On Settler Notions of Social Justice: The Importance of Disrupting and Displacing Colonising Narratives

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Introduction

This chapter begins with a quote from First Nations US scholar Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy:

> For some Indigenous scholars (and others), theory is not simply an abstract thought or idea that explains overarching structures of societies and com- munities; theories, through stories and other media, are roadmaps for our communities and reminders of our individual responsibilities to the survival of our communities. (Brayboy 2006, p. 427)

In the above quote Brayboy shows that “theories through stories… are reminders of our individual responsibilities to the survival of our communities” (2006, p. 427). In this chapter we respond to Brayboy’s (2006) connection of theory and stories with responsibility to communities and consider how Hannah Arendt’s work on collective responsibility might improve settler notions of social justice in higher education. Annabel Herzog, applying Arendt’s work on collective responsibility, describes this move in the following way: “I am responsible only when, through my initiative, I challenge my specific community and its traditions, because such challenges affect the whole humanity” (2004, p. 52). Could universities better engage in social justice with Aboriginal peoples if, guided by collective responsibility, they are willing to challenge their own community? Responsibility, differently imagined, might help invoke obligations to disrupt and displace colonising narratives.

This chapter draws on research from two Aboriginal scholars,

Kamilaroi Woman Sheelagh and Dunghutti Woman Nyssa, and one non-Aboriginal scholar, Valerie. Their experience in conducting empirical work is used to illustrate ways that 'settler notions' of social justice can be disrupted and displaced. We begin with a discussion of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Aboriginal People and the university. We then work with an Arendtian formulation of responsibility, building on this with a discussion of CRT meeting educational thoughtlessness. Tree examples of disrupting or displacing deleterious colonising narratives are then provided: Responsible Mistakes; Prioritising Aboriginal Protocols in Research; and Resistance within the Academy. These examples are shared to offer transformative counter-stories of universities fulfilling their social justice responsibilities to Aboriginal peoples and their communities, even if only after being challenged and only after settler privilege being resisted by the researchers themselves.

Critical Race Theory and Aboriginal Peoples in University Education

Education is generally promoted as the pathway to expanding one's opportunities and improving one's economic status; of breaking free from locked-in inequality (Gillborn 2008; Roithmayr 2004). However, if the potential of Aboriginal peoples is to be routinely underestimated within higher education, then investment in such grandiose promises will constitute, for many, a condition that Berlant (2011, p. 24) refers to as "cruel optimism". Berlant explains that cruel optimism is ". a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realisation is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic" (2011, p. 24). Contemporary education policy involves an optimistic attachment to something that is promised; the promise that one can "get ahead" through intense investments in education (Sellar 2015, p. 213). But if educational institutions are not invested in the potential of Aboriginal staff and students – and in Aboriginal communities – then the return on investment by Aboriginal peoples themselves is likely low, and arguably, toxic.

Put simply, the Australian educational system is founded on

western, ‘settler’ values. It is a system borne out of two centuries of dispossessing colonisation that actively excluded, segregated, oppressed, assimilated and dispossessed Aboriginal peoples in their aim to civilise and Christianise (Daniels-Mayes 2016). Writing of the colonisation evident within educational institutions in the United States, Sahnish and Hidatasa scholar, Michael Yellow Bird states:

> Colonised-based educational systems contributed significantly to the destruction of cultural knowledge, and the imposition of the belief that Indigenous Peoples and their knowledge and ideas were—and remain— less than those of mainstream peoples. (2005, p.16)

Likewise, Australian policies of segregated Aboriginal education, that persisted for over a century, have been one of the clearest expressions of the belief in the inferiority of Aboriginal peoples (Beresford 2012). As Roithmayr (2004) and Gillborn (2008) have asserted, policies and practices that excluded Aboriginal peoples from legal, health, economic and education systems continue to contribute to current inequality. This perpetuation of inequality also includes so-called ‘new approaches and solutions’ that continue to pathologise (Sefa Dei and Kempf 2006) Aboriginal peoples by upholding a narrative that is embedded in a myriad of raciologies. As Ford (2013, p. 83) eloquently asserts, “. locked-in inequality has its roots in a third rate education of the past and the struggles to adequately provide a first rate education in the present”.

