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FORUM

# The cultural interface tension: doing Indigenous work in the academy

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**Abstract**
This article explores Vanessa Anthony-Stevens and Sammy Matsaw's paper "The productive uncertainty of Indigenous and decolonizing methodologies in the preparation of interdisciplinary STEM researchers". That paper reports on a small qualitative study on how STEM students in the field of natural resources management react to the inclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing in their interdisciplinary research methodologies course. The authors are engaging contested intersections of knowledge that are notoriously difficult to negotiate. I argue that the inclusion of Indigenous 'ways of knowing' into the water resource management curriculum is based on Morgan's (in: McKinley, Smith (eds) Handbook of indigenous education, Springer, Singapore, pp 111–128, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-3899-0) idea of the 'guest paradigm'. At the same time, and in contrast, I also argue that the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum cannot just occur in the classroom but needs to be considered at an institutional and individual level as well. The project should be seen as a small step within a wider Indigenous agenda of decolonizing the Eurocentric curriculum.

**Keywords** Indigenous knowledges · Decolonizing methodologies · Ways of knowing · Indigenous curriculum

## An unwillingness to accept

Indigenous academics are often asked if they will contribute a lecture or workshop to a course designed and taught by non-Indigenous academics. I recall in my first week starting in my new position one of my colleagues bursting into my office with a big smile welcoming me to Melbourne and telling me she had been waiting for my arrival. I thanked her for

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This review essay addresses issues raised in Vanessa Anthony-Stevens and Sammy Matsaw's paper entitled: *The productive uncertainty of indigenous and decolonizing methodologies in the preparation of interdisciplinary STEM researchers*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11422-019-09942-x.

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her words of welcome and inquired why she had wanted me to arrive hoping it would be a well thought through analysis of the current state of affairs with the lack of Indigenous education in the faculty courses. However, it eventuated that she wanted to ask me if I would teach one of her classes in the next couple of weeks to fulfil the 'Indigenous education' objective in the course outline and, at the same time, it would fill in one lecture while she was attending a conference in the UK. I was disappointed but not shocked. I did not have to think about my response. I declined the offer. I did try to explain that a one-off lecture was not a meaningful space for Indigenous people's educational concerns and challenges within the structures and practices of education. She left disappointed and confused. She thought she was doing the right thing by asking the person who was to take responsibility for Indigenous education in the school to do the 'Indigenous' lecture. The refusal of this request is not that I think teacher education students should not be exposed to and taught about Indigenous education. Far from it. It is that by doing an Indigenous 'guest' lecture or workshop for the non-Indigenous teacher you are 'fitting Indigenous work' into another's frame, and by doing so allowing non-Indigenous peoples to (continue to) write the Indigenous story. And maybe even be somehow complicit in giving others the power if we as Indigenous academics agree to do it.

The authors, Vanessa Anthony-Stevens and Sammy Matsaw, undertook the challenge of addressing inequities among knowledge systems in the academy. In re-writing, teaching and researching a 'Ways of Knowing' module for an interdisciplinary program in the preparation of social-ecological researchers they were able to increase the focus on Indigenous research. So the reader is clear let me position myself in relation to the paper.

I am a Māori academic who has spent most of my life in Aotearoa New Zealand. I have written previously about my 'body of knowledge'—my connection with the land and the people in Aotearoa New Zealand (McKinley 2007), my ancestral homeland. Professionally, I have worked as a secondary school science teacher and as an academic researching in Māori education for all my life. But currently, I am privileged to be a visitor on Wurundjeri land in Narrm (Melbourne), Australia, working at the University of Melbourne. I have been employed to work with Indigenous faculty across the university to build Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education programs. I do not speak for Indigenous Australians, and I use my knowledge of working in Aotearoa New Zealand as an Indigenous academic to help guide my work in Australia. I am not an Indigenous Australian but instead in the moment of my refusal to give a lecture I saw myself as a 'settler' accomplice "in the decolonial project [needing] to assume the stance of the advocate (not spectator) for Indigenous rights and perhaps more importantly, for *whitestream transformation*." (Grande, 2019, p. 1026 original emphasis). I am, like Vanessa Anthony-Stevens, an interested 'cultural broker' in Australia. I consider myself a 'knowledgeable ally' informed by the work that Māori academics have done in Aotearoa New Zealand over the last three decades or more (Smith and Smith 2019).

