

(Not)Knowing: Walking the Terrain of Indigenous Education with Preservice Teachers

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Our work as educators is entangled in questions of how colonisation privileges particular epistemologies and ontologies, ethical responsibilities and the reproduction of privilege or exclusion through education. Working with preservice teachers as they shape their social and ethical responsibilities allows the opportunity to effect social change on a larger scale as they move into their own classrooms. Students often begin the course seeking some form of knowledge about Indigenous peoples, yet this knowledge can be seen to represent a form of epistemic violence.

In this research project, I use a decolonial lens to consider the reflective writing journals of preservice teachers as they consider their relationships and responsibilities in the field of Indigenous education. The purpose is to explore how preservice teachers position themselves in this field and whether their engagement with these stories, theories, voices and knowledges leaves them with an inability to remain indifferent to their ethical responsibilities. In this paper, I invite you to walk with me through a landscape where we consider preservice teachers' writings, Moreton–Robinson's possessive logic, transformative education and the concept of diffraction.

■ **Keywords:** Decoloniality, transformative learning, epistemic violence, reflective learning journals, preservice teachers, Indigenous education

Grab your things and come with me, and we shall take a walk through a small part of the landscape of Indigenous Education. As we set off, it becomes clear that the section we are about to walk through is the part that concerns itself with teacher education, where preservice teachers are enrolled in social-justice-oriented courses. In this part of the landscape, students learn about the shared histories of Australia, the embedding of Indigenous perspectives in daily schooling and the pedagogical principles that underpin these.

To set the scene for the words to come, let's take a look around at some of the features that protrude throughout the landscape on which we find ourselves, a 'complex and contested knowledge terrain' (Nakata, Nakata, Keech, & Bolt, 2012, p. 120). In the south-east of the place known as the Country of Australia, mostly white, mostly male politicians in a green carpeted room in a curved rectangular building have made the decision to keep Indigenous perspectives in the National Curriculum to the areas that are deemed to be 'educationally relevant' (Bita, 2015) by these mostly white, mostly male politicians and their academic peers. We need to make more space, they say, for 'our Christian Heritage' (they seem to have forgotten that heritage reaches back more than 245 years). The hand that

holds the 'laser-like focus on literacy and numeracy' (Bita, 2015) slips and accidentally takes out pluriversal perspectives (Mignolo, 2007, p. 498) at the same time. On the eastern seaboard, in the Turrbal and Juggera Countries from which I write, the Queensland Government introduced a policy to Embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives, recognising the multiple knowledge systems that both clash and converse in the interface of daily schooling, creating a third-cultural space (Department of Education and Training, 2011). After two years of roll out, a 2011 evaluation found a third of schools had not yet begun implementing this policy (Department of Education, Training and Employment, 2012), bringing to mind Ahmed's (2012, p. 6) words that important is not just what documents say, but what they do, and what is done with them by governments and those in power. To the far west of the nation-state (where I first presented this work at the Australian Association of Research in Education conference in Fremantle), on Wajemup, also known as Rottneest Island, proposals are pouring in for

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the development of a 250 berth marina and resort (Strutt, 2015), conveniently erasing the histories of the 3700 Aboriginal men held prisoner there (Rottneest Foundation, 2016). Ten per cent of these men and boys died on the island; an unmarked cemetery crumbles to dust in the background. Peppering the landscape, graduate attributes of cultural competencies are embedded into undergraduate programs, as debates rage around what constitutes competency when working culturally with Indigenous peoples (e.g. Carey, 2015; Furlong & Wight, 2011; Universities Australia, 2011).

