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# CONSIDERING THE WORK of MARTIN NAKATA'S "CULTURAL INTERFACE": a REFLECTION on THEORY and PRACTICE by a NON-INDIGENOUS ACADEMIC

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## Abstract

This is a reflective paper that explores Martin Nakata's work as a basis for understanding the possibilities and restrictions of non-Indigenous academics working in Indigenous studies. The paper engages with Nakata's work at the level of praxis. It contends that Nakata's work provides non-Indigenous teachers of Indigenous studies a framework for understanding their role, their potential, and limitations within the power relations that comprise the "cultural interface". The paper also engages with Nakata's approach to Indigenous research through his "Indigenous standpoint theory". This work emerges from the experiential and conceptual, and from a commitment to teaching and learning in Indigenous studies. It is a reflection of how non-Indigenous academics working in Indigenous studies can contribute to the development and application of the discipline.

What is needed is consideration of a different conceptualisation of the cross-cultural space, not as a clash of opposites and differences but as a layered and very complex entanglement of concepts, theories and sets of meanings of a knowledge system (Nakata, 2006, p. 272).

At an Indigenous postgraduate conference, I was inspired to hear Martin Nakata (2008) speak about his theoretical model for Indigenous research. Nakata offered constructive advice to all postgraduates, and explained his methodological approach to Indigenous research, incorporated in his model for Indigenous standpoint theory. He emphasised the importance of engagement with Indigenous studies, by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars. Nakata stated his wish for non-Indigenous academics to become conversant with his methodologies, and for them to begin engaging at the level of dialogue with the issues he raises in his work. It is important, he said, for non-Indigenous educators to be well-versed, for them to engage in Indigenous debates, to be aware of the struggles, and to have some awareness of the knowledge system that has existed in Australia for over 60,000 years, without which Indigenous survival would not have occurred. Nakata stressed that critical engagement with Indigenous methodologies is particularly important for non-Indigenous academics working in the discipline of Indigenous studies.

This paper is a response to Nakata's invitation for critical engagement with his work. My interest is motivated by my use of his concept of the "cultural interface" in my teaching, and my understanding of how this operates in my workplace. Specifically, in this paper, I want to make sense of how non-Indigenous academics function at, and contribute to this site of struggle: how I (we) learn to understand protocol, how we can be effective contributors to a rigorous anti-colonial pedagogy, and how we become savvy about what is required to support an Indigenous politics while juggling this with the "brownie points" we must collect on the road to a successful career. I have argued elsewhere that in my case, collaborative efforts have played a major role in my academic successes

(McGloin, 2008, pp. 81-88), but in this paper, I want to think further about the possibilities and limitations afforded by my position as a non-Indigenous teacher of Indigenous studies. It is a position that requires an on-going reflexivity about the contributions I can make, and it demands consideration of the nature of competing knowledges, as cited above "as a layered and very complex entanglement of concepts, theories and sets of meanings" that require non-Indigenous educators to acknowledge the implications of the dominance of Western knowledge systems from whence they speak, and in whose proliferation of knowledge they are implicated. So how do we balance our privileged white perspectives with competing knowledges, and at the same time, retain a sense of confidence in our ability as educators? As Nakata stated in his address to the postgraduate forum, without an understanding of competing knowledge systems, or an appreciation of the extent of their marginalisation within the academy, it is impossible to embed Indigenous perspectives into course work, impart these to future teachers, or engage with Indigenous colleagues in a way that is meaningful or productive. With this in mind, I consider Nakata's work at the level of theory and practice; that is, I want to bring to light the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives of higher learning, and to consider how ideas and practices come together in collaborative settings where relations of power are always an issue, and always, as Nakata says, skewed in favour of non-Indigenous academics.

My intention is to raise questions about what we do (and by this I mean "we" in the context of my own workplace: a collaborative Indigenous and non-Indigenous team) when teaching Indigenous studies, how we do it, and to think how it might be done better with a greater understanding of non-Western knowledge systems and their continued marginalisation within the academy. In marking the limitations of non-Indigenous participation within the disciplinary arena of Indigenous studies, it is important to think about ways of working within those limitations while still making a valid contribution to Indigenous pedagogy, and to students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who undertake Indigenous studies. Again, I have raised this elsewhere (McGloin, 2008). But the same questions, I think, bear repetition; good pedagogy is often a result of harking back to the same questions albeit in different ways. I have come to realise that effective participation in Indigenous studies demands acknowledgement of the responsibility involved in the process of generating and teaching anti-colonial discourse, along with a simultaneous recognition that this discourse is not static. Like others participating in this dialogue (Bierman & Townsend-Cross, 2008), I am interested in contributing to the "conversation" that will help us "think what we are doing" (Arendt cited in Biermann & Townsend-Cross, 2008, p. 149), and how

we can make effective and meaningful contributions to the discipline.