Establishing conditions in the academy that move beyond what Aboriginal academic Bob Morgan (2019) has identified as the 'guest paradigm' are a challenge for all Indigenous academics. Morgan refers to policies that target equal access, cultural affirmation, mitigation against racism and marginalization, and the need for social and restorative justice, for Indigenous students as examples of having "a "*guest relationship*" wherein non-Aboriginal people create and administer the terms and conditions that regulate Aboriginal involvement and participation in education systems" (Morgan 2019, p. 121, original emphasis). Morgan's desire is to create spaces, in a similar manner to the authors of the article under discussion, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples lead their own transformative educational processes. Seeking space for Indigenous 'ways of knowing', as

in Anthony-Stevens and Matsaw's article, is about rejecting the Eurocentric teachings of colonialist systems as the only means towards a decolonial outcome. This object is shared by most Indigenous peoples worldwide, particularly those who are minority populations in their own countries.

The featured study in the article of Vanessa Anthony-Stevens and Sammy Matsaw is part of a refusal to accept a 'guest relationship' with higher education institutes. The article highlights concerns related to how educational structures in colonized societies work to reproduce dominant interests. Matsaw wanted graduate students to undertake an interdisciplinary STEM research course as part of their preparation in the natural resource sciences, so they would be exposed to and could consider Indigenous ways of knowing in relation to water management, with the ultimate outcome being that the students, as practitioners, would feel more comfortable to be able to consult with and include Indigenous communities in decision-making. Their rationale was that as Indigenous lands are increasingly becoming the focus of natural resource management and climate science, the students undertaking the course need to have an understanding of Indigenous 'ways of knowing' as foundational in their preparation as social-ecological researchers. Indigenous peoples have long understood the importance of a deep relationship with the land, and the relationships between all things (McKinley and Smith 2019). Yet Indigenous peoples have been, and continue to be, excluded from the STEM disciplines at all levels, particularly in schools (McKinley and Gan 2014) and, hence, from positions in the science academy. So the question that arises is what does this small study achieve and how does it fit an overall 'Indigenous space-making' picture?

## Working the cultural interface of the academy

The academy is a contested knowledge space where Indigenous people's concerns and issues intersect with the established disciplines. As Anthony-Stevens indicates in her story, this is nowhere more evident than in the sciences. Australian Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander academic, Martin Nakata, argues it is not possible to bring in Indigenous knowledge and place it in the curriculum unproblematically "as if it were another data set for Western knowledge to discipline and test" (2007, p. 8). Nakata contends that bringing Indigenous knowledge into the academy positions it similarly within discursive fields as any other knowledge about Indigenous peoples. In other words, non-Indigenous or Western parameters give shape to the Indigenous knowledge discourse, including who can be a knower, what can be known, and what constitutes knowledge. He writes:

> In the academy, and in Australia—whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, lecturer or student—most of us develop our general and/or detailed understandings of Indigenous knowledge, traditions, and practices via the interpretations and representations of it in the English language by Western knowledge specialists or scientists. This is not to deny that some Indigenous students and lecturers develop knowledge in situ in Indigenous contexts. But, it is to suggest that the larger conceptualization and characteristics that describe and situate Indigenous knowledge vis-a-vis Western knowledge, comes to us through the filter of its discourse. (Nakata 2007, p. 9)

Doing Indigenous work inside the academy is a struggle, but it has the potential to create critical and meaningful spaces despite Nakata's challenge to us all. While many Indigenous academics teach subjects with our non-Indigenous colleagues, the aim in

struggling to transform institutions is to seek more ‘authentic’ spaces for Indigenous development and advancement.

Higher education institutions encompass an array of challenges for Indigenous peoples to seek authentic spaces (Smith and Smith 2019). The interrogation of academic institutions occurs at two levels, firstly the academy as a broader institution of knowledge, and secondly, the institution as a single entity located on lands that have histories that are context specific. But, the two levels are always intertwined and overlapping as indicated in Anthony-Stevens and Matsaw’s article. Finding authentic space within the interdisciplinary STEM course the following year, and reading the responses received from some of the respondents indicate ‘authentic space’ is not an easy space to find in fitting into another’s curriculum. As noted in Anthony–Stevens and Matsaw’s article, students attending their institution in the USA have their learning (mostly unknowingly) rooted within the academy and its colonial roots. The key is to try to get students to realize and then understand how contemporary institutional practices are deeply connected to historical practices, as the events of the past shape the present.

