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# Critical allies and feminist praxis: rethinking dis-ease

Colleen McGloin

*University of Wollongong*, [cmcgloin@uow.edu.au](mailto:cmcgloin@uow.edu.au)

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# Critical allies and feminist praxis: rethinking dis-ease

## **Abstract**

In Australian universities, non-Indigenous educators teaching Indigenous studies and/or Indigenous content must engage critically with anti-colonialism, not simply as lip service to syllabus content, but also, as an ethical consideration whereby consultation and collaboration with Indigenous scholars must necessarily direct praxis. Such an engagement might be referred to as a 'critical alliance': an engagement with Others about whom we are speaking that forms the basis for an ethical relationship. A 'critical alliance' with Others seeks always to undermine the colonial relations of power that discursively position both Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjects. This paper explores what such an alliance might 'look like' as a feminist practice, what will sustain it or give it substance so it can be a productive contribution to a more socially just pedagogy that gives emphasis to Indigenous struggles and Indigenous knowledge.

## **Keywords**

allies, ease, feminist, critical, praxis, rethinking, dis

## **Disciplines**

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Abstract

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Key words: white privilege; Australian Indigenous studies Indigenous critical pedagogy; feminist praxis; “critical allies”.

[F]eminist pedagogy is marked by the development of non-hierarchical relationships among teachers and students and reflexivity about power relations, not only in society but also in the classroom. (Crabtree, Saap, Licona, 5)

...new analytic spaces have been opened up in the academy, spaces that make possible thinking of knowledge as praxis, of knowledge as embodying the very seeds of transformation and change. (Mohanty, 195).

## **Introduction**

Indigenous studies in Australian Universities is a cross disciplinary area of study that draws from Australian, Maori, Native American, Canadian Aboriginal and other international Indigenous contexts in what Nakata describes as “an ever expanding corpus of knowledge” that “collects and redistributes knowledge about Indigenous people” (2006, 265-275). I teach Indigenous studies at undergraduate level in a small Unit where anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-colonialism and critical Indigenous pedagogy are core business and where the principles of both Indigenous and white feminisms are routinely incorporated into curriculum content and teaching. Despite the disciplinary focus of Indigenous studies, it is still the case, for well-known historical reasons, that most students (around 90%) are non-Indigenous. I am also non-Indigenous. I have the pleasure of working with and alongside Indigenous female and male scholars with whom I share a productive and mutually respectful alliance. My teaching demands that I have some knowledge and understanding of racialized histories in Australia and that I foreground Indigenous thinkers, theorists and perspectives as central to the discipline of Indigenous studies. The discipline I teach into takes leave from conventional multicultural teaching where a wide range of ‘Other’ interests

can be tidily collapsed into a hegemonic liberal orthodoxy under the nebulous rubric of social justice; Indigenous studies is, by comparison, distinctive: its content is anti-colonial, and by definition, anti-patriarchal, therefore always inflected by the inextricable axis of racial and gendered oppression. Australian Indigenous studies is grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems where history, politics, literature, art, cosmology, environmental concerns, and many other fields of knowledge have a basis in a system of knowledge that challenges Western hegemonic pedagogies, and indeed Western feminisms; pre-colonial gender relations were not based on the socio-economic preoccupations of Eurocentric thought. The same/different equation within the formation of this discipline is thus distinguished from a range of multicultural pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning by tens of thousands of years of survival prior to just over two hundred years of sustained colonial violence. During British colonisation, Australian Indigenous people were massacred, dispossessed of their lands, cultures and languages, and regulated under policies that enforced miscegenation, removed children, and continue to have the most devastating impact through high rates of early mortality, infant mortality, incarceration rates, and deaths in custody. We teach this history, as mentioned, to a primarily non-Indigenous cohort, with a commitment to understanding the force of white supremacy and to undoing, or demythologising the attendant misconceptions that continue to circulate about Indigenous people. We also teach Indigenous students and students from other culturally diverse backgrounds. What we do is thus difficult at times. It is by necessity intersectional, often messy and challenging for us and for our students. Although potentially rewarding, our endeavours are always underscored by the asymmetrical, colonial relations of power that position Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the academy and that can render fraught efforts to form alliances.