With this landscape in our field of vision, let's take a walk and see how we might use theory, from both decolonial theorists and other friends, as a road map to take us to what Haraway names 'a place called, simply, elsewhere' (Haraway, 1992, p. 295). The trip that we are about to undertake is not a journey, a pathway straight and true leading to a known destination, driven by an unceasing sense of need to make haste. Progress, that great metanarrative of Western civilisation, will not push us ever forwards. As Graham might say, 'Western people were (and still are) habituated to the notion of 'travelling', metaphorically, towards some great unknown where they hope that what might be waiting for them is, if not Heaven, then maybe, Happiness, Love, Security, a Theory Explaining Everything.' (2008, p. 185). Instead, let's take the time to walk on and be with this landscape, and let the elements that we find interrupt us. This walk is not meant to be the definitive passing of research results from me to you, but instead, an exploration of different obstacles that might leave us thinking differently from where we are in this moment (Barad, 2007). We will read decolonial theorists diffractively through feminist and Indigenous theorists (and indeed feminist-Indigenous theorists), not seeking to commensurate these but instead consider how they interrupt each other as they meet. To read diffractively is to 'read insights . . . through one another' (Barad, 2007, p. 25), not 'collapsing important differences between them, or treating them in the same way, but means allowing any integral aspects to emerge' (p. 25).

Looking around, Haraway's words come to mind as our vision blurs and we see 'not effects of distance, but effects of connection, of embodiment and of responsibility for an imagined elsewhere that we may yet learn to see and build here' (1992, p. 295). An elsewhere that draws on what has previously existed and continues to exist here, as Indigenous peoples continually recalibrate pathways to changing conditions. As someone close to me said, 'our people survived an Ice Age because of our ability to adapt. Do you think that we would have failed to adapt our black protocols just because we live in suburbia?' (Aunty Ruby Rose, personal communication, July 29, 2013). Her words remind me of my *gunyahji* and need to question my own practices as a White Woman, as I walk through this landscape and start to develop my own relationship with and learn from Country as a non-Indigenous person—a

relationship that does not try to appropriate an Indigenous perspective, but rather, one that is respectful, reciprocal and responsible (McKnight, 2016). The theoretical land on which we walk is one shaped after Haraway's (1992, p. 295) own 'mind-scapes and landscapes of what might count', but the matter on which this theoretical land is written remind us that land matters, that 'decolonization is not a metaphor' (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 3).

As we start to trek through this complex terrain, my foot catches and I stumble slightly. Looking down, we see a treasure chest masquerading as a white and purple paper bag. The treasure chest bag is filled with reflective learning journals. These have been written by 93 Primary Education preservice teachers participating in one compulsory semester long course in Indigenous Education across two years of data collection. Reflections were written weekly by students as a 40 per cent in-class assessment piece. The journals themselves and the learning reflected within raise emotions of joy, despair, confusion, anger and ultimately hope in both students and myself. The journals become jewels to be treasured. Throughout the course, students are asked to consider a broad landscape of Indigenous Education, including the impact of historical and contemporary policies and attitudes, Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing, pedagogical practices and the roles and responsibility of creating space for multiples voices and perspectives. Concepts and theories such as identity, the cultural interface, critical race theory, aboriginalism and tokenism are taught, discussed, and explored; and strategies to embed these theoretical perspectives in the classroom are practised. This learning is framed as transformative, effecting a change in perspective (Mackinlay & Barney, 2014). As Nakata and colleagues (2012) suggest, rather than asking students to deeply reflect on the ways in which they are complicit with colonialism, it may be more useful to assist students in beginning to understand the complex and contested knowledge terrains in which we live.

Thinking about my own involvements in the course, I am transported back to my first week as part of the course, half standing, half hiding behind a lectern in a tutorial classroom. As a tutor and workshop facilitator in a course that my doctoral supervisor coordinated, I couldn't shake the feeling that I shouldn't be standing in that classroom. An imposter, impersonating somebody with more right to stand there than I. I'm not sure what I felt I was in want of, what type of educator I thought would have been standing there instead. An ex-school teacher? An Indigenous academic? A white university educator with years of experience working with Indigenous communities? What types of knowledge may I myself have held if I inhabited any of these social locations? And what burdens may they bring with them? I stood in that classroom with my white power and privilege, which had helped carve out a space for me, performing my middle-class whiteness in how I dressed, spoke and taught, deploying it to form a connection to a classroom full of white students, who

