# Race, the senses, and the materials of writing and literacy practices

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This chapter argues that the changing materiality of writing and literacy practices has an inherently cultural dimension, requiring shifts in dominant writing practices and counter-colonial literacy pedagogies. Such a shift requires relevance to the ecological world of Indigenous culture and experience, as well as mobile and creative digital environments where the materials of writing and literacy practices are constantly changing.

## Introduction

A radically transformed understanding of schooling success is needed to counter neoliberal conceptions of the purpose of education, which often emphasise future economic benefits to the nation. We argue here that race, the senses, and the materials of writing and literacy practices need to be theorised in what has been called the 'post-racial era', when racism is seemly hidden, irrelevant, or transcended (Cho, 2008). We also argue that the changing materiality of writing and literacy practices has an inherently cultural dimension, requiring shifts in dominant writing practices and counter-colonial literacy pedagogies.

Our first argument is to acknowledge the white-bound condition of societal structures that contributes to the long-term staying power of white privilege in developing literacy discourses and curriculum, and which functions as a form of historical reproduction, control, and privileging of materials and modes. Our second argument is the need to acknowledge the forgotten sensory nature of writing and literacy practices that typically vary across cultures. Understanding these two aforementioned arguments plays a changing and vital role in new

digital forms of textual production. Our third argument is the need to attend to the materiality and spirituality of writing and literacy practices, including the meanings embedded in artefacts. This argument is particularly relevant to the ecological world of Indigenous culture and experience, but is also relevant in mobile and creative digital environments where the materials of writing and literacy practices are shifting.

**Argument 1: White writing and literacy practices**

In an effort to address Indigenous writing and literacy practices, it is important to explore the concept of whiteness, or the implicit normalisation of oppression through the imposition of white schooling and culturally-defined standards of literacy practice. Whiteness is an essential part of the discussion in redefining and rethinking the role racism plays in our discourses and practices concerning the teaching of writing, because white schooling tends to idealise the white middle class at the expense of the culture and character of non-whites (Foley, 2008).

Some have conjectured that the current times are characterised by post- racial discourses that have emerged with the presidency of Barack Obama in the United States. It is sometimes perceived that because one black man has attained the highest public office, racism is now transcended and antiracist initiatives are less vital than in the past (Cho, 2008; Howard, 2014). This post-racial stance subtly intensifies the deniability of race, and race becomes unspeakable (Goldberg, 2012; Howard, 2014). A danger of the post-racial period is that in the false sense of Literacy tests and definitions of writing achievement are, in fact, part of a racial script. For example, Van de Kleut (2011) critiqued a reading and writing training program in Ontario that used romanticised portrayals of an Indigenous people in teaching demonstrations, books, and writing activities that served to perpetuate racism uncritically. security it promulgates, the continuing racism, oppression, and struggle experienced by many is denied, ignored, and privately intensified. Such issues have erupted in more cataclysmic ways than if issues of race were openly acknowledged and the tensions discussed. The silencing of racial references and the forgetting of racial history are two features of the current post-racial milieu (Howard, 2014).  The following discussion demonstrates how these practices are relevant to the teaching of writing.

In discussions of race and literacy it is vital to avoid the common error of positioning writing practices in ways that assume white superiority, or alternatively, that depict writing and literacy reform as an effort of white heroes who will rescue the racial 'other'. Such discourses ignore the white privileges built into so-called 'race-neutral', 'standardised', or 'universal' writing forms and requirements (Roman, 1997). The struggles of the racially oppressed are never knowable by whites, so attempts at racial identification with any racial other in education is not truly possible, however well intentioned. Such discourses also ignore the political responsibility of whites for the underlying and systemic consequences of racism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism that undergirds inequitable schooling and literacy testing.

Literacy tests and definitions of writing achievement are, in fact, part of a racial script. For example, Van de Kleut (2011) critiqued a reading and writing training program in Ontario that used romanticised portrayals of an Indigenous people in teaching demonstrations, books, and writing activities that served to perpetuate racism uncritically. The portrayals refused to deal with Indigenous people as people who live in the present, and not just the past. Researchers have long written about writing and literacy 'discourses' that marginalise children from different communities. We can name these unreflective discourses for what they really are – another form of racism.