This paper explores what a critical alliance between non-Indigenous educators and Indigenous colleagues and students might 'look like' in the context of a feminist critical pedagogy where the demands of the contemporary neoliberal university are increasingly at odds with the principles that steer much feminist praxis. While the paper offers but a microcosm of the potential for effective, ethical and transformative "critical alliances" as a feminist pedagogical endeavour, it might provoke thought also for educators who seek to do better in their engagement with Others. This essay is in part reflective and contemplative: critical alliances based on unequal relations of power demand continuous rethinking on the part of those favoured by such power relations. A return to the same questions, problems and issues therefore is an on-going endeavour. I take on board Allison Jones' view of the "interminability" or "apparent *endlessness*" of the struggles in Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations where there is no sight of a "happy ending". As Jones notes, this is a difficult position for education, a field "obsessed with locating the problems for which we believe *redemptive solutions* can be found (5; italics in original). The contribution I make here reflects this "interminability". However, it also proffers an original discussion pertaining to Indigenous/non-Indigenous alliances by bringing together international feminist scholarship on critical alliances with the specificities of the Australian critical Indigenous pedagogy context.

Although this work comes specifically from an Australian Indigenous/non-Indigenous context to discuss the concept and practice of "critical alliance", some points might be extrapolated to other areas of cross cultural practice, although this is not to suggest a neat collapsing of all 'Other' histories, or indeed an essentialising of Otherness. In other words, while I would suggest that some ideas can be extended to broader cultural contexts, some

cannot, because they cannot be decontextualized from specific socio-cultural and historical contexts. At this tentative point of entry, I build on the work of other scholars who ask what will sustain an effective “critical alliance” or give it substance so that it can be a productive contribution to a more socially just pedagogy, one that reflects the efforts of feminist educators to not simply be seen as ‘good white women’ but to engage *with* Others with a conscious view to unlearning white privilege. Such praxis, consciously initiated and sustained will perhaps intervene in institutional relations of power with a view to affirming Other histories, and Other *epistemes*.

The paper takes the following course: first I will discuss the concept of “critical allies” as a feminist pedagogical endeavour that seeks to undermine the continuing force of sexism and racism. In the context of Indigenous studies, a feminist commitment to critical alliances with Others is further complicated by the sometimes competing demands of antiracism where gender relations for Aboriginal women, for example, are characterised by differential histories and social structures. Secondly, I examine literature by non-Indigenous women scholars whose work focuses on alliances. The scholars I identify are selected according to their provocations in forcing me to consider the complexity of what constitutes effective critical alliances – and indeed, the ethics of my own praxis. Next, I locate this scholarship in my own pedagogical practice through examples from a course I teach, *Critical Themes in Indigenous Studies*, where I identify the *dis-ease* that accompanies feminist efforts to teach, learn and become critical allies.

### **Critical allies, Aboriginal contexts and feminist pedagogy**

A “critical ally” in a feminist pedagogical context is an educator who sees her responsibility as being always, necessarily, a commitment to destabilising the prevailing

relations of power that structure her praxis. In other words, she maintains a critical consciousness about the dominance and force of whiteness and its attendant privilege as this structures all institutional sites. A critical ally attempts to intervene in the discourse of whiteness through a conscious process of unlearning and relearning. In practical terms, there are several ways this might be effected as a conscious political act including structuring teaching and input into curriculum development according to the principles of feminism and antiracism and balancing the priorities of these principles according to their intersecting and sometimes competing demands, or as stated in the framing quote by Crabtree *et al* characterised by a commitment to reflexivity, and to dismantling hierarchies, both in and outside the classroom.(2009, 5) Forging and maintaining an alliance based on destabilising existing power relations is not a straightforward proposition, however, especially in most higher education contexts where capitalising on privilege and individual prowess is to be aspired to and is often institutionally rewarded. In terms of effecting “critical alliances” there is invariably a gap between the signifier and signified, the concept and practice, between what we aspire to do and what we actually achieve.

I first became aware of the concept of “critical allies” in a conversation with an Indigenous colleague who, when I expressed “dis-ease” about being a non-Indigenous practitioner working in Indigenous contexts, (e.g. should I be here? I Do I have a contribution to make and if so, what form does this take?), said to me, “Indigenous people comprise just over two per cent of Australia’s population; we need critical allies”. This comment has since drawn to my attention three important points about white practitioners working with – in my case - Indigenous people. Firstly, it is often the case that our inability to cope with our own discomfort or complicity in oppression leads us to unnecessarily



burden our Indigenous colleagues with our anxiety, and difficulty in coping with our *dis*-ease and the constant requirement of self-reflexivity. As Black feminist scholar bell hooks warns us, “[T]hose white people who want to continue the dominant-subordinate relationship so endemic to racist exploitation by insisting that we ‘serve’ them – that we do the work of challenging and changing their consciousness – are acting in bad faith.” (1995, 194) In other words, in our ambitions to ‘get it right’, unless we are vigilant, we are invariably returned to dominating discourses we purportedly seek to challenge: or to put it more bluntly, our desire to be “relieved” takes the form of yet another imperialist urge.

