
Can we move beyond 'Indigenous good, non-Indigenous bad' in thinking about people and the environment?

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Abstract

Bucknell and Mannion (2007) commented that student responses in the 2006 VCE Outdoor and Environmental Studies (OES) exam could be boiled down to a pat answer of "Indigenous good, non-Indigenous bad" (p. 8). They suggest that the subject of OES is too rich for such a simple answer. This paper uses the expression of 'Indigenous good/non-Indigenous bad' as a springboard to explore some of the ways notions of the environment, race and ethnicity intersect and how this might lead to an exam question being answered in such a uniform and simplistic way by some students. The aim of this paper is to highlight some of the productive tensions of environment, race and ethnicity as a strategy for richer and more complex debates around peoples' interactions with the environment.

Introduction

The suggestion that the answer to a question about the historical relationships between people and the environment can be reduced to Indigenous good/non-Indigenous bad raises some questions about what is occurring around the Victorian Outdoor and Environmental Studies (OES) curriculum to enable such a pat answer. There is a need for caution when using students' exam responses to make inferences about curriculum and the way it is taught. However, in this paper I use the OES curriculum as a context to examine some of the broader social processes at work that may be informing what Bucknell & Mannion (2007) perceive to be such a uniformly reductionist response of Indigenous good/non-Indigenous bad. Curriculum does not stand alone; rather it is "shaped by and reflects the content and organisation of society, including the distribution and relationships of power" (Reid, 2004, p. 59). As such, curriculum documents are a rich site to explore the content and organisation of society. I would suggest that the OES curriculum is not unique in producing a 'pat' response of Indigenous good/non-Indigenous bad, but rather, this response reflects broader social discourses. The intent of this paper is to explore the content and organisation of society through the OES curriculum, rather than a critique of this curriculum area as such.

This paper starts with a brief description of the OES curriculum to provide a context through which to examine the ways in which race, ethnicity and environment intersect. This is further located in the outdoor and environmental education literature. Then I turn to a discussion on some of the ways in which race and environment are written about. I return to the curriculum documents and look how the terms *Indigenous* and *Australians* are portrayed in this curriculum area via the text book that supports it.

The paper finishes with a discussion foregrounding whiteness as a strategy to engage with questions of race, ethnicity and environment.

Before proceeding, it is important to point out that this paper is written from the perspective of a white educator who is grappling with how to meaningfully engage with questions concerned with relationships with the natural environment. These questions have come into focus more sharply since moving from New Zealand to Australia in 2005 as I try to make sense of new landscapes and new curricula. The 'we' I refer to in the paper's title and in the text is to non-Indigenous people given that, as I argue in the paper, stories around race usually serve the needs of non-Indigenous people.

Outdoor and Environmental Studies

The Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) refers to the final two years of secondary schooling in Victoria. The rationale for Outdoor Environmental Studies (OES) is as follows:

Outdoor and Environmental Studies is a study of the ways humans interact with and relate to natural environments. Natural environments are understood to include environments that have minimum influence from humans, but they may also include environments that have been subject to human intervention. Ultimately, the study is directed towards enabling students to make critically informed comment on questions of environmental sustainability and to understand the importance of environmental health, particularly in local contexts. (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority [VCAA], 2005, p. 7)

The aims of the OES study area relevant to this paper are related to students developing experience-based relationships with the natural environment, understanding how ecological, historical, economic and social factors influence natural environments over time and critically analysing interactions with natural environments in shaping Australian cultural practices (VCAA, 2005).

The first two units focus on understanding outdoor experiences and environmental impacts. These two are internally assessed. Units three and four focus on relationships with natural environments and the future of human-nature environments. The exam which Bucknell and Mannion (2007) are referring to is based on units three and four. Unit 3 of the OES study area looks at both historical and contemporary relationships with natural environments. The historical section is divided into three time frames beginning with Indigenous cultures, then early non-Indigenous settlers from the gold rush period to Federation, and since Federation. These demarcations have been chosen because of key events occurring at these times. This unit is supported with practical outdoor experiences (VCAA, 2005).

Unit 4 of the OES study investigates the future of human-nature interactions and one area of study is 'Healthy natural environments.' This explores "the contemporary state of environments in Australia and the importance of natural environments to individuals and society" (VCAA, 2005, p. 24). Another area of study, called 'Sustaining environments,' focuses on the sustainability of environments, conflicts of interest between different groups of people and methods and processes commonly used to resolve these conflicts (VCAA, 2005).

The exam question Bucknell and Mannion (2007) base their observations on asks students to describe and compare relationships contemporary Australians and early European Australians (1788-1850s) have with the natural environment. The characterisation of Indigenous good/non-Indigenous bad refers, I presume to relationships with the natural environment not to the people themselves. But this characterisation begs the question of how both humans and the natural environment are being conceptualised to result in Bucknell and Mannion (2007) claiming the question is being answered in such a uniform and simplistic way? From this leads another question of how, as a white educator, I might engage with the issue of human relationships with the natural environment to enable a richer and more complex debate around peoples' interactions with the environment?