As a non-Indigenous educator, my subjectivity is inscribed by Western knowledges and Western cultural traditions. Or so it would seem. However, subjectivity is never quite so neat, and corporeal markers of academic "authority" can be sites of confusion, or worse, guarantors of suspicion when teaching Indigenous studies (Konishi et al., 2008, pp. 1-11). Non-Indigenous educators working in this field, are in my experience also located at what Nakata calls the "cultural interface", at times reflecting on their right to be part of Indigenous struggles while attempting to balance reflexivity with a commitment to speak with, or alongside, their Indigenous counterparts to redress the lies, silences and omissions that continue to shape Australian history, and to mark out the limitations of the Australian citizenry. I cannot speak for other non-Indigenous educators working in Indigenous studies. But my own experience tells me that what draws non-Indigenous academics into this field is a will to contribute to an anti-racist praxis, and to destabilise systemic inequity through teaching anti-racism at the level of local, national and international histories. In my particular case, my history as a female migrant from a working-class family continues to inform my interest in the gendered and racialised complexities of the Australian nation. In the early days of my family's arrival in the 1960s, I recall an instance following one of our perfunctory Sunday visits to the beach (like all migrants, we tried hard to "fit in"), where my father, a proud Scotsman, declared that he couldn't understand these Australians who "don't seem to like black people, and yet spend all their time lying on the sand trying to be black". This simple, but honest impression was one of many that generated a profound interest in the ways that nations are constructed, in what and who are included, and excluded, and in the tools of representation that are used to tell us who we "are" and "aren't". This was one of many statements, observations and comments that informed me of the politics of race in Australia, and continues to mould me as an academic.

From that personal history to the privileged position of an academic in the field of Indigenous studies, I negotiate a plethora of spaces and speaking positions that at times are difficult and frustrating, while at others, immensely satisfying and rewarding. I would have to say my position provides a sound basis for learning, one that demands consideration of my own subject position, and my personal history. I am reminded of Pugliese's reflections of the difficulty of incorporating personal histories into one's area of interest, as he responds to his own question "How does one incorporate a subjective history into an analysis of the transsubjective: the nation?"

This question, I would suggest, generates an untenable dichotomisation between the subject and her/his object of inquiry ... inscribed in this question is the effacement of a corporeal subjectivity in order for the question to be what it represents itself as: scholarly discourse under the guise of a pure and disembodied intellectuality (Pugliese, 1995, p. 236).

Pugliese challenges the liminal space whereby subjectivities exceed scholarly inquiry, imposing his personal history into his academic analysis, and refuting a neat separation of the two. Nakata also affirms the value of the personal and its power in relaying the effects of governmental practice. Nakata sees the use of personal anecdote as a strategy:

elect[ing] to use a "language register" which people understand and will listen to-I choose to weave my personal story into my more academic work rather than abide by Western academic or literary protocols (Nakata, 2006, p. 135).

My own interest in nation and identity is not the sole genesis of academic study. It has its roots in the entirety of life's experiences, in anecdotes such as that above, in multiple subject positions, experiences, interactions, and thus is not ancillary to my academic interests, but rather, an embodied position that informs all practices and perspectives. It is from my (undoubtedly gendered) relationship to the "story" as a valid form of transmitting knowledge that I have learned its value. In my teaching, I encourage the anecdote as a narrative tool that helps students to make sense of their personal history as they attempt to understand their subjectivity in broader national and global contexts. It is often from the narratives of students, and specifically those from Indigenous students, that I acquire a deeper understanding of what it means to be located at the "cultural interface" and to make those daily negotiations that "inform, constrain or enable what can be seen or not seen, what can be brought to the surface or sutured over, what can be said or not said, heard or not heard, understood or misunderstood ..." (Nakata, 2007, p. 199).