Secondly, and following the first proposition, I would suggest that the hard work of effecting ethical alliances with Others, particularly in the context of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, should – indeed must – be undertaken by white scholars: i.e. given the discursivities that direct race relations generally, and specifically Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations in Australia, it is *our* responsibility, I would argue, to learn the protocols, ethics and practicalities of how we might offer our services as allies who are politically and socially motivated to forming collaborative relations that might position us as subordinate to the knowledge of Others. It is our task also to understand why there might be times when our efforts are not welcome. Certainly, we should not be seeking the labour of Indigenous colleague in a project whose focus is to unlearn our capacity for oppressing the subjects of our endeavour: our unlearning is our task; our efforts to establish trust through alliances is our task; and our commitment to a feminist praxis based on the acknowledgement of many forms of oppression in which we are implicated must also be our undertaking. To reiterate hooks, to burden Others with our discomfort is an act of “bad faith.”

Thirdly, since I began formally researching alliances with Others as a concept and practice in many and varied contexts, it has become clear to me that this is a research area undertaken primarily by white women scholars who are motivated by feminist pedagogical principles and who articulate discomfort at the knowledge of their complicity in racialized oppression. Feminist interest in forging critical alliances thus rests on understanding and opposing systems of oppression as these interlock and bolster one another. Forming critical alliances demands we cross borders, shift our thinking and not simply apply an abstract feminist sensibility to pedagogy, but that we try to develop a language for unlearning. Sue Jackson's discussion of critical pedagogy offers insight, "[A] feminist perspective can highlight the ways in which women, forced to write and think in a 'foreign' language, find ways to cross the borders where language differences are fought out and struggles and challenges can take place" (2010, 462). Jackson's discussion of the male dominated field of critical pedagogy draws attention to its race and gender blindness. She argues that feminist approaches to a socially just pedagogy, while grappling with the gaps and absences of male theorists such as Freire and Giroux, still need to "go further" (466). "Feminist theories of education", she argues, "centralise the experiential" ... "examine oppression in educational institutions in terms of gender, clearly linked to other oppressions of class, race, sexuality ..." and, importantly, "do not set themselves up as *the* new truth" (466, italics in original). As Chandra Mohanty attests, "[T]he academy has always been a site of feminist struggle" (2003, 170). It is crucial therefore, that feminist scholars continue to pursue the intersections that inform us as gendered and racialized subjects who both interrogate and refute limitations, and who see our alliances with Others as urgent political endeavours that favour mutuality, commonality, collaboration, consultation, *and* humility.

## **Critical Allies: Issues raised in the literature**

Although an understanding of colonial history is essential for the formation of alliances with Indigenous peoples, and must be a necessary starting point for political engagement and activism, experience and the literature assures this writer that a rigorous, cognizant commitment to acknowledging one's positionality, power, and privilege is also necessary. My introduction into thinking about how this might work in practice begins with the work of Anne Bishop's book, *Becoming an Ally* (2002) which draws from vast experience as a community development worker and educator in Canada. This work seeks to address oppression in its many and varied social and cultural contexts. Bishop's theorising of the intersections between racism and sexism across a multitude of institutional sites seeks to understand the nature of oppression, discrimination and bigotry. She asks fundamental questions about 'human nature' and social justice. These are starting points though. This is not simply an inquiry into the generalities of social oppression; Bishop asks more difficult questions about how oppression acquires legitimacy in certain contexts through the hierarchical arrangements of institutions where dominance by some groups over others is institutionally sanctioned. Through questions about 'how' and 'what' can be done at a practical level – and she offers many suggestions for this – Bishop identifies a kind of Freirean desire for hope throughout her work that sees alliances with Others as being a worthy and worthwhile "dream".

This dream is a vision of the world I would like to live in, a world based on cooperation, negotiation, and universal respect for the innate value of every creature on Earth and the Earth herself (18).

