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14. THE PLEASURE AND PAIN OF ABORIGINAL BEING IN THE UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal education is a relatively recent phenomenon within higher education and its inclusion has given rise to complexity that is at once subjugating and liberating. We offer stories of critical moments in teaching within the university to represent the complexity as a continuum of experience ranging from pleasure to pain. Viewed through a critical theoretical lens the stories told demonstrate how the intersectionality of race and power remains relevant to the position of the Aboriginal academic in teaching Aboriginal studies to primarily white undergraduate students or in the teaching of Aboriginal students at the preparatory level. In particular this chapter examines the race based hazards associated with teaching about Aboriginal histories and societies to the uninitiated and resistant white learner whilst the teaching about white learning codes of the university within Aboriginal ways of knowing presents a differing pedagogical challenge. We draw upon our doctoral studies and current teaching to inform how the Aboriginal academic is called upon to deflect institutional and ideological whiteness and yet needs to remain centred in this space to be effective for teaching the next generations of Aboriginal learners. Riding the pleasure-pain continuum poses challenges not only for the Aboriginal academic but also for the Australian university which has responsibility to increase its Aboriginal workforce. The chapter unpacks this problematic to reduce the harmful effects of the race/ power tangling on the body, mind and spirit of the Aboriginal academic whilst exposing and decentering whiteness in the university.

As is important within our cultural practices as Aboriginal women we introduce ourselves as Alyawarre for Gilbey and Ngugi/Wakka Wakka for Bund. We also identify ourselves as experienced academics in the field of Aboriginal higher education though we are classed in the academy as early career researchers. Together, and at the time of writing, we constitute the permanent Aboriginal academic staff of an Indigenous academic site in a regional university. We draw on our doctoral studies to locate this chapter within a critical theoretical lens, in part informed by the study of whiteness to elucidate the intersectionality of race and power at ideological, institutional and individual levels (Dyson, 2003). Additionally we draw upon our collective experiences in teaching both Aboriginal studies/education at the undergraduate level and teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at the Pathways Program level. We unpack the socio-political complexities that work to position the teaching Aboriginal academic on a continuum riding through experiences of pleasure and pain. This chapter is
organized in two parts with the first speaking into critical moments of teaching pleasure for the Aboriginal academic and the second part speaking into teaching pain. We conclude with strategic advice to the Australian university that struggles to build appropriate numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academic staff and at appropriate levels concomitant to agendas signaling the need for a National Indigenous Higher Education Workforce Strategy (IHEAC, 2011). It is our thesis that the lived day-to-day experience of the teaching Aboriginal academic cannot be negated in this consideration if the academy is to be a site of educational invitation for our communities and a site of safety for work through exposing, naming and decentering its whiteness.

CONTEXTUALISING MOMENTS OF PLEASURE

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educational site where we are employed has, within the past two years, undergone a review. In terms of course and program offerings the site offered a Pathways Program specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, a core course in initial teacher education and a minor studies in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. The Pathways Program was offered with various levels of success, measured in terms of graduating and articulating Indigenous students into degree level studies. The particular educational circumstances of our student body meant that past structural impediments to formal education had to be eliminated. The criteria for entrance in to the Pathways Program was often restrictive to some of older students and to our students who didn’t have the luxury of full schooling. The creation of three pre-entry subjects provided opportunities that otherwise would have been denied. In post review mode, Gilbey set about transforming the program to deliver a preparatory studies that was both epistemologically and pedagogically grounded in a blackness that drew from Indigenous knowledges with an additional need to decode the skills required by our students to negotiate a higher education.

Author 1 (Kathryn Gilbey) Speaks: The Power of the Telling

The pleasure of our positions within the university sector comes from knowing that we are doing ‘some good’, making change, chipping away at the behemoth that is the University and western academia. Through implementing a methodology where telling and sharing our own stories, with our own people is centred we slowly begin to identify that which matters through a shared practice of knowing and being (Martin, 2008).

The pleasure experience comes from dialogue about a pathways program delivered at a regional university and uniquely written by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. IHEPP is the Indigenous Higher Education Pathways Program and has existed as a safe place for First Nations students to find their way into the sometimes unwelcoming environment of western academia. Translating into the whitestream (Andersen,