represented the majority (although not exclusively) make-up of the course. I had scribbled down in my own journal at the time ‘*Am I failing to interrogate my own Whiteness in my teaching practices, just as Galman, Pica-Smith and Rosenberger (2010) discussed? Or am I establishing a careful relationship, a basis from which dangerous talk can happen?*’ The conversations in my classroom, while carefully navigated, were safe topics for me to discuss. My whiteness and the safety in afforded me in the classroom was a privilege I held teaching in a course entitled ‘Indigenous Education and Knowledge’ as a white non-Indigenous academic. Yet at the same time, I saw this work as vitally important, responding to calls by academics such as Bond (2014, para. 12) for non-Indigenous colleagues to ‘carry some of the intellectual burden’ of teaching ‘Indigenous “content”’.

My work as a tutor in the course, shortly after which my research became aligned with the same, entangles how I think about the treasures the students present. A continual critical reflective practice seems unavoidable as every word I write brings me back to my own praxis—theory in action (hooks, 1984). What would it mean to have systematically collected and analysed this data? Standing by that purple and white treasure-chest-paper-bag full of orange and black journals, I think what that systematicity might mean. I could outline the steps I took and faithfully noted down in a word document buried, much like the journals under the sand, somewhere in the world of my computer; just waiting to catch clumsy feet and be stumbled on. How I went from tutorial to tutorial, asking students if they would be willing to give consent for their reflective learning journals to be used in research. Perhaps my decision to concentrate on the work of only primary students, although both primary and secondary students were enrolled in the course—an arbitrary line drawn in the sand with the justification that these students were a more cohesive cohort, all being in the same year of their study; that their experiences of practicum halfway through the semester might ‘yield more interesting data’. Or I could write of the hours and days and weeks spent faithfully transcribing these journals, encoding terms and phrases pertaining to predetermined relevant themes with coloured nodes. But those weeks spent drifting in data made me rethink the themes that I had originally thought were most relevant. Sure, the area of critical race and whiteness studies has established itself as an important aspect of educational debates in Australia and internationally, and exploring how and if preservice teachers interrogate their own whiteness, and how this unfolds throughout the course of a course, would be an interesting and relevant project to pursue. But I hadn’t been able to shake the feeling that something else was going on, that I couldn’t help but be drawn to the types of epistemic violence that underlay students’ conceptualisations of what such a course might entail. Perhaps it was an encounter with Levinas (Mackinlay & Chalmers, 2014) at the same time as writing a data poem on students’ expect-

tations that made me realise I had taken a line of flight into a different way of thinking about the treasures the students had so caringly let me survey and display, claim as mine while the treasures would always remain theirs, little peeks thought dusty windows into constructed worlds.

Reaching into the treasure chest, I pull out a piece of paper and recognise a script so familiar, my own. But the words I wrote were those of the students rewritten, twisted around, cut up, pasted together, put into different orders so that a story might emerge; a story in-between them and you and me.

Week 1 reflective writing question: Think about where you are right now—what are your expectations of this course?

-
- Not too sure
 - What to expect
 - An open mind
 - Will be open
 - Willingness to learn
 - Become more aware
 - Awareness of culture
 - Is the overarching issue
 - Of Indigenous culture
 - A limited understanding
 - Breeding our ignorance
 - Needs to discontinue
- They spoke about
 - Students feeling shame
 - I am aware
 - This may happen
 - A foreboding sense
 - My internal anxiety
 - Nervous about assumptions
 - And being offensive
 - Would offend anyone
 - Bound-up in fear
 - Crippled by ‘correctness’
 - I feel determined
 - Not too sure
 - What to expect
- I want to
 - Heighten my understanding
 - Develop my understanding
 - Broaden my knowledge
 - Understand more about
 - Them, their culture
 - Evaluate my position
 - Value the prospect
 - Discussions about difference
 - Open your eyes
 - Perspectives of Others
 - You cannot say:
 - “How do I teach Indigenous students?”
-

I had folded my readings of Levinas into my readings of the students' journals, and was unable to disconnect the two again. I had come to see that writing about and through and with the students' words had 'nothing to do with signifying' and instead everything 'to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 4–5). In the same way that Haraway (1992) encourages us to journey to simply elsewhere, to avoid the semiotics of representation, perhaps I could re-envision these words as treasures that almost jumped off the page, the patterns that worked their way into my own poems and writings despite not knowing what they were. Perhaps this is another way to understand how we use data.