Although expressing what few would find fault with, Bishop brings to the fore ideas of collaborative effort in the practicalities of such a “dream”. Focusing on a universal concept of equitable social relations with all ‘Others’, she considers how power, labour, property ownership and the general terrain of the existing socio-economic framework that dominates in the Global North governs and reproduces various modes of racism and sexism based on the discursive formations that reproduce colonialism, imperialism, institutionalised discrimination and patriarchal social relations. Importantly for my discussion, Bishop notes that for some cultures, a different *episteme* makes incomprehensible the extent of oppression that exists in classed, racialized and gendered societies. She outlines a range of practical strategies in “how to” become an ally (114-119) one of which I cite here for its suggestion of what a productive alliance might look like,

“[A]llies” are distinguished by several characteristics: their sense of connection with other people, all other people; their grasp of the concept of collectivity and collective responsibility; their sense of process and change; their understanding of their own process of learning; their realistic sense of their own power – somewhere between all powerful and powerless; their grasp of “power-with” as opposed to “power-over;” their honesty, openness and lack of shame about their own limitations; their knowledge and sense of history; their acceptance of struggle; their understanding that good intentions do not matter if there is no action against oppression; their knowledge of their own roots (1994, 95).

Bishop provokes thought about effecting change through self-reflexivity: a “lack of shame” about one’s own limits invites critical insight into what those limits might be. She questions not only the extent of oppression, but what sustains its veracity. Also, importantly Bishop

notes the pitfalls of “diversity education” (125,-145) in institutions where, for example, borrowing from Sara Ahmed’s critique of the “new equality regime” (8) a brief course on cultural diversity is often considered sufficient in ticking the box of competency<sup>1</sup> (McGloin, Stirling).

The idea of acquiring cultural competency is complex and suggests a level of knowledge of Others that is problematic on many levels. How much knowledge about Others is enough to engage critically, pedagogically, with those histories that are not ours? Can one acquire ‘enough’ knowledge through a course? Or must we accept that we are always in a state of learning – and unlearning? Nado Aveling articulates the difficulty of ‘knowing’ enough. As a white feminist educator who has taught about white privilege and Indigenous histories for many years and still sees herself as unable to fully comprehend the colonial experience, she argues that,

no matter how well intentioned I may be, my understanding of colonisation can only ever be partial, as my view is invariably coloured by my own experiences. As a white western woman I can bring my awareness to the fact that there are realities and worldviews other than my own and I can learn to listen to other voices, but I cannot speak about experiences I have not had ( 2012, 210).

Acknowledging the partial nature of knowledge is valid. Of course it is the case that we cannot fully ‘know’ what we have not experienced. However, there is a sense in which self-limitation can be conceived as a choice that justifies the constraints we then place on our praxis. In other words, the very option of partial knowledge or understanding could be seen as a level of unacknowledged privilege that tends to leave intact our (white people’s) “lack” as a kind of apology rather than addressing it as a central feature of our privilege.

Such limits on our knowledge can be addressed through research, collaboration, consultation, reading, and of course, through *hearing* as a political activity differentiated from listening (McGloin, 2015). What needs to be identified in contexts where educators speak of Others than themselves, are not simply experiential limitations but the possibilities for joining in political activism, for supporting and collaborating *where we can*. Aveling, citing Rigney's definition of "Indigenist" research states she "cannot 'do' Indigenist research grounded in Indigenous epistemology because I am not Indigenous" (2012, 210). The question raised here is "do we need to be doing Indigenist research"? The harm caused by non-Indigenous people researching Indigenous people and issues has a long history that has sustained colonial ideology, and has been widely critiqued, most vociferously by Linda-Tuhiwai Smith's seminal work and her reminder that "'Research' is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary" (p.1). With this in mind, we need to ask are there not many ways of conducting ethical research in consultation and collaboration that allow feminist pedagogues to contribute to anti-racism, anti-colonialism, and social justice from a position of support? While we must recognise the exclusivity of the Indigenous epistemologies that inform Indigenist research, isn't it the case that backing away from Indigenous research at all simply renders us safe and reinforces (again) the privilege we have to choose whether or not to engage or participate in collaborative alliances? It seems to me that the partial understanding of [O]thers is a condition that can and must be addressed as a mark of privilege if we are to ally with those whose often brutal histories are instrumental in allowing us the privilege of partial understanding. The question then becomes, "how can we extend that partiality" so that any pedagogical contribution we might make can be worthwhile and not simply an imposition of colonial values. There is no doubt that collaborative and consultative research offers opportunities for consciously

avoiding the imposition of colonial power. However, this often requires a trusting alliance to be *in situ* as a pre requisite for collaborative efforts. Doing Indigenist research, to my mind, demands self-reflexivity not simply as an internalised gesture of contemplation, but more proactively, as a practice that seeks to both understand and foreground epistemes not motivated by colonial or imperial goals.