Anthony-Stevens and Matsaw found their work with the ‘Ways of Knowing’ module might constitute a small step “toward breaking down the hierarchies which support centuries of Western-centric knowledge supremacy” (p. 16), but it was not nearly enough to support the “deep work of substantive changes in graduate study”(p. 17) required to bring about change. And they are right. This featured article is an example of Morgan’s ‘guest paradigm’—being ‘allowed’ to teach a small number of lectures/classes on Indigenous research methodologies. However, I do not want to dismiss this small study as a learning experience for all. Most universities, in countries who have undergone various forms of European colonization, have a tendency to interpret the world in terms of European or Anglo-American values and experiences.

The work required to make changes in the academies is significantly more than inserting a few classes. Indigenous work needs to be seen as part of a bigger Indigenous agenda. To do this, Graham Smith (1997) argues it is important for Indigenous peoples to develop our own Indigenous theory (from our experiences and histories) that are critically informed in order to ensure the work is enduring. Theory can then inform a suite of interconnecting strategies to be applied across a number of institutions—multi-sited and multi-pronged. An example of this multi-sited and multi-pronged approach at work in Aotearoa New Zealand is both the work within traditional universities and the development of new Māori tertiary institutions. While there is much work being established in ‘mainstream universities’ (see Smith and Smith 2019 for examples), there has been the establishment of three Māori universities that can advance different agendas for Māori in a way that the more traditional universities cannot achieve. For example, these higher education institutions can teach complete degree programs in Māori language and develop courses more targeted to Māori concerns, such as resource management courses for Māori communities working their own land. In addition, there are Māori nursing courses that focus on Māori health needs determined by the current complex health issues shown in the health indices. These developments, which took several years to initiate and establish, have produced a number of positive effects such as increasing the number of health care workers by developing Māori-focused courses. We also need to be open to evaluating the impact and effects of all our strategies—the development of new ideas needs to be tested through our practices and discarded if needed. Even ideas that do not work as we hoped are important in our endeavours.

## Staying with multilevel learning

The findings of the paper highlight two issues as identified by the authors—science as more expansive, and grappling with power and settler colonial discomfort. I like to think of these as parts of our learning process. As educators, we are familiar with students reflecting on their learning—new ideas and how they align (or not) with the ideas we currently hold is an important initial step in learning. Students tend to be very tentative at this stage, particularly with Indigenous knowledge. In my own experience with teacher education students, there are two things at play as they process these ideas. Students do not come to our classes devoid of ideas associated with Indigenous knowledges and the people who are teaching them this work. The ideas might not take them far, they may be incorrect, but they do have ideas. Students can show a reticence not often associated with graduate students as they move through a double confusion—firstly grappling with the new concepts and trying to work out how they align with their current schema of knowledge, and, secondly, dealing with the fear of learning brought on by being in a context where they are not sure of the rules. My graduate student teacher candidates often mention they are scared of making mistakes and being 'told off' when they are incorrect. Whether one thinks these reasons are valid or not, students often choose not to say anything rather than ask questions or offer opinions. Unfortunately, students often have a limited understanding of and belief in Indigenous knowledge and its effectiveness, and furthermore there is a lack of understanding on how to implement it—to find its advantage over concepts they might already have.

On an individual level, it comes down to whether students believe issues of Indigeneity (that includes 'race' and culture) are related to and important for the practice of water resource management. If students believe the science of water management is 'race-neutral', then they will hold any statements made about Indigenous knowledge to a standard science frame, such as 'show me the evidence' and other statements evident in the paper. As Jan Morse (2006) argues, evidence is never morally or ethically neutral. The politics of evidence is not a question of evidence or no evidence but who has the power to control the definition of evidence, who determines the best methods to produce the best forms of evidence, and whose criteria and standards are ultimately used to evaluate the quality of evidence.