The effects of diffracted ways of working and feeling with data had made their way into my subconscious, marking a diffraction pattern (Haraway, 1992), appearing as my hand—gripping a pen ever so tightly—raced across the page. Writing as a method of inquiry and analysis (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005), one might imagine. The students' words, constructed ever so tentatively for the purpose of assessment, could not be seen to signify. Instead, they might provide a road map for what else might come, help us to think about that embodied, connected, responsible elsewhere we may yet build here (Haraway, 1992).

I pick up the orange and black striped journal and feel the smoothness of the cover holding together the crinkled and torn pages, the paper inside then rough against my skin. The words are written onto the page by dozens of hands. As I trace the words on the first line, I wonder what to do. Should I see if anybody is close by, having carelessly forgotten their treasure chest? Call the authorities and let them know I have found a paper bag of treasures? I start to wonder if anybody would notice if I took just a couple. It seems such a pity just to leave these books hidden here, half-buried under the sand. I think about what might happen if I were to try to make sense of the writings within. Could I claim to enter the worlds of the students (Hastrup, 1992) to understand, know and analyse their thoughts? Could I classify them into categories of transformed or not transformed, open or resistant, as other examples of transformative learning research do? Transformative learning aspires to 'transform problematic frames of reference' (Mezirow, 2003, p. 58). By fixing categories such as 'transformed', can we claim to have 'fixed' students—shown them the light, opened their eyes, given them a new perspective, or any other transformative metaphor that reflects the symbolism of new vision? The wind sweeps through the sparse leaves on near naked trees, and whispers the question 'What else might writing do except mean?' (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005, pp. 971–972). We think about how the writing in these journals could be presented in a research text in a way that does not represent a new meaning, does not search for definite transformations in students' thinking, but asks us to trans-

form our own thinking about the work that we undertake as educators. A text that 'denies "comfort"' (Lather, 2001, p. 205), denies the capacity to mean in 'our usual ways of making sense' (p. 205) and perhaps, instead, does.

You and I decide to open the journals and read the first few entries (feeling like we are trespassing slightly, despite our institution-given right to be here, bestowed through doctoral panels, the Behavioural and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee at the University of Queensland, and the informed consent of participating students). Different words and patterns start to emerge and jump out at us. Some of the students write about all that they have or don't have. We wonder what type of treasure it is that they are seeking to possess:

I have

low levels of knowledge regarding Indigenous Australian Education.

had very few personal encounters with Indigenous education.

a limited understanding of how to approach teaching Aboriginal students.

a limited understanding of their culture.

had very few experiences with Indigenous education as the schools that I was at did not have a strong connection to Indigenous culture.

a lot to learn in this class.

Perhaps these haves represent a form of possessive logic: an easy and unquestioned ability to belong and to possess that is based on the dispossession of Indigenous peoples (Moreton-Robinson, 2004a). 'What types of possessions might the students be laying claim to?' we ask each other, as we read through these journals.

Lamenting her earlier lack of knowledge, one student writes, 'I have the opportunity now (in uni) to learn about Indigenous people' and that she had ignored 'Indigenous problems in society'. Now, however, she had 'the drive to want to learn more about Indigenous people'. Another student reflects on her expectations enrolling in the course—'convinced it would be a piece of cake'. Her experience working as an inclusion officer for Indigenous children in community had, 'I felt, equipped me with ALL I needed to know'. Thinking about her childhood in 'a remote town with a large population of Indigenous people', a third student writes that she is 'likely to be more aware and understanding of the culture and ways of Indigenous groups'.