Working with Arendtian Responsibility

Our subtitle, the importance of disrupting and displacing colonising narratives, alludes to the two ways that, to draw on the work of twentieth century political philosopher Hannah Arendt, we need to critically engage with her work. Arendt’s work on responsibility and politics is highly respected, and we suggest it can be generative for analysing settler colonialism; yet there are difficult tensions (Moses 2012; Sloan Morgan 2017; Strakosch 2016). For example, Moses (2012) states “her naïve paean to British expansion simply repeated contemporary European prejudices about their civilization and non-

European barbarism" (p. 5). Yet Arendt's work has been used in this space. It has informed discussions of dehumanisation, bureaucracy and genocide in research examining the accounting techniques used to subjugate Aboriginal people in Canada (Neu and Terrien 2003). Arendtian collective responsibility has been used to analyse *The Apology to the Stolen Generations* (Mookherjee et al. 2009) and her analysis of the Jewish Holocaust has been drawn on in Manne's (2012) account of the Genocide of Aboriginal people, which is in the same volume as the above criticism by Moses (2012).

Elizabeth Strakosch acknowledges this tension in her analysis of Australian settler colonialism, conceding "the writing of Hannah Arendt is not a natural place to look for decolonizing resources" because "she is increasingly criticised for her particular validation of settler colonial-ism…" (2016, p. 26). Vanessa Sloan Morgan (2017) and Strakosch (2016) make the case that Arendt's work provides a persuasive way to challenge readings of colonisation as something 'of the past' and to place it *in the present* on settlers and settler states. Using Arendt, Strakosch (2016) makes a searing critique of Australian settler politics, pointing out that politics is fervently avoided in 'dealings' with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia, and that "we [settler institutions] would rather 'administer things' than negotiate relationships" (Strakosch 2016, p. 29). Administration is abounding in the sinister acts made on Aboriginal people. Drawing on Arendt's analysis of the Jewish Holocaust, Deborah Bird Rose (2001) argues that this violence is an activity of Australian settler society, where violence against Aboriginal peoples is 'commonplace'. Arendt's notes from 1946 examine imperialism, where she writes "Imperialist treatment of aboriginal populations (sic), fore- shadowing the Nazis' treatment of the Jews…" (Arendt 1946, cited in Canovan 1992, p. 37). Her work lays bare the immense dangers of imperialism.

Tropes of the colonial past are wielded in settler narratives to deny contemporary settler colonisation. Revering the past as the definitive of colonialism, paradoxically maintains its own settler colonising problems and supports its failures to build relationships with Aboriginal peoples. As Sloan Morgan (2017) remarks, "in settler colonial temporalities, the settler state asserts its completion even as it

seeks to enact it, declares that colonialism is past even as it seeks to end it, and denies Indigenous difference even as it confronts and seeks to manage it" (2016, p. 2). Just how this trope of the past impacts Aboriginal people is evident in research with Larrakia people in Darwin in northern Australia, "A common remark was that whenever they [Larrakia] try to talk about the past as a pathway to reconciliation [to settlers] it is misinterpreted as an excuse for any difficulties they [Larrakia] had" (Habibis et al. 2016, p.64).

Arendt's conception of responsibility throws contemporary settler society squarely into a position of 'collective responsibility' of the past. Arendt describes collective responsibility in this way, "I must be held responsible for something I have not done, and the reason for my responsibility must be my membership in a group (a collective) which no voluntary act of mine can dissolve" (2003b, p. 149). She implores, however, that collective responsibility is not the same as guilt, "There is such a thing as responsibility for things one has not done; one can be held liable for them. But there is no such thing as being or feeling guilty for things that happened without oneself actively participating in them" (Arendt 2003b, p. 149). Following this, we are not advocating settler guilt at universities, we are proposing collective responsibility.

