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LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP: *The* EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE *that* SOMETIMES HIDES BEHIND *the* WORD "INCLUSION"

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates how Indigenous studies is controlled in some Australian universities in ways that continue the marginalisation, denigration and exploitation of Indigenous peoples. Moreover, it shows how the engagement of white notions of "inclusion" can result in the maintenance of racism, systemic marginalisation, white race privilege and radicalised subjectivity. A case study will be utilised which draws from the experience of two Indigenous scholars who were invited to be part of a panel to review one Australian university's plan and courses in Indigenous studies. The case study offers the opportunity to destabilise the relationships between oppression and privilege and the epistemology that maintains them. The paper argues for the need to examine exactly what is being offered when universities provide opportunities for "inclusion".

Introduction

I want to state very clearly that this paper is not about who should or shouldn't teach Indigenous studies. This paper aims to demonstrate how the education and racialised systems operating within some universities seek to make Indigenous peoples complicit in the production of knowledge (Spivak, 1999) that positions us as objects of continued exploitation (Khan, 2005, p. 2032). This paper draws on critical race theory and whiteness studies in an attempt to turn the gaze on Indigenous studies and how it is sometimes controlled in ways which continue the marginalisation, denigration and exploitation of Indigenous peoples in order for others, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, to maintain control. I do this through sharing an incident that happened several years ago. Since this time, the circumstances around this incident has given me cause to reflect on the nature of racialised inter-subjectivity played out within tertiary education environments. I have opted to write about it as a way of highlighting the problematic nature of racism and systemic marginalisation within these environments. In sharing my experience and bringing some analysis to my example I seek to disrupt the relationships between oppression along with white race and institutional privilege and the epistemology that maintains them.

The invitation

In September 2005 I received a phone call inviting me to join an academic panel that would review an Australian university's courses in the field of Indigenous studies. The panel was scheduled to meet face-to-face for two full days on the main campus of that university (17-18 October 2005). Initially I said yes to the invitation. I received a letter the following week (26 September 2005) thanking me for accepting the invitation. Accompanying the letter was information relating to the membership of the review panel; terms of reference for the review; a schedule for the two day meeting; 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. The following were to be addressed as a minimum and were included under the terms of reference.

1. The relevance of graduate attributes to current and likely near future industry requirements.
2. The mapping of generic skills into the graduate attributes of the program.
3. The mapping of individual course objectives and outcomes to the graduate attributes of the program.
4. The attributes/skills required for entry to the program.
5. The demonstration of the acquisition of graduate attributes, including generic skills, as defined in the program, by graduates.
6. Program viability.
7. The academic and/or community value of the program.
8. Delivery methods, curriculum and pedagogy.
9. Benchmarking.

Based on the materials sent out 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.

Dr 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, for example, payment of registration for conferences offered by that university, vouchers for the university press or bookshop or travel reimbursements. Pamela and I shared our thoughts and feelings with each other. We also needed to work through the issues and the anger that surfaced in both of us. At that time I was not employed. I 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 lived some distance from the university). As a practicing artist, Pamela is self-employed and therefore she would have given a week to the review where she would not have been earning an income or organising business opportunities. It was going to financially cost us both to participate in the review.

I made contact with the university-based academic who originally rang me and discussed the matter. I was made to feel like I was not entitled to payment and that I was "money hungry" when I asked about payment despite giving my time freely in the past to that university for educational activities. I was told that lunch, morning tea and afternoon tea would be provided each day and that there would be a dinner on the first evening. I believed that the role I was being asked to play was too great to ask without attributing a value when I was expected to financially bear the costs of my participation.

■ Institutionalised and racialised power revealed

I wish to now turn to the other people on the review team. Of the ten names on the review team, seven belonged to people working for the university conducting the review. From this, six were non-Indigenous people. This included two females, one with qualifications in education and the other qualifications in nursing and education. There were four males who collectively had qualifications in humanities, psychology and sociology. Among the seven, there was one Aboriginal 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 also one Aboriginal man from a university in another part of Australia also listed as a member of the review panel who had qualifications in education. There were additionally two Aboriginal women's names on the list, Pamela's and mine. In relation to the content, three of the non-Indigenous men had mixed responsibilities for the Indigenous studies courses (coordinating the major and courses or being a contact person). Two of these have received grant monies, researched and written in the field of Indigenous studies. The Aboriginal man on the review panel who was employed in that university does not have any responsibility for the Indigenous courses in Arts/Humanities and as already stated is based in the Indigenous centre of that university. This university is not, as explained by Nakata (2004), a place where Indigenous programs are "Indigenous run, managed and taught" (p. 5) or "increasingly under the nominal authority or management of Indigenous academics" (Nakata, 2004, p. 5). As seven of the people were employed and based within that university their wages were covered by that university while they participated in the review. Some in this group were also tenured. As such, non-Indigenous people hold what is considered "legitimate knowledge" that underpins and maintains their power within the university (Alfred, 2004; Henderson, 2000; Martin, 2003; Ngugi, 1993; Smith, 1999).

