
Book Review

McConaghy, Cathryn (2000) *Rethinking Indigenous Education: Culturalism, Colonialism and the Politics of Knowing*. Flaxton, Queensland: Post Pressed.

Reviewer: Sue Shore

Centre for Literacy, Policy and Learning Cultures
University of South Australia, Australia

Cathryn McConaghy argues that Australian Indigenous people and Indigenous education systems have been produced through disciplinary practices that presume social and pedagogical issues are shaped primarily by cultural identity and that educational practice is premised on assumptions about cultural identity that are grounded in “two immutable and oppositional cultures: 'Indigenous' and 'Western'” (p 8). McConaghy’s task is to explore how centring assumptions about 'culture' produce a form of culturalism that has profound consequences for Indigenous people. For McConaghy, culturalism is

the perception of subjectivity as primarily 'cultural'. It is centrally about identity politics; it privileges 'culture' as an explanatory tool for knowing matters of social difference; and it uses 'culture' indiscriminately to explain issues in colonial contexts (p 43).

McConaghy’s use of postcolonial theorizing provides a structure which renders visible the systemic nature of theories deployed to centre culturalism and subsequently locate debates in an always already formed landscape that privileges concerns about ‘cultural difference’.

The book is structured in four parts with an introduction that establishes the concerns of the study: understanding how a form of Aboriginalism (cf. Edward Said’s development of Orientalism, as well as McConaghy’s examination of the strengths and weaknesses of an Aboriginalist framework) reinforces the hierarchies and logics embedded in colonial ways of knowing Indigenous subjects. To this extent McConaghy’s project reflects the aims of

decolonisation projects [that] are not concerned with the imposition of a new system of identity/knowledge exclusions and ‘itineraries of silencing’, but with the possibility of developing new post-cultural conditions and ethics for postcolonial work.

In order to develop these new legitimating conditions, it is necessary firstly to identify the various forms and expressions of culturalism which have been

influential, and then to consider the strategies by which these expression of culturalism have sought to secure epistemic authority within the field of Indigenous education (p 49).

Part Two explains two particular forms of culturalism: early culturalism and scientific culturalism. As McConaghy puts it

early culturalism drew upon a range of ideologies and discursive practices in order to secure epistemic, moral and socio-political authority. These included strategies to determine certain social relations, the construction of a universalist colonial aesthetic, metaphors of objectivity and degradation, the use of specific binaries, the use of theological arguments, the ideology of naturalism in relation to particular racisms and patriarchies, and judicial sanctions which worked to deprive certain social groups of liberty and nurturance (p 81).

Similarly scientific culturalism draws on the tradition of knowing which links the structures and processes of 'legitimate' science to the study of culture and the development of methods which will provide a way of 'knowing' Indigeneity – and this is especially significant for the manner in which science organizes a view of culture that produces binary notions of cultural difference as the starting point for debates about pedagogy and cultural difference.

One of the main arguments in the book establishes the pattern for how notions of culture enter educational debates as 'already read', as knowable and agreed in terms of boundaries and effects, and as capable of determining the ways in which Indigenous citizens can be known. Central to this argument are 'five regimes of othering': naturalism; colonial desire; the discourses of nationalism; patriarchy and domesticity; and globalising transnational capitalism.

The consequences of these regimes of othering ... legitimate a number of social formations and social movements which were oppressive of Indigenous Australians, ... enslaved [them] and denied them liberty and nurturance of the most basic kinds (p 82).

Equally important, the power of the regimes of othering lies in their affiliation, rather than in their detached difference from each other. In McConaghy's view these regimes established the conditions under which identity politics became the guiding framework for understanding Indigenous difference in Australia. The argument is complex in regards to the relations between culturalism/scientific culturalism and their operations but McConaghy builds a strong case for understanding how colonialism thrives in contemporary educational practice.

This is not an argument generally made accessible to educators located beyond Indigenous contexts and for this reason it is important as an analysis that disrupts commonly available discourses about educational interventions that presume Indigenous (in)capacity and a benign history of helpful efforts to 'enable' Indigenous people. So how do these conditions of early and scientific culturalism prevent educators and policy makers from thinking differently? McConaghy's contribution to the task of 'rethinking Indigenous education' is structured in four

chapters that sketch four traditions within culturalism, each of which produces and reaffirms the grounds on which Indigeneity can be known.