When Herzog (2004) explains Arendt's concept of responsibility "evolved over time" (p. 39) she adds that she maintained a definition "in terms of political presence" (p. 39). This political presence is crucial and rejects settler colonising acts that supplant the political with the 'administrative'. Political presence brings people together and we are drawn to the 'in-between'. This *in-between* is crucial, for as Arendt writes, "wherever people come together, the world thrusts itself between them, and it is in this in-between space that all human affairs are conducted" (2005,p. 106). In the in-between we also include the non-human, and the 'non- living', such as rocks (Povinelli 2016). Arendt's(2005) idea of politics, then, is concerned with the in-between and this necessitates plurality. It is simply not possible to have in-between with singularity.

When we are in the political space with others, we call on the faculty of judgement. Here "judging, the by-product of the liberating effect of thinking, realises thinking, makes it manifest in the world of appearances, where I am never alone and much

too busy to be able to think" (Arendt 2003a, p. 189). Judging, then, is an activity that we do in the world when we are in the in-between. Occurring as a political activity, it is connected with responsibility and the activity of thinking (Arendt 1978). Irresponsible judgement is based on 'thoughtlessness', and Arendt's investigation of Nazi Adolf Eichmann's role in the Holocaust is "an extreme case of thoughtlessness" (Hermsen and Villa 1999). Thoughtfulness is therefore crucial to responsible judgement. When we consider questions of social justice in universities, irresponsible judgement can be said to be occurring when colonizing narratives are invoked, whether directly, indirectly, accidently, purposefully, covertly or overtly. For the university (and this also means those within the university) to make responsible judgements, there is a twofold reliance on the in-between and the political on one hand and on thoughtfulness on the other. It is to these two points, the in-between and thoughtfulness, that we now turn and build on with Critical Race Theory.

Critical Race Theory in the in-Between: Meeting with Educational Thoughtlessness

Complicating the embedded inequality forced on Aboriginal people, Sarra and colleagues (2011, p. 177) assert that most educators have difficulty viewing themselves as part of the problem and are therefore unlikely to seek solutions from within their pedagogical practices or willingly challenge their deficit constructions of marginalised or minoritised groups.

Many researchers and educators in universities possess a non-reflective and non-critical mind, what we might term, borrowing from Arendt, as thoughtlessness. It is this thoughtlessness that produces irresponsible judgements that tend to accept in the main the existing status quo of domination and oppression. Consequently, the university focuses on what is wrong with Aboriginal communities, or Aboriginal staff and students, rather than questioning what is wrong with the system from within which they teach and research. Tis issue is brought home by Narungga scholar Peter Buckskin (2013, p. 4) in relation to school education when he writes:

> In Australia, there is a lack of analysis on the impact of racism in Indigenous educational outcomes; and while there is a lack of evidence, White Australia can continue to argue that racism is not the issue that results in poor educational outcomes.

Such racism is evidenced by, for example, the language embedded in constructions of Aboriginal peoples in university settings, policies and practices – and the ‘safe’ reliance on administration rather than negotiating relationships. These constructions include: being positioned as non- researchers or not researching fast enough or in the ‘western way’; not holding legitimate knowledges and methodologies; or low expectations. While it is important to recognise disadvantage and inequality, there is a danger of losing the intent of social justice as a responsible activity of political life of the university. Instead, what is risked is falling into a narrative too focused on the ‘victim’, and how ‘victims’ are to improve their situation; a deleterious narrative that exonerates all in the university of responsibility, even while higher education is promoted as the pathway for improving ones’ status.

The task of challenging the racialised settler narrative, borne out of two centuries of dispossessing colonisation (Daniels-Mayes 2016), involves making the invisible visible, illuminating the privileges and in some cases recasting previous versions of history and social issues (Malin and Ngarritjan 1999, p. 9). Achieving this means regarding Aboriginal stories and knowledge systems as real and legitimate sources for understanding racial oppression (Brayboy 2006). However, colonisation has largely meant that Aboriginal distinct cultural ways of knowing, being and doing alongside their experiences of dispossession have been ridiculed, rejected, ignored or oppressed.