The people that "owned" Indigenous studies within this university were non-Indigenous people. Further to this, as will be demonstrated, the processes of the review and the terms in which Pamela and I were asked to participate excluded us from holding any form of ownership and would lead to a further investment in the white possession of Indigenous studies in that university (Moreton-Robinson, 2005a). The situation, as I see it, had I participated in the review under the conditions set down for me, 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 voices of Aboriginal women who were offered no value other than as “informant” to legitimate their academic processes (Khan, 2005, p. 2025). This amounts to a recycling of the colonial power and a distinct difference in standpoints between those with institutional privilege and those without. 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, it would have affirmed “white domination and economic success at the cost of racial and economic oppression” (Moreton-Robinson, 2005a, p. 26).

Through my telephone discussion with the university-based academic and on reflection, I knew that Pamela and I were being expected to give our knowledge, skills and abilities on Indigenous studies for “our people” based on “goodwill” and “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 Aboriginal women with doctoral postgraduate qualifications (Croft, 2003; Fredericks, 2003). Our participation in the review panel was constructed through our Aboriginal embodiment as racial and gendered objects and based on their desire for us to be the Indigenous “Other.” We were defined as both subject and object and through our Indigenousness offered a positioning of subjugation and subordination. The non-Indigenous people were positioned as the knowers and offered the ongoing positioning of domination and control. I was not asked to participate because my postgraduate studies were in the disciplines of education and health or because of my past work and experience. Pamela was not asked because her discipline is visual arts and as a result of her past work and experience. I believe that most people on that review panel would have had no idea what we had studied or our past experiences and work history. It was our gendered and racialised embodiment as Aboriginal women coupled with our doctoral qualifications in name only that was of interest and that was wanted. 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 in control. I came to understand that we were being asked to perform the role of female academic “native informants” (Khan, 2005). We were not being valued and honoured in all that we could offer. This represents a form of identity politics that is rooted in Australian colonial history that has contributed to the historical, legal and political racialisation and marginalisation of Aboriginal 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. I state this because in other circumstances staff in that same university have explained that I could not work in the disciplines of humanities and arts and hence within the field of Indigenous studies, because I did not have undergraduate and/or postgraduate qualifications in this field and that this was why non-Indigenous postgraduates in these areas were given work. Indigenous studies emerged from “the discipline of Social Anthropology, branching out into linguistics, prehistory, history and political science” (Moreton-Robinson, 2005b, p. 44). Deloria (2004, p. 25) argues that a “scholar’s academic pedigree begins with his or her graduate supervising professor and continues with his peer group during his or her graduate years”. In terms of what I had been told by several academics in that university in the past, I did not have sufficient “academic pedigree” in Indigenous studies. This is despite being recently granted membership of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) based on my contributions to the field. Since the review, the university has not asked me to be part of any grant applications, research projects or to offer a guest lecture based on my disciplinary knowledge or my work history and experience. My only considered worth was to be a volunteer member of a curriculum review panel.

■ Not on these terms

Had we participated in the review we would have allowed the university academics to take, consume, and make what we had to give their own for the purposes of their work. Our knowledge would have been taken, intellectualised and commercialised for people other than us through their employment and ownership within the university. It was no doubt the same people who set the parameters for the “type” of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person they wanted for the review (Miheuah, 2004). bell hooks describes in part this process of selection of some people over others, “Black women are treated as though we are a box of chocolates presented to individual white women for their eating pleasure, so they can decide for themselves and others which pieces are most tasty” (1994, p. 80). For the purposes of the review we were initially regarded as the “most tasty” in that we had doctoral qualifications, were Aboriginal women, were “known” to a couple of the people on the panel and we had both undertaken work *pro-bono* in the past.

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 courses in that university (across a range of disciplines) have

qualifications in the field of Indigenous studies. Somehow in this instance, non-Indigenous people are able to undertake a process of metamorphosis, which allows them to teach within the Indigenous studies domain. Furthermore, 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. The particulars of my qualifications were in one sense irrelevant. Despite having a degree, two masters degrees and a PhD (Fredericks, 2003) it was not my disciplinary knowledge or research skills or abilities that were required. My qualifications were also not attracting a monetary value or offering me a form of equity or equality through the review. The words of Monture-Angus (1995, p. 69) are useful here when she explains that she,

... believed that once I could write enough letters after my name that White people would accept me as equal. I no longer proscribe to the theory of equality because it does not significantly embrace my difference or that I choose to continue to remain different ... As I climbed the ladder of success I never understood that I could not climb to a safer place. I now understand that the ladder I was climbing was not my ladder and it cannot ever take me to a safe place. The ladder, the higher I climbed, led to the source of my oppression (1995, p. 69).

The simple part of the equation is that if Pamela and I had agreed to do what was asked of us, what would have resulted is that we as the only two Aboriginal 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 may be we might have found ourselves deeper within the system that marginalised us. In this we share the experience that so many other Aboriginal women experience, that of being deprecated (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p. 74). I am unsure whether the Aboriginal man from that institution who participated in the review unwittingly colluded in this depreciation 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 and believed that if I did participate that I would be expected to do little more than play the role that Deloria (2004) terms, a “house pet” (p. 29). Mihesuah (2004) writes that Aboriginal people are sometimes wanted for “window dressing” (p. 44), that is, “universities want us but not our opinions.” Pamela and I have written about some of our experiences of being positioned in this way in other localities (Fredericks & Croft, 2006, 2007, 2008).