You and I put the journals down and ask each other what type of treasure it is that the students seek. How could knowledge about the other—an Indigenous other—constitute a treasure for preservice teachers? Shiny, neatly packaged gems of knowledge glittering out. A gem can be picked up, held in your hand, transported, set into a ring or a necklace or a classroom, as long as the ring or necklace or student is moulded and twisted to fit the gem. Gems

don't change over time, they stay static and solid. But is it possible to know Indigenous peoples without enacting violence? Moreton-Robinson (2011a) uses the concept of possessive logic to 'denote a mode of rationalization . . . which is underpinned by an excessive desire to invest in reproducing and reaffirming the state's ownership, control and domination' (p. 647). Possession imposes a will-to-be on Indigenous peoples who are perceived to lack will, and are, therefore, open to being possessed (Moreton-Robinson, 2011a, p. 646). Although Moreton-Robinson is primarily concerned with the way in which the State exercises possessive logic, increasing its control over Indigenous peoples, we think about how this concept may apply to the individuals whose journals we read, and the way in which an ontology of possession is ideologically and sociodiscursively deployed in the day-to-day classroom. And how might a treasure morph into erasure, the exercising of patriarchal white sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson, 2004b) that erases the will-to-be of Indigenous peoples? Through White people—teachers, principals, education authorities—naming and evaluating Indigeneity, conferring identity and acting as the arbiter of authority on what bodies are allowed to exist under the term 'Indigenous' (Moreton-Robinson, 2014)? Through the displacement of Indigenous histories through unquestioned white bodies, the founding of modern Australia celebrated? Perhaps, I suggest to you, this is how assimilatory perspectives represent violent acts—through the erasure of a will-to-be (Moreton-Robinson, 2014). And of course, the epistemic violence accomplished through claiming to know about Indigenous peoples as objects of knowledge. And what might it mean if these erasures are continued in classrooms?

And then again, you and I consider as we continue to discuss the journals, is all knowing the same? What type of knowing may be beneficial? As educators, we are engaged in the act of facilitating learning. For many involved in higher education courses related to Indigenous Studies, the facilitating of learning requires refuting pedagogies of ignorance, systematically produced ignorance that serves to continue oppression by privileging standpoints of dominant societal groups (Sullivan & Tuana, 2007). By remaining uninformed of the ways in which we construct difference in our discourses, we enter a silent 'agreement to misinterpret the world' (Mills, 1997, p. 18). 'What is the difference between this systematic ignorance and the violence of knowing?' we deliberate. While we seek to create awareness in Indigenous Studies courses, it is not awareness of culture in a way that essentialises and limits Indigenous peoples, reducing them to a knowable Other (Carey, 2015; Nakata et al., 2012). Instead the awareness we seek is one where students are able to begin recognising the 'very complex and historically layered contemporary knowledge space' (Nakata et al., 2012, p. 132) in which Indigenous Education is taught and learnt. As Nakata et al. (2012) continue different types of awareness

can be useful: 'awareness of the limits of various positions, the persistent pervasiveness of "allknowing", "taken-for-granted" Western frames' (p. 133). In developing these types of understanding, students may have better insight into how quickly unburied knowledges about Others are a form of 'not understanding sufficiently' (Nakata et al., 2012, p. 133).

With these thoughts entangled in our minds, we start to wander out further and the terrain transforms. The soil gets redder, the landscape more rugged, and sheer rockfaces, seemingly devoid of life, rise in the distance. Every now and then the wind sweeps through, throwing dust into our faces as we bat our eyelashes to stave it off. But the wind is also greeting us, giving us permission to enter this space as long as we walk carefully. We take a brave step forwards, and enter the terrain that maps the effects of coloniality and decoloniality.