Aboriginal scholars such as Martin (2003), Rigney (2006) and Blair (2015) contend that the extent of research in Aboriginal lands and on Aboriginal peoples since colonisation in the late eighteenth century “is so vast it makes Aboriginal peoples one of the most researched groups of people on earth” (Martin 2003, p. 1). Research has been conducted by all manner of natural and social scientists, usually without permission, consultation or involvement of Aboriginal peoples (Bourke 1995). Karen Martin writes of ‘terra nullius’ styled research:

> In this research, we are present only as objects of curiosity and subjects of research. To be seen but not asked, heard nor respected. So the research has been undertaken in the same way Captain James Cook falsely claimed the eastern coast of the land to become known as Australia as terra nullius. (2003, p. 1)

This fictional doctrine of terra nullius not only devalued, dispossessed and marginalised Aboriginal people but also set the scene for how relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples within Australia were to be administered (Matthews 2012, p. 122). Terra nullius- styled research, embedded with racialised narratives of inferiority and superiority, excluded Aboriginal peoples from knowledge construction as defined by western thought (Kovach 2009). Consequently, Aboriginal knowledges and methodologies were not—and in many circles are still not—valued or seen as legitimate ways of producing knowledge (Hart and Whatman 1998, p. 3).

Responsible Mistakes

One of the many areas we need to think through in disrupting and displacing colonising narratives is in the relationships of non-Aboriginal academics with Aboriginal students. An Arendtian collective responsibility that infuses the process of mistake making, is, we suggest, significant to negotiating these relationships. To illustrate this point, we analyse an example from one of Valerie's research supervision experiences with then PhD student, Dr Anthony McKnight an Awabakal, Gumaroi and Yuin Man. Anthony has read and agreed to sharing this example.

During her reading and responses to Anthony's work, Valerie repeatedly read the words below,

> My voice is just as important as any. Whether you listen or not is your priority not mine.

These words, in an epigraph, stand before and above the body of writing. Over many months of discussion, Anthony did not explain

these words. For many months, Valerie assumed she knew the meaning. After a long time of not understanding and of slowly learning from Anthony, Valerie heard the words, and felt who was speaking. Anthony's PhD is titled *Singing up Country in academia: teacher education academics and preservice teachers' experience with Yuin Country* (McKnight 2015) and these words are from Country. Valerie made a mistake in her earlier reading of these words. This is no ordinary mistake; this is a colonising mistake occurring because the logics of settler colonialism were not questioned as is the rule of terra nullius-styled research. Valerie is a non-Aboriginal academic supervising an Aboriginal Man who is writing about Country; she holds the privileged position of credentialed legitimated western knowledge. She is a senior academic, promoted to a professor during the time of this supervision. So how did Valerie learn to supervise in this context? By learning to make responsible mistakes, by learning to learn with Anthony and by learning to recognise and negotiate the complexity of their relationship which brought together numerous expertises. Tis relationship is not a one-way expertise led by the professor.

We might call this mistake responsible insofar as Valerie is taking up her 'collective responsibility'. Tis demanded training herself to be watch- full of academic practices that delegitimate Aboriginal knowledge, to recognise and understand the mistake she made in not only not 'getting' what her PhD student was writing to her, but in not recognising the overlay and domination of her own western-centric knowledge. Over time, and with learning and patience she grew to listen, and heed these words, their author and her own mistaken assumptions about Country.

In her relationship, she is able to make a responsible mistake because she doesn't enter a zone of administration; but rather moves to a political space of relationship. Here she is required to hold a relationship of respect and at the same time, her collective responsibility in a settler colonising society. She must work at her academic positionality and her history as a non-Aboriginal person in Australia. Valerie needs to do these things because she *is* a member of this settler community. Tis member- ship necessitates collective responsibility. Arendt makes this resoundingly clear,

> We can escape this political and strictly collective responsibility only by leaving the community, and since no man (sic) can live without belonging to some community, this would simply mean to exchange one community for another and hence one kind of responsibility for another (2003b, p. 150).