Grappling with power and settler colonial discomfort results in further layers of the learning task at hand. In a recent study of teachers' 'resistance' to implementing culturally responsive education, Rebecca Neri, Maritza Lozano, and Louis Gomez (2019) suggest that many hold beliefs disconnected to power. They suggest as schools become increasingly conscious of race and culture people draw on new understandings of racism that allow them to bolster their privilege. In other words, there is an increase in sympathy for Indigenous concerns but at the same time a lack of reflecting on one's own privilege and an unwillingness to distribute one's power in ways that are necessary for facilitating action. What this indicates is that it is unsurprising Anthony-Stevens and Matsaw concluded that "most [students] struggled to understand the necessity of unpacking colonial structures at work in their assumptions and research positionalities". Yet this is possibly the most important work that needs to be done. Sammy Matsaw argues that Indigenous people's integrity and futures are inextricably linked to the work of protecting the survival of Indigenous languages, knowledges, and cultures and it is not enough to just practise our ways of being and knowing. In this context, one way that Matsaw sees as a means to survival is to incorporate this work into the understanding and practice of 'stakeholders' involved with water resource management.

We know complex processes are at play when people process new knowledge. Students have to draw on their own experiences and resources to engage with any tensions between their personal experiences and perspectives and those being presented. They need to engage the tensions between Western knowledge positions and Indigenous knowledge. To engage critically and to synthesize their own understandings require particular cognitive and Indigenous literacy skills to allow an analytical back and forth between knowledge systems. It does not usually occur quickly. Paulo Freire (1970), in his work *The pedagogy of the oppressed*, argues that to learn and understand only occurs when one establishes a connected and participatory relationship with the natural, cultural and historical reality in which one lives. In Matsaw's attempt to retain some aspects of Indigenous people's ways of life, their relationship with their lands, and their consciousness of themselves as a distinct people, in the 'ways of knowing' module, he exposes his students to a struggle of oppression by modern societies. Unfortunately, high-quality supports needed for staff and students to work through the struggle are few and far between. As a result, to re-imagine what a water resource management program might entail that is responsive to Indigenous people's needs and for them to be 'at the table' when decisions are being made will continue to be reliant on what Morgan refers to as the 'guest relationship'.

## Conclusion

Māori legal academic, Moana Jackson, recently wrote "in the end, decolonization simply means having faith that we can still be brave enough to change an imposed reality" (2019, p. 101). As Indigenous peoples, we are continually asked to face what seem like unassailable realities of power and expectations—and to have the courage to break free from them. Colonization has always had dispossession of lands, lives, language, and power at its centre. As Jackson argues for Indigenous peoples, these are not things of the past or in distant memory, but a present that continues to link contemporary relations to the long dead European 'natural philosophers'. Dispossession is a form of violence—the "systemic reality of colonization" (p. 104). Breaking free from the dispossession and the ideas and practices which shaped it is the key.

We need to remember colonization by its nature is the privileging of one form of political power over another. At the same time, societies develop institutions, such as universities, to act as sites to exercise power. Universities exercise social, economic, and cultural control through hegemonic claims to ideas such as universality of knowledge and the building of knowledge hierarchies, by operating culturally bound institutional practices (Smith and Smith 2019). Jackson (2019, p. 109) sums it up well.

> … decolonization is not just about challenging and deconstructing the colonized "reality" but having faith once again in our own. To deal with the trauma and wrong that colonization inflicts while creating the hope for something better.

Hidden within the curriculum changes Anthony-Stevens and Matsaw were attempting to bring about is to dream of a better future. It is widely advocated by Indigenous peoples there is a need to develop transformative approaches to reconceptualize and create a space that is liberating. This liberating place is essentially a educative process, and it has to begin somewhere. This does not mean parts of modern Western science have no value; they do. Anthony-Stevens and Matsaw's argument is fundamentally concerned with the need for cultural knowledge and affirmation. Their paper contributes to the growing literature of

addressing the dilemmas and costs for Indigenous students and communities in negotiating the academic disciplines, including Indigenous knowledge representations of Indigenous people. It is particularly directed towards decolonial efforts in producing Indigenous knowledge and methodologies to counter and influence the disciplines and is a space of difficult translation.

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