

BOOK REVIEWS

Teaching Aboriginal Studies: A Practical Resource for Primary and Secondary Teachers

Rhonda Craven (Editor)

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Reviewed by Greg Vass, School of Education, The University of Queensland, Australia. Email: g.vass@uq.edu.au

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The release of *Teaching Aboriginal Studies: A Practical Resource for Primary and Secondary Teaching* comes 12 years after the first edition, offering a timely and important update on some of the key issues and impacts arising from shifts in the educational landscape over the last few years. Rhonda Craven has drawn on her extensive experience as an education researcher and teacher to edit a book that is broad in its scope; draws on a variety of voices that offer practical and contemporary insights; and seeks to encourage, motivate and equip future (and current) teachers with relevant skills and knowledge. In this way the book is a valuable addition to the resources available to the education community. However, the book is contributing to an area of study that is contested, volatile and confronting, and it is the cursory or absent engagement with some of the messier aspects of the broader context in which 'Aboriginal studies' is located that raises a number of concerns for me.

The educational context has undergone significant change following the arrival of the Labor government in 2007, with the so-called 'Education Revolution' precipitating developments that have altered the education landscape in Australia that this book seeks to make a contribution to. Among the changes, those that have had the most direct impact on 'Aboriginal Studies' are associated with the abrupt and high-profile appearance of the NAPLAN (National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy) assessment regime. The NAPLAN data served to clearly reiterate the ongoing disparity in achievement (and hence engagement) when Indigenous and non-Indigenous students are compared. In part, this information subsequently fed into the 2009 Australian Government policy, *Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage: The Challenge for Australia* (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2009). Concomitant with these developments, in Queensland (for example), from 2008–2009 on, the *Embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives in Schools* (Department of Education and the Arts, 2009) process was being implemented across the state alongside

the release of *Closing the Gap: Education Strategy* (Department of Education and Training, 2009). Collectively these developments are contributing to reshaping pedagogies, curriculum and education policy to such a degree that they represent an epochal shift into what could be described as the 'Gap Era' of Indigenous education. Underscoring this point is the inclusion of a chapter called 'Closing the Gap' by John Lester and Geoff Munns. A chapter in itself that illustrates my worry that while the authors seek to reaffirm the positive elements that do underpin the 'gap' sentiment, this is pursued at the expense of developing a more nuanced and critical understanding of the politics and power that permeates the Gap Era approach (see Altman & Fogarty, 2010; or Lingard, Creagh, & Vass, 2011 for critiques of this). With the clear aim of offering a 'practical resource' that will support education practices, *Teaching Aboriginal Studies* faces a number of challenges if it is to make a meaningful and positive impact within the Gap Era. I will briefly explore four challenges that I see as particularly pertinent, with brief comments regarding the book's response in engaging with these hurdles.

The first and central challenge of any contribution to the discursive terrain broadly known as Indigenous education, is distinguishing between the *teaching of Indigenous students*, and the *teaching of Indigenous studies*. There are significant differences here with regard to policy implications, the preparation and delivery of curriculum, and the pedagogical practices that support student learning. This is because there are different foundations upon which the 'knowing' of Indigenous students and the 'knowing' of Indigenous studies have been built. Broadly speaking, *Teaching Aboriginal Studies* does structurally move towards acknowledging this recognition, with the first half of the book largely addressing the teaching of Indigenous studies, and the second half of the book moving towards concerns with working with Indigenous students. However, the absence of explicitly addressing the political, ethical or practical differences between these two points of focus is an oversight that has the potential to sustain teaching and

learning practices that essentialise representations of Indigenous peoples and cultural heritage while concurrently harbouring ideas about Indigenous 'learning styles'. The latter is a particularly worrying prospect that was well critiqued by Nicholls, Crowley, and Watt (1998) nearly 15 years ago.

The second challenge relates to the composition of the pre-service teacher population that comprises the greatest potential audience for this book. Within the Gap Era, universities are moving towards the compulsory inclusion of a pre-service teacher subject covering Indigenous education. This is an important move that recognises that it is no longer acceptable that this focus be simply embedded or attached to courses covering diversity, multiculturalism or inclusive education. Picking up on this trend, The University of Queensland introduced a compulsory pre-service teacher subject in the second semester of 2011 for the first time. Resistance to aspects of this course that some students expressed was anticipated; Aveling (2006), Phillips and Whatman (2007), and O'Dowd (2010) have all drawn attention to the potential for this with regard to subjects offered at their respective universities. Consistent within these discussions was student resistance to critical engagement with Whiteness, an issue that is absent within *Teaching Aboriginal Studies*. 'Whiteness' in this sense refers to the political and legal framework grounded in the ideologies of Western 'supremacy' and the impact of colonialist processes (Taylor 2009, p. 4), subject matter that warrants far greater attention within the Australian socio-political landscape.