Therefore, to make a responsible mistake means being grounded in the knowledge of membership of settler colonialism and the collective responsibility.

Swayed by her positionality as a western academic, Valerie assumed she knew and understood the words. The issue is that while that positionality maintained its arrogance she could not welcome Yuin knowledge. It is important to point out that Valerie was not new to being in Aboriginal spaces. This gives us pause to consider that disrupting colonising narratives in universities is not a matter of an administrative 'badge' one can wear or a nice gesture (Daniels-Mayes et al. 2019); it demands of us that we continually enter into and strive to remain in the challenges of political spaces.

Prioritising Aboriginal Protocols in Research to Disrupt Western Research Conventions

Prioritising Aboriginal research protocols was an important approach that Nyssa and Valerie used to create the Lead My Learning campaign to promote education (Murray and Harwood 2016, Harwood & Murray, 2019a, b). Nyssa and Valerie's research is from Getting an Early Start to Aspirations, a project funded by the Australian Research Council.[1] This project adapted social marketing techniques to co-create Lead My Learning, an education promotion campaign for Aboriginal and non- Aboriginal parents who had experienced educational disadvantages. Fieldwork involved extensive in-depth research in New South Wales, Australia in urban regional and rural communities where there is considerable socio-economic and educational disadvantage.

The amount of time given to building relationships is one example of how prioritising Aboriginal Protocols improved this

research. Research planning was now underpinned by making time for culturally responsive caring relationships (Daniels-Mayes et al. 2019). Assumptions about timing could also be revised so that the project was respectful of Aboriginal peoples and Aboriginal community commitments. By prioritising Aboriginal protocols of respect, reciprocity and relationships, western- centric and settler colonising practices that dictate research design, methodologies and assumptions about Aboriginal people were disrupted and displaced. Enacting this commitment to Aboriginal protocols meant remaining firm in the resolve of respect, learning to listen and establishing reciprocal relationships.

Led by Nyssa's understanding of building relationships as an Aboriginal Woman and through her extensive experience with Aboriginal community organisations, Valerie, as a non-Aboriginal woman, was able to learn. Rigney (2006, p. 42) notes that "Indigenist research principles can be drawn upon by non-Indigenous researchers who uphold its principles for Indigenous self-determination". So, instead of the focus being on insider and outsider, "what we must focus our attention on is the quality of relations with the people we seek to represent in our texts" (Narayan 1993,
p. 672). Attention to the quality of relationships occurred because Aboriginal research protocols weren't just *included*; they were prioritised and placed into a position of dominance.

Undertaking successful research with Aboriginal peoples and their communities requires the investigator to acquire new ways of working, ways that often fall outside of the established university ways of knowing and doing, or rule of administration. Oftentimes, this involves making responsible mistakes so as to not be sucked back into the mainstreamed system (Castagno 2014; Ladson-Billings and Tate 2006). Prioritising Aboriginal Protocols in research means getting better at avoiding mis- takes and quicker at recognising them, and gave Valerie and Nyssa a language to name the practices they needed and a way to speak about terra nullius-styled western academic research practices that oftentimes delegitimate Aboriginal ways of knowing and being.

Resistance within the Academy

As a Kamilaroi PhD student, Sheelagh was highly aware of the need to undertake her research in 'proper ways' (borrowed from Aunty Nangala, personal communication, 23 June 2013). Sheelagh's research was with community nominated, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers. Sheelagh sought to reveal a counterstory of Aboriginal education success through a critical ethnography at two sites in metropolitan Adelaide, South Australia. Principles of the Indigenous storying methods of yarning (Bessarab and Ng'andu 2010) and Storywork (Archibald 2008) provided a framework for doing this research in 'proper ways' (borrowed from Aunty Nangala, personal communication, 23 June 2013). However, undertaking her research according to Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing was frequently met with resistance from within the academy. As so eloquently argued by Indigenous scholars Kovach (2009, p. 31) and Wilson (2008, p. 127), much of the energy of Indigenous peoples has been trying to 'ft in' to the Western system or resist being 'fitted in' or 'sucked' back into the mainstream of the academy. Here we provide three examples to illuminate the discussion.

