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TEACHING ABORIGINAL STUDIES : SOME PROBLEMS OF CULTURALISM IN AN INNER CITY SCHOOL[#]

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INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal Studies has now been a part of the South Australian curriculum for many years and most of the writing about teaching Aboriginal Studies has focused on appropriate content and pedagogues with little critical appraisal of the actual implementation of Aboriginal Studies curricula. A research project carried out in an inner city Adelaide secondary school suggests that it is crucial for those of us engaged in the teaching of Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students, to turn attention to the taken-for-granted presuppositions and ideologies that inform teacher understandings and practices in Aboriginal Studies.

Aboriginal Studies courses in urban South Australian schools are underpinned by twin objectives of cultural maintenance and renewal for Aboriginal students and cultural awareness for non-Aboriginal students. Both aspects are commonly viewed as effective means of simultaneously challenging the racism experienced by Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander peoples and as challenging white hegemony. Thus, one of the taken-for-granted understandings about the teaching of Aboriginal Studies is that the subject itself constitutes an anti-racist strategy. This understanding in part presupposes that provision of information about Aboriginal cultures acts as a corrective to misunderstandings. The same provision is also assumed to create a space for the affirmation of Aboriginal identity and a space for reflexive examination of taken-for-granted non-Aboriginal identities.

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Culture and identity are important sites for the concrete reflection of students' and teachers' lives. However, the experience at Ealing High School suggests that the teaching of Aboriginal Studies relies heavily on practices based on notions of identities formed only through individual agency and linked almost exclusively to culture as traditional and pre-invasion heritage. Such a framework views human beings as acting from an autonomous, psychologically or individually motivated and innately driven subjectivity. It also imbues some cultures with primordial essences and the locus of anti-racism becomes inscribed in attitude, prejudice and discrimination. Individual or group agency is important, however identities and culture are also formed and contested within historical, political, economic and social ruptures and discontinuities (Hall, 1990) and are shaped by unequal gender, class, ethnic and racial orders. The way in which the privileging of pre-invasion lifeways and individualistic notions of identity 'makes sense' and is 'obvious' is made coherent through an ideology of culturalism.

THE RESEARCH SITE

The discussion in this paper is based on a research project that was carried out in an inner city Adelaide High School over a period of twelve months. Ealing High School ⁽¹⁾ is located in a residential suburb of Adelaide and is part of a small, older inner suburban local government area (LGA). During the research period 30.5% of the households had incomes of less than \$12,000 at a time when the average income in Australia was approximately \$21,000. The unemployment rate was equalled by only one other local government area and 53.% of students were Government Assisted Students who received additional financial support for their education. 47% of pupils were recorded as being from non-English speaking backgrounds and the LGA was characterised as a 'high density' area of people born in South-east Asia, Greece and Italy. Ealing borders on a 'high density' LGA of Aboriginal people and in a school population of 560 students, 14 were Aboriginal. The Aboriginal Education Team comprised of an Aboriginal Education Worker and an Aboriginal Education Resource Teacher both of whom were part time at the school. At year 8 and 9 level students were taught a semester of Aboriginal Studies as part of core humanities subject. There were no Aboriginal teachers in the school and despite the low numerical number of Aboriginal students, Ealing High School was a target school for Aboriginal students.

The examples used in this article are drawn from this project but are also informed by observations in other schools, interviews and discussions with practising and trainee teachers. My own work context also suggests that the examples discussed here, and the culturalist understandings they entail, are far from obsolete or extreme.

While the research project had a broader framework than the teaching of Aboriginal Studies, it became obvious that there was a need to examine the ways in which many teachers constructed their ideas about difference and Aboriginal culture and identity.

CULTURALISM

The notion of culturalism refers to an ideology that informs the way in which most teachers think about cultural difference. It relates to the manner in which they use the idea of culture to explain social relations and construct relations of pedagogy and curriculum (Crowley, 1990; Rizvi & Crowley 1993). Culturalism refers to methods of thinking and reasoning about cultural relations and processes and is characterised by a reliance on anthropological usage of culture as a 'way of life'.

Two aspects of the emergence of notion of culture are worth noting. During the 1920's anthropological theories of culture were formulated as a 'counterweight' to 'race' (Khan, 1991, p.48), to specifically challenge the widely held views of biological explanations for human variation. Popularly, notions of culture are assumed to be intrinsically non-racist and a means of challenging racism. However, like 'race', culture was also a framework for describing and analysing Other peoples often in geographically remote parts of the world (Khan, 1991, p.48). Maintaining a focus on the Other (Said, 1978; Miles, 1989) meant that theories of culture did not necessarily challenge configurations of power or the taken for granted superiority of the observers' cultural identity and gaze. As Khan notes, these processes 'make the *contingent* appear natural' (my emphasis) suggesting firstly that even in the modern world there are discrete cultures and secondly that culture and 'a culture' can only exist in the mind of the observer. As he goes on to assert, such notions can only be sustained in a 'totally arbitrary way' (1991,50).