While frameworks for anti-racism are effective at the level of personal histories, they are also most useful when critical theory is incorporated into wider historical contexts. For example, although the struggles of Indigenous people in Australia have specific personal histories, as well as local and national histories, they cannot be neatly siphoned from the broader project of nation-building that has inscribed the figure of nation as white. Teaching anti-racism, therefore, is not merely a matter of preaching to the converted about the evils of racism, or even encouraging students to consider the wider implications of racism; most students will agree wholeheartedly that racism is a harmful force, and

understand to varying degrees its effects. Rather, an anti-racist pedagogy requires an understanding of the on-going construction of nation as a project that seeks to eliminate cultural and physical difference while at the same time relying on difference to identify itself in relation to that which is excluded. The establishment of nation as a recognisable entity is thus paradoxically dependent upon that which it refutes. In deploying anti-racism as a framework for teaching Indigenous studies, movement between the broad and the specific, global and national, national and local, and local and personal, is possible when unofficial histories mix with official accounts of national and global narratives. That is, the stuff of everyday experience can be made sense of in the context of official histories, policies, legislations, and relations of power that continue to structure colonial discourse.

In a broad sense, students and teachers alike are often beset by a kind of parochialism that can undermine a broad understanding of the complexity of issues that continue to inform racism as a set of practices. As Spivak says, "[A]s the humanities instruct us to instruct, critical theory distinguishes the discriminations of a global culture dominating our pitifully local mind-sets" (Spivak, 2004, p. 98). Indigenous struggles in Australia are part of an international and on-going history of global colonial violence. They are specific in historical circumstance, locally and nationally, and yet, often general in the sense that they formulate a set of histories, or rather, *experiences*, shared by Indigenous people in other colonised nations. Indigenous studies provides a disciplinary platform for incorporating the global, national, local and personal into a set of narratives that constitute a discursive formation made intelligible by Indigenous knowledges and histories. This counter-discourse posits a direct challenge to dominant discourses of race and nation and is located uniquely in the disciplinary area of Indigenous studies where it is constructed and taught mainly by Indigenous scholars, sometimes in collaboration with others, and always with the objective of challenging the historical tenets of colonialism while recognising its more modern manifestations in their often tacit, global forms. Indigenous studies also incorporates local struggles at the level of subjective everyday experience. And Nakata's theory of the "cultural interface" provides a way of thinking about Indigenous struggles in the everyday, *the locale*.

The "cultural interface" is a theoretical model that offers an explanation for the daily negotiations made by Indigenous people in colonised contexts. The concept provides a way of explaining and understanding Islander subjectivities as these have been and continue to be, constituted within colonial relations of power (Nakata, 2007, pp. 195-212), and can be extrapolated to think about wider Indigenous contexts, or indeed, other sites of struggle where marginalisation is the product of asymmetrical

relations of power. The “cultural interface” is a site of contestation, both a real and symbolic domain where Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjects daily engage, where battles can be waged, subjectivities re-conceptualised or re-articulated, and where the struggles of the everyday are not only sites of repressive force, but can also be the productive outcome of agency. The “cultural interface” represents a space of tension that generates the conditions of possibility for a multitude of positions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjects, between colonised people and colonial power structures. It is a site of daily wrangling where Indigenous subjects negotiate agency, fight for autonomy, and find ways of enacting agency to make sense of situations, in the Foucaultian sense (Foucault, 1977), producing discourse by interrupting networks of power that attempt to fix subjectivities. For non-Indigenous subjects at the interface, it is also a place of negotiation where, for the most part, unlearning can occur, and new knowledges given primacy. This is not to suggest that the “cultural interface” is one dimensional for non-Indigenous subjects; it can also be a site of struggle: the process of unlearning is never easy.

I find the “cultural interface” can be best understood as the site of daily negotiations, frustrations and tensions that are the lived realities of colonised people subjected to the dominance of *epistemes* that are outside of their own frames of reference. The interface provides a starting point from where sense can be made of the nonsensical, and from where non-Indigenous people can find ways of explaining the day-to-day struggles that accrue around the erosion of valuable knowledges, traditions, cultural practices and familial structures. The interface is an invaluable concept in the teaching of colonial histories and struggles, particularly so for non-Indigenous academics engaged in this work, who teach diverse student cohorts, often predominantly non-Indigenous, but whose objective is to engage with Indigenous issues and to contribute to the on-going task of developing anti-racist frameworks for making sense of the world. The “cultural interface” offers a way of understanding race struggles by positing visual spaces (i.e., the spaces where daily life is enacted, e.g., home, school, university, shopping centres) that intersect with theoretical or conceptual spaces (e.g., mind maps, intellectual or emotional ways of understanding). It is at the multiple intersections between the visual and conceptual that power relations are challenged, and oppositional perspectives affirmed (Nakata, 2007, p. 210).