Having said this, I am acutely mindful of the circumstances that render us, white, privileged women scholars,<sup>ii</sup> awkward and uncomfortable, an issue Aveling brings into focus while forcing us to think about the *dis-ease* many white female scholars experience in reconciling our own privileged subject positions with our commitment to anti-racism, anti-colonialism, anti-sexism and feminist pedagogical principles. In fact, Aveling's work grapples with the contradictions of being a tenured white woman teaching critical whiteness studies. For example, in marking her own position as a white feminist scholar, she wonders if self-disclosure can border on the phenomenon of "me-too-ism" whereby white people's positionality acquires prominence and,

[W]hether this is a legitimate concern or just an example of epistemological slippage in which a white, western woman feels a huge degree of discomfort about ways of doing things that are not part of my cultural heritage, I do not know. Perhaps, my 'confessions of whiteness' simply constitute 'a form of pleasurable relief' (Applebaum, 2010, 19) because such confessions absolve me from any complicity in perpetuating a system that enables whites to maintain power (2013, 204).

The issues raised by Aveling are at once familiar and unresolved. I would suggest that far from absolving complicity, position statements aim towards the opposite, i.e. a recognition of privilege when speaking on behalf of or about Others, and are, for that reason, not simply

gestures of lip service, but political accounts of the self, to cite Judith Butler, that constitute responsibility for the “complicity” mentioned, “In asking whether we caused such suffering, argues Butler, “ we are being asked ... not only to establish a causal link between our own actions and the suffering that follows but also to take responsibility for these actions and their effects. (21)

Fiona Nichols warns of the condition of “disingenuousness,” a state whereby white educators equipped with knowledge of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations of power can still perpetuate those relations. Nichols argues that disingenuousness comes to the fore only when Indigenous people bring attention to it (2004). Roslyn Carnes argues we must change our way of listening in order to deploy what she calls a “new frequency” as part of the process of working collaboratively (170-184). Carnes draws attention to the reasons non-Indigenous people engage with, or desire to collaborate with Indigenous worldviews in any context. She argues that effective listening is crucial to any alliance and that “we must first know ourselves and our stance on history, core values and viewpoints” (180). Echoing Aveling’s concerns, Carnes adds that, “[S]uch self-reflexivity is however potentially a trap of self-indulgent naval gazing that perpetuates the privilege of whiteness” (180). These feminist pedagogues, thinkers, and activists draw attention in various ways to the ways white feminist educators experience discomfort as part of the unlearning process of coming to terms with white privilege. Paulette Regan offers another way of thinking through this.

### **Re-thinking Dis-Ease**

Regan’s *Unsettling the Settler Within* (2010) focuses on how to re-think colonial power relations with a view to “unsettling” white privilege and indeed, acknowledging and accepting that discomfort can inspire a transformative shift in establishing an “unsettling



pedagogy". Drawing from and extending the work of Megan Boler and Michalinos Zembylas, Regan argues for an understanding of our emotional responses to self/Other relations as reactions that are historically contingent, (48) that is, deeply embedded in the institutions in which we are situated. As suggested, our implication as cultural workers within these institutions invariably demands our compliance to the dominant discourses that prescribe how we act and react, and which themselves, perpetuate discourses of inequity through elitism and other manifestations of cultural dominance.

Regan's work draws from the legacy of whiteness studies and extends its theoretical premise by mapping whiteness in the context of Canadian First Nations history through the survivors of Canada's residential schools. Her starting point for rethinking issues of racial privilege is therefore marked by the real, lived experiences, *bodies*, of those whose presence in Canada is a continual reminder of the enduringness of colonial, patriarchal violence, social injustice, and on-going race policies and practices that continue to harm Canadian First Nations people. In this way, Regan charts the discursive practices of whiteness as officially sanctioned and on-going and always implicated by race and gender. Her research into the discomfort experienced by white subjects suggests that white desires for collaboration might reflect an unacknowledged imperialist desire whereby involvement may act to augment the very impulse it seeks to eradicate (27). It may also be the case for some of us that we are tentative about collaboration *because* we see this as an imperialist urge. It is quite common in my teaching of Indigenous studies to hear white students say "I want to work in remote communities so I can help Aboriginal people". The desire to "help" as a contemporary ideology might emanate from a position of empathy, and perhaps a real desire to be of service, to alleviate suffering, but also, such "goodness" simply acts as a

reinforcement of the power relations that position white folks as the 'helpers' and Others as in need of (our) help.