The property functions of whiteness, such as cultural discourses, work structurally in schools to disadvantage those who 'do not possess whiteness' (Harris, 1993).  For example, a research project in an upper primary classroom in an Australian school demonstrated how Indigenous students and others from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds became marginalised – and even excluded from a movie-making project – because culturally/ socially determined habits, cultures, and values did not match the school expectations (Mills, 2011). Conversely, learners who were white gained greater access to the creative aspects of script writing and production than their non-white peers, because they were familiar with discourses of the Western educational system. As Tom, an Indigenous student identified during script writing, screen writing, and other multimodal aspects of group and class decision-making: 'I never get to speak' (Mills, 2008).  This was because the forms of speaking in Aboriginal communities were not the dominant ways of learning (e.g. raising hand to speak, directing eyes at the teacher, removing hat indoors). The translation of the literacy pedagogies and uses of multimodal design in an upper primary classroom were implicated in the reproduction of social stratification because certain students were unable to draw from their cultural resources.

A critical race paradigm for writing and literacy, which uses race as the framing theoretical lens, is essential for researchers, educators and students to counter a 'dysconscious racism' – that is, limited, distorted, and unreflective understandings of race that are so prevalent in educational spaces (King, 1991, p. 134). Without critical race practices, writing tasks can serve to reinscribe the whiteness of literacy practice in schools, silencing intercultural negotiation and respect for diversity. Critical race theory challenges the notion of racial neutrality, colourblindness, objectivity, ahistoricism (i.e. forgetting of historical forms of oppression), and meritocracy in schooling and literacy education. These challenges form the underlying values of the practices of democratic education for the varieties of cultural forms of expression (Van de Kleut, 2011).

In pedagogical terms, then, anti-racist approaches to literacy in the curriculum can work to unmask and explore racism through critical readings of classrooms texts about race and cultures. Multimodal writing tasks can involve written reflections on how cultural and racial issues have affected students' own lives. Storytelling and writing counter narratives can be employed to give testimony to the voices of the oppressed. Literacy lesson planning and enactments can use culturally authentic texts as models for writing in literacy lessons, from early childhood classrooms through to the upper levels of schooling (Nash & Miller, 2014).

As the nature of racism has shifted to become more complicated and sophisticated in politics, the public sphere, and scholarly debate, the form of antiracist education and resistance through anti-racist literacy frameworks must also change to make post-racial ideologies and practices visible, openly discussed, and challenged (Howard, 2014). This is because racism is perpetuated in subtle discursive and symbolic ways, such as through every day talk, teaching materials, and routines (Rogers & Mosley, 2006). Teachers should be able to talk about race with adults and children. This requires an active anti-racist and anti-white supremacist stance, using discursive actions to confront racism in the moment (Nash & Miller, 2014). A critical race framework is important across all levels of literacy and teacher education. Interruptions of the development of a racialised consciousness are necessary, and need to take place across a range of modes and media, whether writing words on a page, doing a cultural dance, or engaging in multimodal text construction.

 In practising racially inclusive literacy education, we need to pay attention to the sensoriality of communication across cultures. For example, Howes (2015), in his introduction to Mills'

(2015) book, *Ways to Sensory Literacies: A Compendium for the Digital Turn*, draws attention to a remarkable form of communication called quipu. This is a handcrafted series of specialised knots varying in form, dimension, and encoded meanings, which are suspended in strands from a main string. Each strand uses particular colours, and each quipucamayocs, or quipu specialist has an individual style or shorthand. Quipu is a highly sensorial practice involving a very different tactility, visuality, and spatiality to modern forms of communication. Similarly, Classen (1993) describes a feature of Indigenous Inca cultures, whereby each of the senses contributes a particular role in coming to know the world. Sensory experience is essential in learning about the world, and new technologies are increasingly involving different social forms of sensorial engagement for writing, reading, viewing and producing multimodal texts. Yet the role of the senses is often overlooked in white conceptions of schooling and literacy practices.

**Argument 2: Sensoriality of language and writing practices in indigenous communities**

Over the past few decades, studies in the anthropology of the senses has continued to build a critique of the privileging of signs or verbo-centric ways of understanding the world (Porcello, Meintjes, Ochoa & Samuels, 2010). While we have long recognised the socially situated nature of literacy and writing practices, the place of the senses is similarly vital, but often ignored. The senses can contribute to understanding one's relationship to the world and to others, and can function as a kind of structuring of space. For example, children's filmmaking on location can be interpreted as an embodied or 'emplaced' practice that involves interrelationships between the mind, the body, and place (Mills, Comber & Kelly, 2013; Pink, 2009).