At an undergraduate level, the interface is where Indigenous students undertake the highest of all honours in Western knowledge hierarchies, i.e., a university degree, often completing their entire degree with no reference at all to Indigenous perspectives in their chosen field. In the case of Indigenous

studies, this discipline offers students knowledge about Indigenous issues, but often from the position of non-Indigenous knowledges and standpoints; as Nakata notes, Indigenous studies has been a study of and about Indigenous people (Nakata, 2006, p. 269). Although this is changing as pedagogical methods, and the discipline itself acquires more interest, focus, and importantly, Indigenous scholars, there is still a need to consciously insert Indigenous ways of knowing (or make a space where they can be inserted by students themselves) into the content of subjects. According to Nakata, “it is often difficult for Indigenous students to contest the interpretation of the corpus [of Western knowledge systems] on the basis of what they know of their own culture” (2006, p. 221). So how do non-Indigenous educators go about the business of embedding knowledges that are outside of their own frames of reference? This is no easy question. But in my experience, there are at least some useful possibilities. Firstly, familiarity with issues that is derived from Indigenous sources is important. This doesn’t necessarily mean deference to Indigenous sources as always the “right” or “correct” perspective; what it means is that knowledge taught is consciously aimed towards Indigenous standpoints and perspectives, and that students are taught to actively challenge, and engage with the “truth claims” of Western epistemology. This invites critical thinking, a quality aspired to in most areas of the humanities, and integral to the understanding of colonial histories and subject positions, yet also a practice that, as many will testify, is institutionally tempered. Secondly, the validation of experiential knowledge is a valuable pedagogical practice. As I previously noted, anecdotes can be useful pedagogical aids in tutorials and seminars. Students who feel they can connect their experiences to a theory, or set of ideas that makes sense, can start to articulate the struggles of their day-to-day lives by situating experience within an intelligible schema. For Indigenous students, and for other students who occupy marginal spaces, anecdotes can provide a point of validation. Many such students are not always keen to share their experience, and may feel unsafe unless they are assured that the space is one where personal histories can be expressed in a non-competitive and non-judgmental domain for the purpose of sharing knowledge. It seems to me also that non-Indigenous educators teaching Indigenous studies, while ascribed with the authority of the academy, have the opportunity to take the focus from themselves as “experts” and engage with a Freirean (1976a, 1976b) pedagogical model that foregrounds mutual learning and begins from the standpoint that education is a political process. In locating a speaking opposition as a non-Indigenous teacher in an Indigenous learning environment, Freire’s work is useful in foregrounding the politicisation of all knowledge, and in understanding the relationship

between knowledge and power that structures how knowledge is hierarchised

In terms of destabilising the hierarchical arrangement of knowledge systems in higher education, there are practical ways that can undermine dominant discourses and foreground Indigenous perspectives and knowledges in curricula. In my tutorials, group work is always focused around the idea of re-thinking or un-thinking Western preoccupations with the topics at hand. This can be difficult as most of our students are non-Indigenous and points of reference are invariably located within the "familiar". De-familiarising can lead to a feeling of discomfort. For example, issues of gender are often related to Western preoccupations with feminism and issues of equity based on white feminist struggles. Standpoints offered by Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2003), Jackie Huggins (1998) and other Indigenous academics critiquing the perceived orthodoxy of Western feminism can produce noticeable unease for some students. I have also found that work in the area of whiteness studies can generate considerable anxiety for students if it is not contextualised in accordance with the power relations that structure other signifiers of subjectivity such as class, gender and so on. Resistance to ideas of white privilege is, in my experience, quite common, particularly from students who are from working-class backgrounds and who do not see themselves as racially or culturally privileged. Tutorial group work can bring these anxieties to the surface where they can be addressed in a nuanced way that encourages students to consider the intersections between race, class and gender that continue to inform race struggles.

Finally, in negotiating the "cultural interface" at the site of teaching and learning, non-Indigenous academics need to have some understanding of Nakata's concept of Indigenous standpoint theory. Indigenous standpoint theory is a set of parameters whereby analysis of various Indigenous research positions can be tested and where existing knowledge and power relations can be challenged, but importantly, for the purposes of this discussion, Indigenous standpoint theory offers a way of thinking about how to embed Indigenous knowledge into academic disciplines, curricula, into the teaching and learning praxis of universities more generally, and by extension, into public discourse. Indigenous standpoint theory moves beyond the considerations above to incorporate a formalised method of ensuring that Indigenous ways of knowing and being are best understood through the following three principles of knowledge production that recognise:

- The "cultural interface" as a contested knowledge space;
- The continuities and discontinuities of Indigenous agency;
- The continual tension that informs and limits what

can/cannot be said in the everyday (Nakata, 2007, pp. 215-216).