Firstly, Sheelagh avoided scholars that she referred to as 'dead white guys', stating that as excellent as they may be, enough scholars had privileged their voices (Daniels-Mayes 2016, p. 8). (This meant a near absence of Michel Foucault, for example, much to the dismay at times of her two 'white', male supervisors!) She chose instead to privilege, where possible, the voices of those scholars who were Indigenous or had a lived experience of marginalisation or minoritisation. This enactment is referred to within CRT as the privileging of stories and counterstorytelling, which challenges the long promoted deleterious narrative of non-existence or legitimacy of those whose voice has not traditionally been given power.

Secondly, Sheelagh used what became known as an *accessible research vernacular* (Daniels-Mayes 2016, p. 78). Language can be used to converse and learn but so too can it be used to discriminate and exclude. Consequently, within Sheelagh's research three genres of English were used: Standard Australian English; Aboriginal English (AbE);

and Academic English. Within the research, these three languages were often navigated through the use of metaphor. However, while the use of an accessible research vernacular gave Sheelagh's Aboriginal and non- Aboriginal participants access to the research, it met with resistance from within the university. Indeed, she was informed repeatedly that her PhD writings were not 'academic' enough.

Third, while the research had to receive ethical approval from both the university and the relevant education department, it also needed to be approved from the Aboriginal peoples and communities themselves. From the standpoint of being an Indigenous/Aboriginal/Kamilaroi researcher, Sheelagh did not expect to be bestowed with automatic 'insider' status; quite simply, she is not. Sheelagh belongs to a freshwater language group, far distant from the Aboriginal Country where the research was located in or, in some cases, to the Countries of her research participants. Rather, she is expected to undertake research in 'proper ways' (borrowed from Aunty Nangala, personal communication, 23 June 2013) by communicating with individuals and groups, and by learning and participating in appropriate Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing relevant to the community with whom she is engaging. Furthermore, Sheelagh is expected to work respectfully, reciprocally and relationally. Tis process of 'ethical approval' takes time, time that is not accounted for in a four-year doctoral study programme.

As Australian Indigenous scholar Nerida Blair argues,

> [T]he gaze applied is done knowing that there are differences not from the vantage of trying to label and box these differences in values and concepts that speak a different language, but that they have different ontological and epistemological roots (Blair 2015, p. xxi).

Working now as an Aboriginal academic, Sheelagh is highly conscious of her responsibility to undertake research that privileges Aboriginal knowledge and peoples (AIATSIS, 2012). Likewise, she is highly aware of her responsibility to supervise Aboriginal students in a way that enables them to work in 'proper ways' and to reduce their energy expelled in resisting being assimilated as is often expected by the administration of settler colonial universities. Overall, Sheelagh

aims to work in a way that disrupts and unsettles the deleterious traditions so as to affect the whole humanity (Herzog 2004).

Conclusion

Perhaps the focus of research within the academy should shift from the administration to the purpose of research. For example, Indigenous researcher Shawn Wilson asserts "Research is not just something that's out there: it's something that you're building for yourself and for your community" (2001, p. 179). We have argued in this chapter that if universities are to fulfil their unique responsibility of social justice with Aboriginal peoples and their communities, then the focus should be on what they are building with Aboriginal peoples and their communities. Likewise, this chapter has argued that if education is to be of benefit to Aboriginal peoples and their communities, to release them from locked- in inequality, then universities need to work in a way that legitimises Aboriginal knowledges, methodologies and protocols.

Settler colonialism in university education is, not a thing of the past, and to draw on Arendt, "we would rather 'administer things' than negotiate relationships" (Strakosch 2016, p. 29). As we have sought to show, this is crucial to comprehend if universities are going to improve their efforts in social justice. The problem of the past is helpful for settler colonialism in Australia, since rejecting zealotry to 'put it in the past' actually brings universities to a place where politics can thrive and rule by administration can be seen, at last, as imprudent thoughtlessness.

Notes

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