The tradition of pastoral welfarism (Chapter Five), for instance, rests on the notion of Indigenous incapacity which is described in terms of natural ineffectiveness at the same time as it inscribes philanthropy and humanitarianism as the means by which incapacity is 'rescued'. McConaghy's development of the notion of assimilationism (Chapter Six) resonates with contemporary policies of education and training – and that is her point. In contrast to assimilationist policies, McConaghy uses the notion of colonial mimicry to suggest that assimilationism builds on notions of incapacity developed in pastoral welfare discourses to explain why and how subsequent interventions aimed "to transform the Indigenous other in the image of the [non-Indigenous] self" (p155). This transformation can only ever be partial however and it is in this sense that mimicry provides the basis for understanding the fear and desire colonialism invokes as it establishes Aboriginal 'capacity' as an "ideal which is never attainable" (p 157).

Chapter Six provides revealing analyses of contemporary discourses of vocationalism, training, diversity, competency and corporatism that are key turning points in currently available critiques of Australian education and training reform. Postgraduate researchers (and supervisors) will find the structure and development of the argument informative as a framework for developing a wider array of postcolonial critiques of current reforms. In addition a useful innovation in this chapter is the introduction of the notion of imperial humanitarianism (p 148) which presents an alternative way to read discourses of 'best intentions' which are so often the basis on which educational interventions are implicitly developed. McConaghy's portrayal provides alternative ways to understand education interventions and their effects in relation to the role of adult education and training in assimilation, and the more visible links between training and employment and early features of colonialism. These are analyses which are central to understanding the discursive production of Aboriginality within these discourses but are also central to critiques of more recent work on lifelong learning and the seemingly endless possibilities that are constructed for Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) citizens within these discourses.

The tradition of cultural relativism (Chapter Seven) moves closer to familiar territory in terms of conventional critiques of culture in education, however McConaghy still pushes the boundaries of critique as she questions the strategy of colonial tolerance that underpins cultural relativism, and the "claims for 'specialness' attached to programs and services for Indigenous people" (p 191). In terms of an argument designed to be reflexive about its own complicity in forming the subjects of the argument, she claims that the space of cultural relativism does little to 'expose' the regimes of othering and disciplinary production that positions cross-cultural space as a "space inhabited by experts and cultural mediators who develop a largely unreflexive view of their positionality in this space" (p 216).

Not surprisingly 'oppositional' traditions are also foregrounded in McConaghy's analysis of the structures which secure epistemic power in producing

Indigenous subjects and Indigenous education. The tradition of radicalism (Chapter Seven) moves away from liberal understandings of conquest to theories of class and colonial domination. An important part of this argument is McConaghy's discussion of the contradictions inherent in the notion of empowerment and emancipation and the consequences of more thoroughly developed theories of hegemony in establishing complex ground on which to theorise social and historical relations. In terms of radical traditions McConaghy reminds us that "radicalist narratives and discourses more often resemble the weaker counter-discourses that fail to disrupt the basic constructs about which they are critical" (p 238). Radicalism's location within the disciplinary structure of colonial discourse contributes significantly to the difficulties associated with how to "disrupt or move beyond colonialism and its negation" (p 250).

Each tradition, pastoral welfarism, assimilationism, cultural relativism and radicalism, is framed in the context of discourses mobilized to discipline and produce Indigenous people as citizens and learners, but it is also clear that many researchers and scholars are not mindful of the effects of these discourses on the extent to which 'we' can indeed 'rethink Indigenous education'.

If as an educator or researcher you have managed to accept the idea that Indigenous education can be explained through frameworks of cultural difference, if you have generally been exposed to educational resources that ignore or refuse to acknowledge the role of disciplinary production in constituting Indigenous citizens and their (im)possibilities, if you are largely unaware of the extent to which colonial discourses are present in contemporary structures of critique, then you may find this book an uncomfortable read and epistemologically confronting. It would be difficult however to deny the strength of the argument presented by McConaghy.

If you are one of a growing number of educators and researchers who struggle to engage with what Martin Nakata (Foreword viii) describes as the "risky intersection of competing discourses interests and identities" that comprise the grounds on which we come to know Indigenous education (and our complicity in those discourses), then you will find this book a rewarding read. It rattles the foundation of various discourses that shape educational provision. Liberal scholars supporting cultural difference or cultural relativism theories and radicals seeking to invert colonial power relations will be challenged equally by the way in which McConaghy asks us to understand that our theories are profoundly informed by a 'two race binary' which, despite our efforts, continues to establish the grounds on which it is possible to 'know' Indigenous people and Indigenous education provision.

Educators, researchers, research supervisors, policy makers and members of ethics committees have a lot to learn from a close read of McConaghy's views about how culturalism manages to provide the baseline for many common-sense decisions about curriculum, questions of research method vis-à-vis the disciplinary production of research subjects, and policy analysis in contemporary times.