An information board stops us in our path and starts to map out the colonial matrix of power structures present in the colonial landscape: the institutions that control knowledge, gender, authority and economics (Mignolo, 2011), erected by colonial administrations and informing life henceforth. The ongoing presence of coloniality in Australia informs all of our cultures, working lives, relationships and our forms of knowledge production, in a way that survives colonialism. The presence of the map, that we can't tear our eyes away from, asks us to confront the systems of knowing, being and power that were put in place by colonial governments and continue to impact our ways of knowing and being today. Delinking from this colonial matrix of power requires us to consider what Mignolo (2011) terms the *geopolitics of knowing*. Changing the terms of the conversation requires us to focus on the knower, rather than the known. In doing so, we can begin changing the patterns through which colonialities of knowing and being—those power structures that control our education systems—are reproduced.

We come across a sign pointing away from the coloniality of being, and take a deep breath, before turning down the path. A man walks towards us and introduces himself as Maldonado-Torres, and converses with us as we walk, telling us about how the writings of Emmanuel Levinas, a French Lithuanian Jewish philosopher, are helping to edge out this pathway away from coloniality.

'You see' he says, 'Western philosophy is built on Descartes' ego cogito: I think, and therefore I am. A Western tradition of thought is built on knowing first and foremost, and staking knowledge claims about Others. Without knowing, we cannot be. Levinas interrogates the act of knowing, which is seen as fundamental to the act of being; and rejects the idea that we can know the Other. The Other is one so radically different from ourselves. If we try to know her, we try to make them the same as our self, understanding her only through our own frames of reference. The Other is no longer allowed the agency to

define her own way of being and knowing in the world (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).⁷

Recalling Moreton-Robinson's words (2004b, p. 75), I suggest "[Aboriginal people] have often been represented as objects—as the 'known'. Rarely are they represented as subjects, as 'knowers.'" Rarely are Indigenous people represented as those that think⁸.

'That's it,' Maldonado-Torres replies, nodding his head. 'And this is how coloniality justifies racial hierarchies of oppression, through *ego cogito* (2007). The Cartesian formulation of philosophy as epistemology hides propositions about the notion of being; propositions enacted through the colonisation of lands across the world. If I think, and therefore I am, what is left for those who are not seen as thinkers? Those who aren't recognised as knowers—those who don't appear to know the world in which they live through a Cartesian system of classification—don't exist as humans. And those who do not know, are not. "I think means that others do not think, or do not think properly. Therefore, I am suggests others are not, lack being, should not exist or are dispensable" (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 252). And this is how the foundations of Western enlightenment thinking link colonialities of Knowing and Being: "The absent of rationality is articulated in modernity with the idea of the absence of Being in others" (p. 252–253).⁹

'A land belonging to (k)no(w)-one', I respond. 'What a violent idea—epistemically violent, violently claiming to know another (Levinas, 1969); to pin them down with words and research and educational resources and seek to preserve their being; like one might a butterfly'. The sharp stench of ethyl alcohol invades my imagination as I visualise this idea. I shudder and say, "Patriarchal white epistemic violence" (Moreton-Robinson, 2011b, p. 413). To totalise the Other by making her part of my own system of knowledge. I make her mine. I possess her (Levinas, 1969, p. 46). I reduce her to my own classifications and themes¹⁰.

'In the same way, Levinas writes of the radical alterity of the Other—how no matter how we try, it is impossible to be able to know the Other, as the Other is one so radically different from us that we can never understand them from our own totality—from our own frames of reference. And so,' Maldonado-Torres continues, 'Levinas instead proposes a radical new way of relating to Others that entangles ideas of both how we come to know and how we come to be. As a beginning point, he writes that we "are not alone" (1969, p. 101), that "[our] freedom does not come first" (p. 101): we are not alone in the world and thus are always responsible to each Other. Levinas suggests that instead of seeking to know another, our responsibility to the Other must always come first. This responsibility is not one of guilt or of shame (Bird Rose, 2004). Instead, this responsibility comes from the idea that because we are not alone in this world, we are automatically responsible for each other. Levinas tells us that the only response

when we look into the eyes of the Other is an ethical one'. Maldonado-Torres finished and waited for me to respond.