The contributions from Aveling (2006), Phillips and Whatman (2007) and O'Dowd (2010) were directed towards peer higher education providers; however, I see no reason why the concerns that they raise cannot or should not also be directed towards pre-service teachers. Indeed, anecdotal comments from participants in the subject offered at The University of Queensland this year suggest that the Aveling paper was a particularly helpful discussion of White resistance within the context of pre-service teacher education. My concern is that the approach taken in *Teaching Aboriginal Studies* tends to draw on policy and moral arguments that speak to the professional and personal accountabilities of the developing teachers. Important in their own right, it is not enough to present these arguments. I feel that the book fails to provide the reader with a suite of skills, strategies and arguments that will support the sort of critical, self-reflexive engagement with Whiteness that may lead to meaningful and sustained engagement with 'Aboriginal studies'. While I support the move to make Indigenous education a compulsory subject, simply increasing the number of pre-service teachers to the same ethical and professional rationales that have circulated since the mid 1970s is unlikely to lead to meaningful change in the engagement or outcomes of Indigenous students, nor is it likely to result in improved pedagogical or curriculum delivery of Indigenous studies. In

this regard, the approach taken by Wadham, Pudsey, and Boyd (2007), which is also pitched at pre-service teachers, has much more to offer with assisting students in the process of reflexively exploring the socio-political Whiteness of the Australian landscape and its links with educational settings.

A third challenge that warrants greater attention in *Teaching Aboriginal Studies* is the development of whole school and multi-discipline understanding and commitment towards meeting the needs of Indigenous students and the teaching of Indigenous studies. With regards to the former, Indigenous students are present within any and all classroom contexts, and hence necessitate attention from *all* teachers. And with the latter, even at the primary school, it is no longer acceptable that Indigenous perspectives are largely embedded within subjects such as History and Art, as has often occurred. Deepening the engagement of the broader educational landscape with the 'cultural interface' (Nakata, 2007) is a necessary but *yet to take place* shift. Creating a space for developing greater understanding of Indigenous epistemological views of math and science, for example, is neither a simple task, nor can it be allowed to be approached in tokenistic ways. As Nakata points out, this is a move that is connected to the search for greater insights and understanding of increasingly significant concerns linked with social, economic and environmental sustainability. Beyond these concerns, *Teaching Aboriginal Studies* would benefit from explicitly directing attention towards schools with low-density Indigenous student populations. There is the potential within such settings to assume that embedding Indigenous perspectives is not relevant; nor are the poor outcomes and engagement of the few Indigenous students a concern that deserves much attention — as I witnessed within schools as a classroom teacher. While contributions (largely from Craven) do pick up on elements of this challenge, as they are spread across multiple chapters there is the potential for this point to be missed. I would suggest that within the Gap Era, that a clearly articulated argument in support of the whole-school and multi-discipline approach is needed.

The fourth and final challenge in many respects emanates from the previous concerns, and it has to do with what appears to be a lack of preparedness from the educational community to be reflexively critical. This is significant, given the Whiteness of the educational landscape in Australia. With over 90% of the teachers being white, and teacher education courses in Australia remaining based on 'a model of cultural hegemony characterised by a narrowly Western ideology shaping the content, structures and process of learning' (Hickling-Hudson 2003, p. 280), it is imperative that the educational community meaningfully question the implications that stem from this. On the one hand, *Teaching Aboriginal Studies* seeks to address this very concern by aiming to equip readers with a rich array of stimulating and relevant discussion points and

resources. However, it is the cursory negotiation of this challenge itself that may diminish the potential contribution that the book offers. While it may be a confronting prospect for many, the lack of critical engagement with the entrenched Whiteness of education policy, curriculum, and pedagogy is a significant oversight. In this sense, I find much to agree with in Picower's (2009, p. 211) suggestions for teacher education:

Schools of education must make a commitment to transform themselves in order to interrupt the hegemonic understandings of pre-service teachers by implementing strategies, programs, and reforms with this objective. A variety of forms of critical teacher education, such as multicultural education, social justice education, critical pedagogy, culturally relevant education, etc, center their efforts to challenge White student teachers to examine their racial biographies and hegemonic beliefs.

