'benevolence' also assist in masking the power differentials (Hage 1998; Riggs 2004) and denies the truth of Indigenous poverty and dispossession and non-Indigenous privilege. It seemed that even having been through the higher education system and earning our respective pieces of paper, we were not being valued in the same way as the other people on the panel. I have no doubts that the non-Indigenous people on the panel were all supported and congratulated for participating in and undertaking the review of the Indigenous Studies curriculum. The university and that particular faculty could tick off that job from its task list for the year and move on. We knew we risked being seen as making trouble and being too political, too critical and maybe even too personal (White and Sakiestewa 2003). Since this time we have both heard information about ourselves and the review from people within that university who had nothing to do with the review and who should not have known anything about it at all. None of the information has been flattering. We heard that we were presented as complainers and the problem, just as Indigenous people are generally presented as the problem, rather than the social or structural issues and the power and hierarchy associated with the academy (Smith 1999). Lampert in discussing her experiences as a non-Indigenous academic working in Indigenous education argues that Indigenous Studies is generally regarded as a "Black issue rather than a White issue; about 'them' rather than 'us'. It's often taken for granted that I am the good guy, or that it is even good guys and bad guys" (2003: 24). In this case, we were positioned as the 'bad Indigenous women'.

Conclusion

Audre Lorde states that, "it is not difference that immobilises us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken" (1984: 44). In breaking the silence on my experience I have attempted to highlight racism, social and cultural domination, control and white privilege as they intersect and are enacted within an Australian university. I have demonstrated how hard it can be to engage with the Academy when those within it are reproducing imperial attitudes and processes which marginalise and exclude us whilst

proclaiming they want to include and involve us. In the Academy, this can be a common occurrence. Universities are not the safe places we would like to think they are (Miheuah and Wilson 2004; Monture-Angus 1995; Walker 2003). Alfred states that “they are not even so special or different in any meaningful way from other institutions; they are microcosms of the larger societal struggle” (2004:88). As an Indigenous woman and academic, I know I need to face the difficult questions around obligations and responsibilities to other Indigenous peoples and our struggle for freedom from oppression and exploitation at every point of academic engagement. I also know that it takes a lot of energy to challenge and fight the status quo and sometimes it is a lot easier to just accept it because of the level of emotional, physical and spiritual damage we may incur. In this paper I have shown how we can reaffirm and act from our Indigenous epistemological and ontological foundations and how we can challenge and offer resistance to the colonial forces that consistently try to silence us or make us what Miheuah calls “window dressing” (2004: 44). That is, they want us but not our opinions. In the process of working through this paper and articulating the practices within this particular tertiary education institution, I have moved from the position of object to subject. I have been able to gain a form of liberated voice (hooks 1989:9) and demonstrated the multi-faceted forms of domination and control that continue to subjugate Indigenous peoples within universities. Furthermore, I have shown how ‘goodwill’ invitations can be underpinned by racism, white race privilege and racialised subjectivity which results in Indigenous peoples being further marginalised, denigrated and exploited. I have sought to challenge the possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson 2004b) that continues to subjugate Indigenous peoples. I encourage others to do the same.

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ⁱ See isrn@qut.edu.au and www.isrn.qut.edu.au for details.