The sensing body is not a programmed machine, even though we may exercise control over our bodies to conform to the disciplined demands of our working lives, but rather, it is active and responsive to its social and physical environment, capable of continually 'improvising its relation to things and the world' (Abram, 1997, p. 49). As Abrams argues, 'Our senses disclose us to a wide-flowering proliferation of entities and elements, in which humans are thoroughly immersed' (Abram, 1997, p. 48). While humans are not always consciously analysing their own sensory engagement with the mundane aspects of reality, the body is always emplaced in a tangible, physical environment that influences how we perceive the world at any given moment. In other words, for the socially situated nature of literacy and

writing practices, the whole sensing body needs to be acknowledged as a vehicle for the experiential, rather than studying the role of one or more senses (Pink, 2010).

Societies and communities develop their own sensory orders, or distinctive ways of valuing, combining, or creating meaning in relation to different senses. An anthropology of the senses has explored how individual senses become marginalised or elevated in different cultures and societies, and the critique of Western ocular centrism – the emphasis on what can be perceived visually, rather than learned through the other senses – has been a key theme (Dicks, 2013). More recent research has demonstrated the interrelationships between the senses, including an acknowledgment and renewed interest in the multisensoriality of human experiences (Porcello, Meintjes, Ochoa & Samuels, 2010).  This approach regards the whole, sensing body as the pathway into the experiential (Pink, 2009, p. 12).

Materiality of culture, of things, is an outworking or expression of the sensory order, as Classen and Howes (2006, p. 212) argue, '… every artefact embodies a culturally salient, sensory combination'. For example, there is dynamic multisensoriality of Indigenous cultural meaning – meanings that can only be understood when openly experienced, and intrapersonally and interpersonally communicated, within their original cultural origin and context. The multisensoriality of Indigenous culture is sometimes obscured by the cross-cultural consumption of Indigenous artefacts that are uprooted from their natural contexts to be displayed as disconnected objects in Western-style museums or commercial centres, where social mechanisms of whiteness that similarly shape schooling are embedded. Classen and Howes (2006) argue that this kind of use of culture can be potentially problematic, distorting the original sensorial meanings of culture.

Over several decades the anthropology of the senses has indicated that societies and communities have their own sensory order with unique modes of distinguishing, valuing, and combining the senses. Material culture gives expression to sensory orders, since every artefact embodies a culturally salient, sensory combination. For example, in a research project with an Indigenous school community in the region of the Yuggerah, Turrabal and Uragapol peoples, Indigenous and visiting non-Indigenous members of the teaching profession were warmly invited to participate in a welcoming ceremony. We were invited to walk into the depths of the bushland on the school property, within the heart of the living land itself, with its sights, bird sounds, and heat of the mid-day sun. The symbolic ceremonial ritual of receiving marks

of the earth, yellow ochre mixed with water, on our skin, was inseparable from our physical co-presence with each other and the encompassing land.

The marks were emplaced on our skin by the Indigenous students, which involved physically transferring the earthen mixture from person to person. We later participated in ceremonial washing to return the soil from our skin to the original earth. This was done to guard against tangibly and symbolically removing the soil from its place of origin. Rather, we returned the particles of earth to their physical coherence with the native land and its Indigenous peoples.

Drawing from research from two Indigenous communities in Western Australia, Mills, Comber and Kelly (2013) argued for the need to attend more consciously to the senses in digital media production. We demonstrated that literacy practices, in particular, filming, do not occur only using cognition, but involve the sensoriality, embodiment, co-presence, and movement of bodies. The films were created by pre-teen Indigenous and non-Indigenous children in Logan, Queensland, and by Indigenous teenagers at the Warralong campus of the Strelley Community School in remote Western Australia. The films were created through engagement in cross-curricular units that sensitised the students' experience of local places, gathering corporeal information through their sensing bodies as they interacted with the local ecology.

The analysis highlighted how the sensorial and bodily nature of literacy practice through documentary filmmaking was central to the children's formation and representation of knowledge. Knowledge and literacy practices are not only acquired through the mind, but are also reliant on embodiment, sensoriality, co-presence, and kinesics (movement) of the body in place. Filmmaking on location can be interpreted as an embodied or emplaced practice that involves interrelationships between mind, body, and place (Mills, Comber & Kelly, 2013; Pink, 2009). The use of the video camera encouraged both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to engage physically with their sensory and material ecologies, representing their emplaced experiences corporeally.