### **Case Study: Critical Themes in Indigenous Studies**

In attempting to synthesis some of the points raised in relation to how feminist scholars can be effective allies, it appears that the common themes of discomfort or *dis-ease* run through much of the literature alongside themes of collaborative effort, self-reflexivity and an acknowledgement of the potential to, and comfort in returning to well-learned systems of oppression. But how do these responses play out in a classroom where anti-racism and anti-sexism are core concerns?

*Critical Themes in Indigenous Studies* is an undergraduate course that teaches sociological concepts such as gender, race, class, identity, discourse, agency, and so on. The course aims to provide an understanding of Indigenous people and their political struggles with a view to effecting solid, productive relationships – alliances – as future citizens, a term applied in the Freirean sense of its democratising principles. On this course, concepts are taught according to their origins, meanings, applications in society at large, but also more particularly, as specific theories that can be applied to Indigenous peoples' struggles and contexts so theory and practice come together. I cite two examples from a specific teaching event dealing with the concept of gender. I ensure that actual students have been de-identified for reasons of respect and confidentiality. These examples are empirically faithful and offer just a glimpse of my everyday teaching and learning praxis. The class consisted of twenty two students, (seventeen female, six male). Three students were Indigenous, (one male and two female).

**Example # 1, Discussion Topic: Gender and the Over-representation of Aboriginal women in Australian prisons** <sup>iii</sup>

Non-Aboriginal female student: "I know there are historical reasons for the low socio-economic status of Aboriginal people and that there are issues of police racism, but couldn't it just be the case that Aboriginal women commit more crime than white women"?

Non-Aboriginal male student's response: "Yeah, racism is a huge problem in Australia, but it's nowhere near as bad as it is some parts of the world. I think it's important we keep things in perspective. It's not just Aboriginal people.

**Example # 2, Discussion Topic: The intersections between race and gender**

Non-Aboriginal female student: "I've never understood racism. I'm lucky I didn't come from that kind of background. I always hoped I'd meet an Aboriginal guy and have Aboriginal kids".

Aboriginal male student's response: "I can't believe you said that, it sounds pretty racist to me actually."

Each of these examples set in motion dialogues that were both fraught and productive on a number of levels, not simply for their unacknowledged and no doubt unintended expressions of racism, but also because what is expressed is commonplace and indicative of the *dis-ease* felt by white people faced with the enduringness of racism. In considering the first example, the student, aware of current statistical evidence in relation to the incarceration of Aboriginal women, can be seen to be denying what she *knows* for the purpose of reinstating comfort and relieving the *dis-ease* associated with her knowledge. There is a sense that this student is pleading for another answer, almost stating "there has

to be another reason, it can't just be a racial statistic". Her *dis-ease* is matched by that of her male respondent who is also arguing for another solution, one I suggest, that displays even more discomfort as he attempts to discursify Aboriginal women's incarceration rates as outside of the national matrix of gender and race and into the amorphous domain of global Others. For this student, keeping "things in perspective" becomes a rhetorical strategy that offers relief: we no longer have to see this as a gendered, raced, or classed issue that is 'here'. Instead it is reconfigured as an 'everywhere' issue that can be safely located in the domain of the perspectival. The chronic issue of Aboriginal women's incarceration rates is also relieved of its gendered focus by the male respondent who redirects the specific problem of colonial racism towards Aboriginal women in Australia as an 'outside' issue in a world where racism is generalised and 'everywhere'. This is a common strategy and as a white educator, I am not removed from the force of this discourse that seeks to return us to what can be palatable, comprehensible. The force of the desire for ease, as opposed to *dis-ease*, is extremely powerful and is capable of overriding any capacity for critical thought. Dis-engaging from history, obfuscating its violent, *ongoing* effects, can return us to safety.