'We are not alone in the world'. I murmur. These words echo those of Graham (2008, p. 182): 'To behave as if you are a discrete entity or a conscious isolate is to limit yourself to being an observer in an observed world'. Graham often comes in to the university to speak with the preservice teachers in our course of Aboriginal world-views. She speaks of identities beginning first as belonging to a group: the responsibilities we have to our groups, but also to the Country which we live on. I wonder what she would make of Levinas' premise, that first and foremost we are responsible to each other, because we are not alone. She would agree, perhaps, but would insist on thinking about how this relationship must be 'based in . . . the sacredness of land' (p. 183). How might preservice teachers' engagement with the land around them indicates some type of transformation to another way of viewing the world?

Maldonado-Torres interrupts my reverie and passes me a piece of paper, with the roughest of sketches drawn on it. 'This Levinasian thinking might help you to reimagine how you can delink from these systems of coloniality and the colonial matrix of power'. Waving goodbye, he stays standing as we take a decolonial turn (Maldonado-Torres, 2011) and continue across the landscape.

As you and I walk, we come back to the treasure chest-paper-bag full of journals.

The wind has scattered them around, or perhaps a looter has been through. The pages lay open and offer tantalising glimpses into the different ways of thinking and writing that students use at the end of the course. This time, the jewels that are the journals glitter with ideas of no longer having to know the Other; that their role is instead one of a facilitator. There appears to be semblances of a process of change: The students write of how they have to come to realise that knowledge must not necessarily be held:

A long way to go
To acknowledge different knowledges
Allowed for us
To not know everything.
How much I don't know and
Can never know.
Won't always understand,
A way to go still.

Gone is the need to establish knowledge about an Indigenous other in order to become an effective teacher. Instead, students start to engage with the concept of not having to understand, to know and to possess. As Nakata et al. (2012) argue for, the students instead start to understand the different types of knowledge systems that exist in this terrain, and how this complexity influences the lives of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. You ask me whether these jewels might represent Mezirow's idea

of a transformative learning experience, one that ‘transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open and emotionally able to change’ (Mezirow, 2009, p. 22). Transformative learning focuses on a type of communicative learning—understanding the frames of references from which ourselves and others speak, and how these frames of reference shape what we can hear and understand. Transformative education is seen to be identity work: transforming identities as students learn about their own positionalities in fields of social justice (Illeris, 2014).

In some ways it appears that students’ frames of reference have changed: those that wrote with a possessive logic are able to later step back and critique the same. One student’s words about the Australian national anthem causes me to think about the possessive nature of the nation-state and how this impacts Indigenous students:

I never stopped to think how Aboriginal and Indigenous people would feel about the song of ‘our nation’, celebrating colonisation. This [is] something else I will now take with me.

I consider this idea and think about the ways in which the students write change in their frames of reference—a change of their totality that brings them closer to Indigenous peoples. Yet I can’t help but question the limits of transformative learning. As students move and shift frameworks of ‘knowing about Indigenous people’ to understanding that multiple ways of knowing and being are present in the world, the understanding that is constructed continues to be one that assimilates the knowledge one is taught into their own way of perceiving the world—into what they know. Could this represent an inability to move outside of our own totalities? Is it possible to be otherwise than being? But perhaps this might be a necessarily and frustratingly imperfect move in another direction. Even as I think these thoughts, I am hauntingly aware that I can’t move outside of my own understandings of Indigeneity and what Indigenous perspectives should be, look like, and do. This inability takes place even as I reflect on this idea of epistemological violence and what role ‘knowing’ plays in educational spaces.