Following in this tradition, anthropologists and other social scientists have studied remote and isolated Aboriginal groups. This historical process has not only fostered hierarchies of cultures and particular notions of the exotic and different, but popular derivations and understandings of culture have been reduced to cultural forms made visible in language, arts, habits and customs. In education this view of culture is most commonly found in multiculturalism. The teaching of Aboriginal Studies, however, is far from free of this view and, like multiculturalism, the teaching of Aboriginal Studies invariably saturates cultural form with a significance that obscures a series of influences that anthropological theories of culture were meant to challenge.

These issues remain at the heart of culturalism because they are frameworks which maintain in the popular imagination the notion of discrete and frequently exotic cultures uncontaminated by histories of influences and interventions. The very idea of another culture involves a distancing which both resonates with the remote and exotic and impels a category divide that constructs a category of 'observers' who have no need to examine their racialising participations, presence and histories. It also universalises Aboriginal cultural histories.

These are salient points in relation to teacher explanations, practices and understandings of teaching Aboriginal studies particularly as the notion of difference is commonly located in primordial characteristics of a particular group or groups. While maintaining ideas of the primordial and exotic Other is not the intention of Aboriginal Studies, much of the rhetorics and of the teaching practices do not challenge this racialising process and ideology. This is not a straight forward problem as many of the culturalist assumptions echo the material realities of the lived and symbolic political struggle which Aboriginal people and supporters are waging. The way in which a focus on the traditional and primordial is believed to, of itself, challenge racism and an emphasis on the traditional as the only 'real' and authentic identity and representation of culture makes contemporary complexities and multi-vocality of Aboriginal students irrelevant.

DIALOGUES, ACCOUNTS AND EXPLANATIONS ²

The Aboriginal Studies program at Ealing High School provides a stark example of the contradictory ways in which culturalism works. The Aboriginal Studies course had objectives of cultural maintenance and renewal for Aboriginal students and cultural awareness for non-Aboriginal students. The cultural trainings were a part of the tolerance building and prejudice reduction project for combating racism. The Aboriginal Studies Teacher, Beverley Watson, described the course for year 8 as 'fairly much a general (year) and I guess I tend to concentrate on the content more than a lot on attitudes'. She saw her role as important in supporting Aboriginal identity and this was achieved in part through the content of the course which largely focused on the Kurna people of the Adelaide Plains.

The Kurna content provided the 'local' content aimed at making the subject more immediately relevant. 'Local content' is considered important for a number of reasons. Firstly it makes immediate the issues of Aboriginal presence in Australia and the students lives. Secondly it acts as a corrective to notions of Aboriginal issues as being associated with people who are spatially and temporally remote. The inclusion of the local content is also aimed at raising students' consciousness about prior ownership and the land they inhabit and occupy in their everyday lives. Interestingly, these aspects were not explored and the content of the early lessons typically emphasised the Kurna Dreaming trail (Tjilbruke), winter and summer life, bush tucker and shelter. The learning activities involved tasks such as tracing hand prints and naming parts of the hand in Kurna, along with learning the Kurna words for some animals, birds and sites along the Tjilbruke trail. Within this framework cultural form was made visible in language, food, activities, shelter and such like. This culturalist practice represents selective cultural forms as if they constituted a total description of an unproblematic Kurna life. It fails to contextualise historical patterns and illustrate the contingent nature of cultural form. I am not suggesting that cultural learnings are unimportant but rather that they become reduced to simple and narrow forms and the representation of the ancient is unrelated and unable to explain contemporary lifeways or racism experienced by Aboriginal students.

As an explanation for racism these culturalist learnings rely on ideas of two entirely different cultures whose values and practices mean an irreversible incompatibility. The type of politics involved in the quest for land and emerging capitalism were not at issue yet they were integral to the forms of western imperialism that included the colonisation of Australia. More specifically, none of the Aboriginal students in year 8 was of Kurna background and the unrelatedness of the content and student understandings and experience rendered the inclusion of 'local content' as at best geographic and at worst a distanced story about the Other.

The focus on the Kurna as an identity building process relies on culturalist notions that view all Aborigines as universally and inextricably bound to the traditional in unexplained and singular ways. It did not explore the ways in which 204 years of colonisation have, for instance and to use Kevin Keefe terms, worked as persistence and resistance (Keefe, 1988, 1992) or what it means to Ealing High School and life in Adelaide today. Non-Aboriginal students are left with unchallenged ideas about Aborigines as part of an historical past and with the understanding that the issues that confront them today are unrelated to the legacies of history or contemporary processes and structures, legislations and social controls.