As Bucknell and Mannion (2007) rightly point out, exam questions do not lend themselves to full and complex answers. What is written in an exam may

only represent some of the students' knowledge and probably is quite limited as a tool to understand what is being taught. But it is worthwhile considering why the students' answers could be boiled down to Indigenous good/non-Indigenous bad. Why this answer and not something else? Why does the binary of good/bad appear to be such a useful resource for these students? I now turn to a brief review of outdoor education literature to canvass how race and environment have been engaged within this body of work.

Outdoor education literature, race and environment

The broader question of race and ethnicity makes a surprisingly limited appearance in the mainstream outdoor education literature. One strand of this literature is exemplified by Warren's (1998) call for facilitation that is sensitive to race, gender and class or Washington & Roberts (1999) discussion on educating for cultural diversity. Oles (1995) provides an example of engaging with the question of race from an Indigenous viewpoint. He argues that one of the "more pervasive bandwagons [in North American outdoor and experiential education] has been the trend of latching on to rituals and practices of various Native American tribes and other aboriginal groups" (p. 195). In this article he questions some of the ways in which these rituals and practices are misappropriated and not only become meaningless but cause offence.

While there is extensive literature on the role that outdoor education may or may not play in developing relationships and understandings of nature, it is the literature on outdoor education and place that appears to be paying closer attention to both Indigenous and Western knowledge. Stewart (2004), for example, challenges the reader to consider the different ways of knowing the Murray River that Indigenous and Western knowledge afford. He starts by pointing to the ways in which Western knowledge works to colonise nature, where all places are assumed to be "empty of history, both natural and cultural" (p. 46). While the focus of his paper is on connecting with places and with nature, Indigenous knowledge is inextricably entangled in this. Not only does it contribute to the cultural context but he evokes Plumwood's (2003) argument that "individual connections with, or belonging to, the land that are independent of Indigenous understandings would be 'fake,' that any personal understanding needs to be in relation to historical and cultural context, of which an individual is a part" (cited in Stewart, 2004, p. 50).

Wattchow (2005) canvasses similar terrain in *Belonging to the proper country: Australian outdoor education as experiencing relationships in place*. He makes the point that much of the Australian writing on the subject of place is concerned with "an exercise

in building and challenging national identity, rather than an effort to open up an intimate and reciprocal relationship with local and specific places" (p. 23). Drawing on the work of Peter Reed, Watthcow (2005) makes the point that "reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and the differences of multiple migrant perspectives and experiences in place must co-exist in the aspirations of our educational philosophy and pedagogy" (p. 24).

These writers are grappling with the question of how relationships are developed with the places we visit in outdoor education and whose stories need to be told for those relationships to be meaningful. The question I am interested in exploring is what those stories mean. In this I am particularly interested in what implications do the stories told of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people have in relation to ways it is possible to understand myself as a white person and also how I understand Indigenous people in the world today. It is at this point that I turn to some of the literature that brings together race and environment.

Race and environment

There are extensive bodies of literature examining the environment, nature, environmental education and environmental ethics. There has also been a great deal written in many disciplines about race. A number of writers such as Mosely (2006), Ignatow (2005) and Hicks (2006) for example, comment that there is limited work that brings the environment and race together. Mosley (2006) points out that environmental topics are absent from the debates that occur in social history, even though writers in the field have suggested that ecological catastrophe may be the greatest danger facing humanity in the new millennium. Ignatow (2005) makes a similar point, stating that "much has been written on multiculturalism and the emergence of identity politics worldwide since the 1970s, while little has been written linking multiculturalism and identity politics to environmental politics" (p. 93). This lack is surprising given that environmental issues both reflect and "cohere along, racial and gender lines, thus demonstrating the importance of intersectional ways of thinking 'green' – with race and racism a critical axis" (Hicks, 2006, p. 203).

The environment and race are both difficult subjects. As Williams (1988) pointed out, nature may be one of the most complex words in the English language¹. Race is no less complex. Both race and Indigenous knowledge have attracted much definitional energy. Dei, Karumanchery and

Karumanchery-Luik (2004) suggest that broadly there have been and continue to be, three competing ways of interpreting race. These are "as (a) biologically determined, (b) ideologically constructed and (c) socially constituted" (p. 23). Establishing biological criteria was fraught with difficulty. Various tests were conducted to establish the superiority of white people over coloured people (Dei, et al., 2004). They point to the recent re-emergence of this type of research and argue that this "biologically determinist work ... continue[s] to insert fallacious racial signs, symbols and 'facts' into social consciousness" (p. 24). While the major debates around race are now concerned with the ways in which race is socially constructed, Dei et al. (2004) go on to argue that "because racialized bodies have been historically framed, positioned and pathologised in specifically negative ways, the discourse of biological determinism has been deeply naturalised and legitimized as 'truth' and 'commonsense' (p. 26).