Nakata suggests that Indigenous people constantly negotiate these principles, understanding the sites of tension and the limitations of agency, while producing and contesting discourse from the *locale* where humour is often a communal point of reference.

Indigenous standpoint theory nods to feminist standpoint theory as this emerged in the 1970s as a way of understanding, what was at that time the broad and undifferentiated category of women's experience (Nakata, 2007, p. 213). And while a large body of work, specifically in the area of whiteness studies points to this un-differentiation, and demands an on-going review of feminist scholarship, feminist standpoint theory and its critiques provided a basis for many scholarly works that sought to understand patriarchal relations of power, and in the case of much "post-colonial" work, how these constitute colonial discourses.

A postcolonial feminist praxis, (although critiqued for its blindness to its own privileged origins in academia), offers a way to teach students about the intersections between patriarchal power and colonial discourses of race. Through methods that attempt to understand the hierarchical nature of patriarchal knowledge systems, and the marginalisation of women's knowledge in all its diverse contexts, feminist standpoint theory provides a starting point for analysis. Complicating this approach by looking at how this model can act as a basis for understanding Indigenous standpoints has been the trajectory made by Nakata in his development of Indigenous standpoint theory. Nakata acknowledges feminist standpoint theory (Nakata, 2007, p. 213) as a worthwhile basis on which to build a more specific model of inquiry that deals with specific, localised experiences, particular historical contexts, sites of colonial struggle, and the on-going marginality of Indigeneity at the level of institutional practice. Nakata particularises feminist standpoint theory, extending and building on its gendered premises by looking at the nature of knowledge itself, and conceptualising how an Indigenous standpoint can free up space for a spectrum of truths, experiences, and possibilities to occur through analytic inquiry:

It is not a simple reflection of experience and it does not pre-exist in the everyday waiting to be brought into the light. It is not any sort of hidden wisdom that Indigenous people possess. It is a distinct form of analysis, and is itself both a discursive construction and an intellectual device to persuade others and elevate what might not have been a focus of attention by others. It is not determinate of any truth but it lays open a basis from which to launch a range of possible arguments for a range of possible purposes (Nakata, 2007, p. 214).

In thinking about Nakata's approach to the ways in which Indigenous people can understand their position in the world, I return to the complications presented to non-Indigenous academics teaching in Indigenous studies. I have argued for some practical ways that can contribute to good pedagogical practice in this discipline that will generate student confidence and a strong class dynamic where discussion about issues of race and nation can take place in an atmosphere of sharing knowledge through self-reflection. But there are limitations, both imposed, often rightly so, and self-imposed, that regulate speaking positions. Non-Indigenous academics experience the interface as a site of struggle; they balance their recognition of the power relations that position Indigenous studies as a discipline within the academy, and by extension, Indigenous academics within the framework of academia, with the reflexivity required to teach Indigenous studies with level of confidence. This tension is best understood within the framework of on-going colonial power relations that are integral to all cultural institutions, and that continue to regulate subject positions and make the interface a site of struggle. As with all regulatory forces, though, struggle produces the capacity for change, and opportunities to undermining the repressive terrain of the "cultural interface". As Nakata tells us, the interface is where "people discard and take up different ways of understanding, being and acting in a complex and changing environment" (Nakata, 2007, p. 208). In responding to the challenge of trying to understand where I, and perhaps others, fit as non-Indigenous academics in the discipline, the idea of "tak[ing] up different ways of understanding" engages me at the level of behaviour: it asks me to consider what I don't, or more importantly perhaps, *cannot* understand.

This paper is an initial exploration of what it is to be non-Indigenous and to teach Indigenous studies, with all that this involves, and with an acknowledgement to the limitations of non-Indigenous understandings of Indigenous knowledge. It has provided some insight how Nakata's work can facilitate a more profound understanding of the implications, responsibilities, and ethics of non-Indigenous educators teaching in Indigenous studies. I reiterate my contention that some pedagogical questions are worth repeating and contend that for non-Indigenous academics working in Indigenous studies, the "cultural interface" is a site of negotiation but also, potentially, a place where reflection of praxis can be instituted in productive ways that can undermine the colonial relations of power that structure Indigenous education within universities.

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