The failure to engage Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in Aboriginal Studies was also to be found in the contradictory positioning of Aboriginal students within the Aboriginal Studies curricula. For instance, the Aboriginal Studies teacher at Ealing High School asserted that Milly, an Aboriginal student in Year 8, was ^(a) 'an absolute part' of Aboriginal Studies but that 'she didn't have any extra things to add herself. Occasionally she knew more about what it was all about but not a lot'. Mary Johnstone, a year 8 English teacher also saw Aboriginal students as 'obviously' knowledgeable ^(a) 'when it was things they had heard about, legends and stuff and names of tribes'... Aboriginal students, by virtue of being Aboriginal, are thus often constructed as repositories of authentic wisdom and knowledge and expected to intuitively 'relate' to the content. Yet relations between Aboriginal students and Aboriginal Studies, as these examples suggest, illustrate a great deal of ambivalence and ambiguity. Both teachers placed Aboriginal students at the centre of Aboriginal Studies but their culturalist understandings of authenticity are underscored by very narrow constructions of identity and culture.

They are prepared to defer to a traditional authenticity but authenticity is readily denied when students are seen to 'not show any special knowledge of anything'^(a). The culturalist understandings held by teachers are by no means consistent however both these examples ignore contemporary identities, exclude the very students ostensibly central to Aboriginal Studies and furthermore, support for Aboriginal identity becomes contingent on display of the traditional.

Contradictions of culturalism permeated the cultural awareness aspect of Aboriginal Studies which aimed at sensitizing students changing attitudes and increasing tolerance. The Aboriginal Studies teacher explained that one of the reasons for introducing Aboriginal Studies was to [a] 'try and make it a general approach to teaching kids more tolerance about racial areas generally, not just the Aborigines'. With this premise in mind Aboriginal Studies was introduced to a class of year 8 students in the following way : ⁽ⁿ⁾

Beverley Watson (Teacher):

One of the things that is very important is getting along with people who are different to ourselves. Some Aboriginal people are different to ourselves in a very obvious way - who can tell me?

Jimmy :

They're black!

Beverley :

Yes, but some of them don't look Aboriginal... We've got people of all different backgrounds ... (looking at Maryanne) Your great, great, great grandfather would have been English, now Tony, your grandfather would have been (questioning) Greek?

Tony :

Italian.

Beverley :

Italian! Jonathon: English? Ivan, what country?

Ivan :

Yugoslavia, I was born there too!

Beverley :

You were too? You don't have an accent, you must have been small when you came out.

Beverley continued around the class to all students :

So you see we've got very different backgrounds.

There are lots of ways we're different. What's your favourite food (goes around the class getting a variety of responses and comments).

Some of us like different food, different sports, different television, different music.

We need to learn to get along with people who are different from us.

The discussion moves on to the First Fleet and Beverley asks :

Who was already here?

Phillip :

Captain Cook.

Beverley :

No

Shane :

Aborigines.

Beverley :

Yes, and they were totally surprised, no, not totally surprised cause they'd had other people call in, explorers and whalers.

This dialogue encapsulates a number of culturalist underpinnings that direct understandings in particular ways and restrict the possibility of seeing issues of culture and identity as little more than culture clash, a simple story and as tied to a distant past. It is a pedagogic moment of some significance as it establishes the framework in which all students are to engage with the Aboriginal Studies curricula and to understand trajectories of racism (Omi & Winant, 1986). Difference rather than racism frames the course and the difference that Beverley asserts in her opening question claims a boundary of ourselves for herself and all students. She speaks from, and embraces her students in, an insider category through which Aboriginal peoples are constructed as different Others. The collective speaking position is taken-for-granted, fully known and in no need of interrogation. In this way the teacher-students cultural privilege remains intact and difference and Otherness is constructed as discrete and separate from the process of naming the Other that has just taken place. No space is created for examination of ourselves or exploration of any common ground between the Other and the teacher-student inside our-selves. At one and the same time Aboriginal peoples are

unequivocally established and confirmed as 'different' and the difference that students are being led to invites and gains a stereotypic response firmly grounded in the discourse of biological 'race' and racism.

Initially the type of difference the teacher leads the students to includes taken-for-granted understandings of biological racism. An absence of deconstruction in the response of 'They're black' is an acceptance of biological racism on the one hand. On the other hand, the acceptance is muted by the suggestion that perhaps there is more to difference than 'race'-colour and the shift to regional affiliations and heritage invoke culture as inherited 'bloodlines' (Hollinsworth, 1992) and regional boundaries as indicators of culture and identity are affirmed. Within the trajectories of racism, nationalism has been a means of complementing biological/'race' groups and defending the superiority of one group over another (Anthias, 1990). The culturalist idea of nation and national heritage as a code for culture is thus used to move students away from the initial conglomerate insiderism to begin to assert that perhaps we are not all the same. But the difference that is then invoked through recourse to questions about 'favourite foods' is the more popularly acceptable, yet essentially culturalist explanation of difference as the cultural forms of food, habit and preference. Difference is almost reduced to a matter of 'taste' and again no space is created to question how it is that particular cultural formations can be uncritically taken as representing complex histories and influences. The notion of two very discrete and different groups of people remains an unproblematic given. The possibility of the diverse student identities as including experiences and histories of invasion and cultural exclusion does not figure in the equation and the problematic nature of such experience has been rendered invisible. A valuable entry into a discussion of invasion and identities was overlooked.