In the second example, the female student's attempts to be seen as non-racist, a 'perfect' white ally, are intended to represent a position anterior to, or untouched by racism. This student raises the spectre of racialized and sexualised desire as disarticulated from white racism, a position refuted by the Aboriginal male student who named the comment as an example of white racism. The female student's intentions of self-professed antiracism are clear, if not clumsily stated in an objectifying and sexist manner. What is problematic about it are the elisions of historical violence that historically regulated Aboriginal men's and

women's sexuality through policy. Expressed alongside the spectre of race desire, such a claim of 'antiracism' leaves intact a narcissistic form of white hegemony where race and gender are disarticulated from the lived realities of oppression.

In both examples, detailed discussion followed, at times moderated by me, also at times moderated by other students. The Aboriginal students in the class offered insight regarding the effects of expressions of 'antiracism' encoded in paternalistic rhetoric. Critiques were generalised and depersonalised, though, a strategy encouraged in the discipline for the purpose of engendering a more receptive listening experience. I suggested the female student's aspiration for an Aboriginal partner and Aboriginal children could constitute a response to her discomfort whereby in securing these desires, she sees herself permanently safe from the trappings of racism. The Aboriginal student extended this point articulating how he felt objectified by the comment perhaps in the same way that women feel objectified by similar statements of desire based solely on physicality. Although in both instances productive dialogue emerged, I reiterate that comments such as these are familiar and pose considerable challenges to antiracist and feminist pedagogy.

Following Bishop and Regan, an acceptance of the endlessness of struggle is at the basis of effecting an ethical stance as an ally: colonial histories are enduring for colonised people and if we are to be allies, these histories must be enduring for us also. As Nichols notes, "disingenuousness" can penetrate colonial, patriarchal power relations even in (especially in) pedagogical contexts where a feminist antiracist pedagogy is applied. It is no surprise that we and our students are prone to utterances that forget to remember or interrogate our privilege, or our implication in various forms of oppression and domination. Indigenous Studies classrooms are microcosms of an 'outside' where racism and sexism flourish, and

are themselves, as demonstrated, not removed from the force of racist ideologies. In relation to the above examples, something must be said about my own discomfort as the 'expert' in the room and in particular, my own reaction to the projection of racist and sexist stereotypes on to the three Aboriginal students in the room. One of the most challenging aspects for white feminist educators teaching antiracism is locating a balance between a 'safe' speaking space for all students, (and I acknowledge the problematic nature of 'safe' spaces) while still being able to 'trouble the waters' and provide an environment where critical engagement is productive. In other words, the 'ideal' classroom allows all students the right of expression but challenges them, and the teacher, into rethinking what they – (we) – think we know. There is, in my experience, no recipe for locating this balance; it differs from class to class, cohort to cohort and demands a level of risk that Britzman refers to as our undoing:

Many of us who teach ... consciously accept the fact that the work of education is as difficult for us as it is for our students, that a great deal of what occurs in seminars and classrooms seems beyond conscious reach, that in the middle of unfolding pedagogy, more often than not, we become undone (Britzman, 2009: xi).

Becoming pedagogically challenged, or immobilised, can be confronting, but always represents an opportunity for transformation and further self-interrogation. This is where a feminist pedagogy based on an understanding of discriminatory practice can provide valuable sustenance, as that which "explicitly acknowledges and foregrounds the undeniable history and force of sexism and heterosexism in society" (Crabtree et al, 4).

## Conclusion:

As exemplified by classroom examples, *dis-ease* is a reaction, a discursive response, or recursive strategy often mobilised when a narrative, utterance or set of circumstances about Others is too difficult to contemplate. This paper constitutes a work-in-progress, a Sisyphean endeavour that must be frequently revisited if sense is to be made of the vicissitudes of forming ethical critical alliances with 'Others' who are not us. Transcending white privilege is not possible; unlearning it might be. Thus, white feminist pedagogues working towards alliances with 'Others' need to accept that *dis-ease* must regulate the micro-politics of our pedagogical practice. *Dis ease* is necessary to set in motion a transformation of the self that recognises our implication in the on-going oppression of Others.

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<sup>i</sup> See McGloin, Stirling for a comprehensive account of how cultural competency programs function to reproduce colonial relations of power in many institutions.

<sup>ii</sup> I use this descriptor tentatively and with an acute awareness of the multifaceted positions that accrue around white women scholars.

<sup>iii</sup> More than 47% of women in prisons between the ages of 25 and 34 are Aboriginal. Aboriginal women comprise 2% of the population and 30% of the women's prison population, see <http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2014/s4066806.htm>.