When we consider that new technologies are responsive to bodily movement, speech and breath, there is a new imperative to reconceptualise the multisensoriality of writing and literacy practices in different communicative situations. For example, as Walsh (2010, p. 221–239) elaborates regarding the sensoriality of just one form of literacy practice – on-screen reading: 'On screen reading incorporates multisensory activities such as searching,

viewing, browsing, scrolling and navigating together with the clicking and scrolling of a mouse, responding to animated icons, hypertext, sound effects, and the continuous pathways between and within screens'. The sensory dimensions of technology use become further layered when the user is also simultaneously mobile, such as when using a laptop or mobile device on public transport.

Clearly, there is a need expand our knowledge of embodiment and literacy practices, learning to attend to vital relationships between perceiving bodies, active minds, and the sensoriality of the environment, as Indigenous peoples have done for centuries. There is a need for educators to understand how bodies of different kinds and ages come to know and be in the world, and to communicate their multisensorial knowledge to others (Snyder, 2011).

**Argument 3: Materiality and spirituality of cultures and writing practices**

The third argument, and one which is tied to both race and the senses, is built on the materiality and spirituality of cultures and writing practices. Writing practices are  always connected  to  the  material resources at hand, at any given time and place, with their constraints and affordances (Bezemer  & Kress, 2005). Likewise, the material resources for communication are historically influenced by those who have used them repeatedly before (Jewitt, 2011). In contemporary societies, the materiality of communication is changing, and this is related to cultural, social, and technological developments (Haas, 1996; Sorenson, 2009).

Networked communication on the Internet, such as via social media, involves materially different ways of engaging with text, activities that involve new ways of relating to both physical and virtual spaces. For example, using mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablets, people communicate with a sense of immediacy with others who are distant in time and space via their devices, while simultaneously riding public transport, shopping, or walking. Communication has always involved interactions with materials, whether using yellow-ochre paint using hands on cave walls, writing with a quill or pen on paper, or using touch-screen and motion-sensing technologies. The material technologies of writing are culturally based systems. Technologies for communication are configured in remarkably different ways, requiring different orientations of the body with an array of transformed spatial, visual, tactile, and kinesic relations (Haas, 1996), whether walking with a camera to make a film, tilting game controls, or controlling a computer using the gaze of the eyes.

The materiality of communication in different cultures takes many forms.  For example, many Indigenous Australian communities have traditionally shared knowledge through  song, storytelling, dance, embodied art, visual arts, and carved artefacts with symbolic meanings, such as musical instruments, message sticks, and other tangible forms. The traditional materials of Indigenous cultures can be blended with new forms of knowledge sharing, such as digital storytelling. Indigenous communities have creatively utilised the contemporary media or materials of technological development for sustaining Indigenous heritage, and have elements that are dynamic, rather than static or fixed (Mills, 2014).

To many Indigenous communities, some of the most profound knowledge is perceived sensorially from the earth, the material substance of the world, such as rocks, rivers and trees (Abram, 1997). The worldview of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and their perception of the material nature of the universe, can be similarly understood as connected to a complementary spiritual perception. This can be seen, for example, in the stories of the Dreaming. The Dreaming refers to a period in which humans, animals, and natural phenomena find their origin and meanings in relation to totemic ancestors and the universe. As Hughes and More (1997) describe, 'The Aboriginal universe is basically one in which … the world takes on meaning through the qualities, relationships and laws laid down in the Dreaming' (p. 12). In this Indigenous systems of metaphysics, or meanings about the nature of materials and things, humans, animals, and nature are parts of an unchanging network of relationships and they can be traced to their great spirit of ancestors of the Dreaming period. For many Indigenous peoples' spirituality is seen as an internal connection to the universe that provides some sense of meaning or purpose in life. Spirituality is part of a cosmology or way of explaining phenomena within the universe, which also includes a moral code.