At this point the Aboriginal Studies lesson firmly established the lens through which difference and the future content of the course is to be viewed. The lens frames identity as having particular forms of historical origins (place, nation or bloodline) and culture as common-sense visible form. Culture and identity remain unmediated for example by politics, economy, incursion, gender and racism.

The Aboriginal Studies teacher is by no means uninformed about the subject being taught. Beverley is keen to provide a challenge

to Terra Nullius. Through direct questioning she makes it clear that it should be understood that Australia was occupied. She is also keen to provide other correctives to misinformation and corrects her own slippage into prevailing representations of the 'settlement' of Australia and the isolation/insulation of Aborigines. However her approach is firmly embedded in culturalism - a framework that forecloses possibilities of exploration through students lived experiences, histories and contradictions.

It is not that the content of the course is intrinsically flawed, nor some of the underpinnings upon which it is constructed. The possibility for political unity in struggles against racialisation and racism is entirely absent. Nowhere is there the possibility for students to work towards a complex understanding of culture and identities or towards a conviviality in struggle against exploitation and domination. The everyday and ordinary racism confronted by Aboriginal and other minority students in Australia has no place in this course. Yet the very ordinary is a rich source of possible investigation and could provide many avenues for exploring both the particularities and the convergences of trajectories of racism.

CONCLUSION

Culturalism is clearly problematic in a number of ways. It implies a consensus about often unspecified or loosely identified attributes which deny diversity and subjectivities influenced by class, 'race' and gender. Such a perspective assumes totalised groups representing a universal system of meanings devoid, for example, of political fractions and contradiction. It locates social inequality within a domain of difference which is part of a logic that views racism as individual prejudice and discrimination and impels solutions within frameworks of 'understanding', 'tolerance' and 'respecting each others customs'. Culturalism also suggests that there is no intersection between dominant and subordinate groups except as instances of domination and oppression.

Culturalism also romanticises and reifies the past. It fails to interrogate historical processes and structures that produce and reproduce racism. An emphasis on cultural artefacts, intercultural understanding and identities as discrete and separate avoids a requirement for analysis of contradictions occurring within changing situations, emerging identities and the lived and often contradictory contemporary context. In writing,

theorising and discussing Aboriginal education there is a tendency to rely on, and invoke, simplistic notions about Aboriginal identity and culture tied to equally narrow constructions of the traditional past. Another prevailing tendency is to assume that identities and culture have some essence located within individuals and to ignore the role of the state and the white hegemony in influencing cultural and identity formations. There is a further tendency to forget that 70% (Carpenter, 1990) of the Aboriginal population are urban dwellers in major towns and cities throughout Australia and that their histories and identities are complex and diverse. Culture and identities are neither static, simply made nor singular. They are complex, shifting and, as the voices of Eva Johnson, Sally Morgan, Archie Roach and Tracey Moffet for example show, are also about the incursions of, and resistance to, the racialisation of social relations. Creating the pedagogic and curriculum space for emerging and changing complexities would seem to be central to notions of Aboriginal self-determination, assertion, ownership and authority over cultural identities. A reliance on narrow constructions of identity and culture acts to foreclose the possibilities for making present the uneven ways in which subjectivities and identities are formed. The possibility for political unity in struggle against racialisation and racism is entirely absent.

The problems of culturalism that emerged at Ealing High School do not represent an argument for abandoning the existing content of Aboriginal Studies curricula. It is, however, an argument for the need to examine the cultural conditions that lead to particular understandings of culture and identity as well as a need to examine ideologies that deny contestation over culture and identity. It is time to interrogate and challenge discourses and sentiment that see the world, to borrow from James Clifford (1988:5), 'as populated by endangered authenticities'. Identities, culture, ideas and histories 'cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configuration of power being understood' (Said, 1978:5).

NOTES

1. Ealing High School and all the names of people are pseudonyms. Ealing High School was the focus school in which the research was carried out although other schools were visited.
2. Dialogues were recorded on audio-tape [a] and in notebooks [n]. The dialogues should not be read as typifying Aboriginal Studies courses and teaching however they are included and used for the way in which they demonstrate commonly held culturalist assumptions and practices.

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