I made the decision that I would not participate in the review. I sought counsel from an elder from the community in which that university is located. The elder explained that just because non-Indigenous people might know a lot about Aboriginal affairs and Aboriginal politics does not mean that they will support Aboriginal people, our worldviews and our values over their own and it does not mean that they will not put Aboriginal people down in the process. In essence they might protect and maintain their own interests in Aboriginal 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, pp. 1-9). 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 and enacted in the invitation.

I then wrote a formal letter detailing my concerns to the chairperson of the review panel and asked that it 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. I was disappointed that the Aboriginal man based in the Indigenous centre who was also a member of the review panel did not make contact with me. This made me ask whether he was: unaware of his own intellectual biases and monocultural encapsulation or enacting the role of “imperial servant in the mechanics of dominion” (Alfred, 2004, p. 96). In not hearing anything or receiving a letter back from the chairperson of the review panel or anyone else I came to understand that the review panel 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 depreciated. Pamela and I were no longer the “most tasty”. We were suddenly made unpalatable by our refusal to participate and we were simply dismissed. I was again reminded that the engagement with us was on white terms and how easy it is for institutions such as universities to dispossess and exclude us. In not

communicating with Pamela or I, the university and those within it connected to the review, endorsed their positioning, privilege, advantage and their rationalising of ownership. They did not 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 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: may be even in some way we might have even been grateful that we were even asked. This is in opposition to non-Indigenous academics from that same university who repeatedly ask for monies for consulting with community groups, including Indigenous groups or applying for research funds to undertake research in specific Indigenous areas. 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.

If I had undertaken the role of panel member I would have engaged fully within the review panel process from this basis. I would have critically read the materials and contributed to the discussion in the workshop 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 would have undertaken some broader consultation with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in readiness for my contribution. I knew if Pamela and I did not participate then we couldn’t do any of this and that the people handling the review panel might say that they had asked Aboriginal people, and that the Aboriginal women they had asked didn’t take up the offer to participate. It could be said as I have both 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 ...”

It seemed that even having been through the higher education system and earning our respective pieces of paper, we were still 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 curriculum. The university could tick off that job from its task list for the year and move on. Pamela and I supported one another with the position that we would not participate in the review. We knew we risked being seen as making “trouble” and being “too political” and we know we already make some people uncomfortable. 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.

■ Conclusion

Although I know that our experiences as Indigenous peoples within universities often reflects the experiences we have as Indigenous people in broader society, I am still surprised when it is other academics who espouse notions of justice and equity with whom we experience tension and conflict in asserting our rights, values and cultural values. At times it is a constant struggle even when universities have a Reconciliation Statement as most of them do now, Indigenous recruitment or employment strategies and anti-racism and anti-discrimination policies and procedures. Universities are not the safe places we would like to think they are and if the case study that I have shared is an example of inclusion and an act of reconciliation then we are in big trouble. Henry and Tator (2007, p. 26) in a recent article explain that, “anti-racism models of knowledge production and pedagogy, which emphasise methods and measures to counteract racism and other forms of oppression, have yet to find a place in most universities.” Alfred (2004, p. 88) in writing as an Indigenous academic 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”.

Audre Lorde (1984, p. 44) states that, “it is not difference that immobilises us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken”. I have shared this incident and my understandings of it in an attempt to break the silence and to make visible how certain forms of knowledge and values operate and are deployed in inter-racial relations and subject positions. I am trying to enact part of my responsibility as an Aboriginal woman within the tertiary education environment (Alfred, 2004; Deloria, 2004). Enacting responsibility within the Indigenisation of the academy (Mihesuah & Wilson, 2004) does not mean taking up every offer to be “included” or for “inclusion”. It does mean that we need to critically think through how we are engaged in Indigenous studies, what we want Indigenous studies to be and what we think our role should be (Nakata, 2004). I know that my understandings may be dismissed as over-intellectualising racism or criticising what people are trying to do under the banner of inclusion, but I also understand that “Indigenous women do see, analyse and have knowledge about whiteness-knowledge that is usually dismissed, ignored or rebuffed by whites upon whom we cast our gaze and about whom we write” (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p. 67). I will also state with great sadness that this also comes at times from other Aboriginal people. In regards to non-Indigenous academics, it is their responsibility to investigate their

own subjectivities and their own cultural positioning in order to fully engage with us (MacIntosh, 1998; Nicoll, 2004a, 2004b). Failure for them to do so will result in the on-going marginalisation, denigration and exploitation of Indigenous peoples and the denial of our sovereignty (Dei & Calliste, 2000; Dei et al., 2005; Kumashiro, 2000; Moreton-Robinson, 2006, 2007). Moreover, it will result in the maintenance of racism in the name of "inclusion".

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