And what of how preservice teachers should be and do in Indigenous education? How might it be problematic to claim that students’ frames of reference are problematic? Why doesn’t it feel empowering to claim that we as educators can change students to have a more just or more right identity? Who should decide what the goal—the end point—of transformative learning is? Other researchers have analysed the proportions of students who have undergone transformation, so to speak, and analysed those who haven’t as to how they are lacking. I think back to the Levinasian idea of the violence in claiming to ‘know the other’—how could I as a researcher claim to ‘know’ whether a student has experienced transformation or not? How would this knowing be limited to my own frames of reference? To make students objects of knowledge would

be to draw them into my own totality, in the same way the students sought to know about Indigenous people as objects of knowledge. In the same way, can transformative learning be seen as imposing a will-to-be on those considered will-less, a will-less-ness constructed by our own underlying epistemologies and ontologies as researchers?

Holding the journals, we decide to stay for a while. As we look around this this decolonial landscape in which we have wandered, a shimmer in the distance indicates light particles wrapping themselves around theoretical ideas in the landscape. The idea of diffraction appears, offering an alternative way of thinking about educational theories. As Barad states:

Diffraction has to do with the way waves combine when they overlap and the apparent bending and spreading of waves that occurs when waves encounter an obstruction . . . The waves are said to interfere with each other, and the pattern created is called an interference or diffraction pattern. (2007, p. 77)

These diffraction patterns, rather than charting the replication or reflection of ideas, plot where interference has occurred. When the waves of light or water or thinking have been obstructed and interfere with each other, a diffraction pattern appears, one that ‘does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the effects of differences appear’ (Haraway, 1992, p. 300). Toying with the journal in our hands, we ask ourselves what these diffraction patterns might look like in the reflective learning writings of preservice teachers. ‘Differences that matter’ (Barad, 2007, p. 146) in the way students search for knowledge and understanding is expressed perhaps: writing that demonstrates possessive logic exchanged for a logic that speaks of responsibility and connection. A diffractive analysis might look at how students’ trajectories of thinking and being in Indigenous Education change when they meet interference: for example a lecture by Indigenous philosopher Dr Mary Graham, or an understanding of how multiple knowledges might be found in the classroom through Nakata’s cultural interface (2007). These interference patterns might demonstrate that instead of seeking to know, preservice teachers are able to make allowance for not knowing; and instead focus on how to move forwards.

A diffractive learning experience—an obstacle placed in front of us—forces our thinking, doing, and being waves to bend around the interruption placed in front of them, a moment that causes students to challenge the way they thought before. We open the learning journal one last time as we think about the imagined elsewhere that we are starting to see and build here (Haraway, 1992). We look for the effects and connection, embodiment and responsibility as we highlight the patterns of critical differences in students’ writings:

The idea of Aboriginal knowledge has been difficult for me to comprehend. I think this is because westernised knowledge is generally, written down, recorded and permanent,

while Mary Graham described Aboriginal knowledge as being passed down through word of mouth and expressed through dancing, singing and painting. Additionally, Mary described Aboriginal knowledge as being produced in place, reflecting Harrison and Greenfield's work.

Therefore, as a preservice teacher in order to bring Indigenous knowledge and perspectives into the classroom, it is imperative for me to make connections with the local community. Only they can truly discuss their relationship with place and the local stories and Dreamings related to the area.

Instead of wanting to learn about Indigenous people, learning that different knowledges are held and expressed in different ways. Instead of wanting to teach about Indigenous people, facilitating Indigenous community members being able to bring their own knowledges into the classroom. Instead of wanting to know, wanting to be in relation. Lines of wants and haves meet Indigenous thought and bend themselves into new configurations. Configurations that aren't predetermined before picking up a pen to write; but that demonstrate a little difference that matters.

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About the Author

Ailie McDowall is a white, non-Indigenous Australian research student at the University of Queensland. She has a background in Psychology. Ailie is researching the ways in which preservice teachers position themselves on the Indigenous Education landscape, using decolonial theories and the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas to analyse reflective learning journals. She is interested in the ways that writing reinscribes and resists colonial ways of knowing, being and doing, both in research and the preservice teachers' journals.