Picower is quoted at length here to illustrate the point that there are a multitude of potential pathways available to support the transformation of how to approach both the teaching of Indigenous students and Indigenous studies; however, central to this shift is coming to terms with the Whiteness of the educational landscape. Acknowledging the need for this type of approach within the Australian setting, Aveling (2004) has centrally located critical Whiteness studies in her pre-service teacher education course for over 10 years, and despite the challenges she has encountered, she maintains a view that clearly advocates equipping students with a suite of skills and knowledges that enables movement towards becoming a 'White ally'. Such a shift would represent the necessary swing towards 'aggressively, yet tenderly, navigating and interrupting white racial knowledge', potentially leading to transformative educational teaching and learning in the classroom (Galman, Pica-Smith, & Rosenberger 2010, p. 234).

Teaching Aboriginal Studies is a valuable and useful contribution to the literature available to teachers and pre-service teachers. It offers rich and engaging insights into a range of issues that are relevant to the teaching of Indigenous studies and Indigenous students. Additionally, it offers a good selection of primary sources that can assist with the development of relevant curriculum within some teaching areas. However, the concerns about the book outlined here are linked with the broader educational landscape itself, and my worry is that the potential contribution that the book can make will be reduced by virtue of not engaging on a deeper or more meaningful level with this broader context.

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The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race

Alison Ravenscroft

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Reviewed by Alan Han, School of English, Media Studies and Art History, The University of Queensland, Australia.

Email: a.han@uq.edu.au

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Postcolonial studies has been critiqued by many Indigenous studies and critical race and whiteness studies scholars for its inadequate theorisations of race and Indigenous sovereignty. Building on many of these critiques, Alison Ravenscroft's *The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race* is an important contribution to understandings of race and postcoloniality in Australia. Using the theme of the 'visual field of race', Ravenscroft examines historical writing and literature about and by Indigenous people, to argue that there are cultural divides between settlers and Indigenous people that remain perpetually unbridgeable, and out of the white subject's field of vision. According to Ravenscroft, 'modern Indigenous cultures remain in significant ways profoundly, even bewilderingly, strange and unknowable within the terms of settlers' epistemologies' (p. 1). Examining the white Australian subject's sense of out-of-placeness, Ravenscroft asks: are there alternative 'ways of seeing' that might make it possible for a white subject to 'approach Indigenous cultural practices as a stranger or foreigner might'? Is there a way for the white subject to see the Indigenous subject without trespassing or colonising, but instead by 'acknowledging radical difference' and Indigenous sovereignty?

Ravenscroft approaches these theoretical questions by drawing upon the colonial archive and Australian literature. For the most part, theories of race and vision are condensed in the book's first three chapters. While these theories could have been further developed throughout the book, Ravenscroft is more concerned with illuminating particular passages and descriptions of Indigenous people and their culture, to expose the limits of white settler discourse and interpretations of the Australian landscape. Ravenscroft employs a method of critique throughout her book that aims to interrogate the often heavily loaded genre of white settler writing, as exemplified in her study of Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs groundbreaking book, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (1998). According to Ravenscroft,

Gelder and Jacobs install a white settler sensibility and sense of belonging by reading an 'Aboriginal settlement' as a 'homestead' instead of as a place of Indigenous dispossession and colonisation. Ravenscroft argues that Gelder and Jacobs frame Aboriginal belonging through the lens of the white settler through which Aboriginal people appear to be only at home in 'the white man's *home instead of their own?*' (p. 85). This notion of the blurred white settler vision is developed throughout the book.

To expose the limits of white settler literary criticism, Ravenscroft examines Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* (1997) and *Carpentaria* (2006). White scholars, as Ravenscroft notes, have failed to acknowledge the 'unimaginable, invisible ... gaps and holes' and the 'particular places where a white reader might remain blind before' Wright's work (p. 45). Although this particular section of Ravenscroft's book would probably only appeal to literary theorists, her theorisation of 'white reading practices' will have a wider appeal to critical race studies scholars by showing that whiteness is embodied in how white settlers read Indigenous-signed texts. As Ravenscroft asserts, even though many Australian literary critics acknowledge that Indigenous texts cannot be completely understood by white readers, 'still the idea persists that white subjects can know the meaning of Indigenous-signed texts and the intentions of their authors, if only we are careful and canny enough' (p. 47). According to Ravenscroft, white settler literary critics should not seek to 'know' the Indigenous subject through literature, but rather acknowledge the imperfections and partiality of white settler vision. This perhaps is the most unsettling aspect of writing by Indigenous people that Ravenscroft suggests might productively enable white settler scholars to account for their own whiteness.

While the notion of blurred White vision is developed persuasively throughout the book, it is surprising that Ravenscroft does not devote as much attention to photographs as she does to literature. For this reason, the book will perhaps belong on a literary studies shelf, although