Indigenous spirituality is part of the driving force of resistance against the oppression of Western colonialism in which the intrinsic nature of holistic metaphysics is characterised by anti-dualism – separating the dimensions of personhood. It is the 'essence of personhood' and provides the seeds of Indigenous knowledge (Grieves, 2009, p. 17). The meanings and materiality of language in Indigenous cultures are intimately connected with Indigenous identity, which is connected to spirituality. In this sense, Indigenous spirituality should not be understood as a sense of self or sense of personal identity, but relational, collective, and transcendental, and connected to the material earth. Even in Western society, there has been a

renewed recognition that extends beyond the dualistic Hellenistic view of the mind-body relation. Humans are not simply immaterial or abstract minds captured or housed in inconsequential bodies, but are at once material and spiritual, while having capacity for abstract reasoning. While living and fully conscious, our thinking is rarely completely cut off from a flow of direct, perceptual experiences in a material ecology (Abrams, Pedulla & Madaus, 2003). In this sense, to deny Indigenous children the opportunity to communicate using the materials and meanings of their culture is to deny the development of their spirituality. For many Indigenous groups, such as to the Maori people, the failure of schooling to cultivate in students a strong cultural identity is an education that is partial and incomplete (Durie, 1998).

To illustrate the materiality of identity formation in Indigenous literacy practices, we reference research in an Indigenous school community in South East Queensland. Teachers were observed implementing units of English that connected the Australian Aboriginal birth totem tradition to multimodal literacy practices. A teacher of a Preparatory and Year One class enabled the students to read and retell dreaming stories that were connected in some way to the students' totem. Totemic beings represent the original form of an animal, a plant, or a natural object of the child's birth, kinship or tribe. To them, literacy involved making meaningful, cultural, and spiritual connections to the natural world. The children rediscovered the animal world through cultural and kinship identity ties, drawing pictures and writing words about their totem stories, and then sequencing scanned images of these pages as digital slideshows (Mills, 2014). The students were awakened to the familial, historical, and ancestral connections to the creatures in their local sensory ecology and their place in the surrounding earth. In this way, the meanings of literacy practices were entangled with the material and spiritual worlds, which were connected in performative or active ways to their identities.

## Conclusion

It has erroneously been assumed in discussions of race that 'white is the colour that need not name itself' (Willinsky, 1998, p. 8). We have argued that critical race theory can provide an important basis for critiquing assumptions of race in literacy and writing practices. Without contextualising discussions of writing and literacy in terms of historical oppression through white imperialism, and without publically naming racist literacy practices, we cannot present alternative perspectives, nor open mono-cultural white practices to negotiation and debate

(Van de Kleut, 2011). In a complacent 'post-racial era', where the rise of non-white leaders to political power is falsely seen as evidence of the advent of racial equality, the need to debate and negotiate issues of race and literacy is vital as the 'enemy of hegemony' (Bruner, 1996, p. 96).

We have argued here, as elsewhere (see Mills, Comber & Kelly, 2013; Ranker & Mills, 2014), for attention to the multisensoriality of literacy practices. Extending the sensory turn in social and cultural anthropology (Pink, 2009), writing and literacies can be re-envisioned as a sensory process that engages multiple dimensions of human perception that are simultaneously entangled with the emplaced, corporeal body and the mind. Moving beyond ocular centric definitions of literacy that prioritise texts in terms of what can be interpreted primarily through the eyes, the embodied and multisensorial nature of literacy is critical for understanding literacy practices in their fullness.  This need becomes readily apparent when we look at the variety of practices across cultures, such as the richness of Indigenous dance, music, artefacts, etchings, costumes, and body art, and the interdependency of the people with the land. A realisation of the sensorial nature of writing and literacies can also be generative for understanding human interactions with the modified affordances of technologies across time, that are responsive to human touch (e.g., touch- screens), body movements (e.g., motion-sensing technologies), voice and gaze (e.g., eye-control technologies).

Our overarching argument is to attend to the changing materiality of writing and literacy practices, which has an inherently cultural dimension. Burnett, Merchant, Pahl and Rowsell (2012) have argued: 'Texts must always be received within a material world and so literacy practices can be understood as materially situated, that is, connected to the material culture of the surroundings in which they occur' (p. 97). Language is material, whether spoken through the vocal cords of the body, written on paper, or painted on the skin (Haas, 1996). In contemporary society, the tangible materials and technologies of encoding and decoding practices are diverse and dynamically changing across times and communities.

The materiality of language in many Indigenous communities is similarly dynamic, and literacy practices can be transformed in schools to continue active relationships and reciprocity with people, animals, and the natural world. The argument is not to exoticise or idealise Indigenous language practices. Neither is this, as Smith (2009) states about Indigenous peoples in America, a 'refusal to deal with us as just plain folks living in the present and not the past' (p. 18). Rather, the materiality of Indigenous practices serves to

308

remind us of how writing has too often been extracted from its material and spiritual connections in the world, since it is always entangled in a more-than-abstract set of symbols that exist in the mind.

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