Nayak (2006) reminds the reader that "*there is no such thing as race*" (p. 411, original emphasis) although this has not lessened the impact of race as a form of social organisation. The theorisation of race as socially constituted has not countered the "still voracious appetite for approaches that freeze, objectify and tame 'race' / ethnicity into unitary categories that can be easily understood and managed" (Gunarantman, 2003, cited in Nayak, 2006, p. 417). Nayak (2006) makes the point that constructionism has not replaced essentialism as a lens through which to view and understand the operations of race. Rather, he suggests, "essentialism and constructionism overlay one another" (p. 420). While race may be a fiction and socially constituted, the ways in which it can and does get lived can appear as if race were an essential category, as if black and white bodies do exist and certain cultural practices and beliefs are fastened to these bodies. Smith (1999) reminds us that "imperialism still hurts, still destroys and is reforming itself constantly" (p. 19).

The challenge for those who write and discuss the topic of race is how to do this in such a way that does not reiterate and reify the very categories that are sought to be dismantled. This is both part of the dangerous terrain that Semali and Kincheloe (1999) refer to and the site of productive tension that Nayak (2006) uses to explore race politics and theory. One way to work with this productive tension is to recognise that "black and white are relational and mutually constitutive" (Nayak, 2006, p. 419). Constituting Indigenous as good only makes sense in relation to non-Indigenous as bad. Both who and what counts as good and bad changes depending on the needs of the social and cultural context. Indigenous are cast as bad if there is a need to possess land or enhance the notion of civilisation of Western society. Alternatively, Indigenous are cast as good when aspects of Western society are out of favour. Berkhofer (1979, cited in Grande, 1999) argues

¹ I use the terms *nature*, *natural* and *environment* interchangeably throughout this article. Different bodies of literature tend to use the terms differently and in crossing over these bodies of literature I have found it difficult to settle on one term.

that while the image may shift from 'good' to 'bad' this is always in relation to the needs of the white population. "So when white civilization is in favour, Indians [Berkhofer was writing about North America] are deemed ignoble, and when white civilization is in disfavour, 'Indian-ness' becomes the elixir" (Grande, 1999, p. 309).

The noble savage was the motif used by colonisers to grab land and to justify the destruction of Indigenous peoples (Buege, 1996). The ecologically noble savage is another manifestation of this and "serves the current 'polemical and creative needs of whites'" (Grande, 1999, p. 309). Invested in the ecologically noble savage is the moral superiority of the natural world. As the discontent with the modern world and the modern project grows on a number of levels, including environmental, there is a need for "an illusion of the uncomplicated primitive utopia" (Grande, 1999, p. 309). Indigenous people are seen to be closer to nature and less corrupted by civilisation than white people. One of the effects of classifying Indigenous people in this way is to portray them as "'timeless' beings – that is, as people who exist in an indistinguishable present-past" (Buege, 1996, p. 73). Indigenous people not only maintain a connection to the past, but they do not live in the present. To count as an Indigenous person in the mode of the ecologically noble savage requires the fulfilment of a number of criteria. It can only be vested in groups and this group must have a "direct connection to a particular environment" (Buege, 1996, p. 74). The motif of the ecologically noble savage involves a sacrosanct relationship with that particular environment which informs all action and all behaviour. To count as ecologically noble, Indigenous people must put environmental concerns above all others. Buege (1996) highlights this as a particularly important point as it suggests that "a group either has it or it doesn't" (p. 74). As with any marker in the operation of binary opposites such as good/bad, it works to clearly demarcate who is in and who is out.

Indigenous knowledge becomes idealised through the motif of the ecologically noble savage. Knowledge is fixed and frozen, sealed from the corruption of civilisation (Baber, 1996, cited in Shahjahan, 2005). Freezing and sealing Indigenous knowledge serves a number of purposes. It provides a form of measuring the progress of Western society and a foil to our way of life. The ecologically noble savage represents a utopian vision of life as it could be. "We persevere by dreaming that there are people out there living the lives that we believe we should live" (Buege, 1996, p. 76).

The myth of the ecologically noble savage also positions Indigenous people for an inevitable fall. The fall occurs as "the Native Americans have failed to live the lives that Euro-Americans have expected of them" (Beuge, 1996, p. 85). They have neither remained

frozen and fixed from the corruption of civilisation nor do their environmental issues necessarily cohere with the West's vision of what these should be. Indigenous people can not live up to Western ideals of authenticity as these are idealised and mythologised to meet the needs of the West.

As Nayak (2006) reminds us, black and white are relational and mutually constitutive. The ecologically noble savage and the way it is deployed may reveal more about white people than it does about the Indigenous people that are being valorised in this way. The stories associated with the ecologically noble savage are one thread of the content and organisation of society that shapes the OES curriculum. It is with this in mind that I now turn to the OES curriculum and text book to consider how the motif of the ecologically noble savage shapes and limits the possibilities for understanding relationships with the natural environment.

Narratives in OES studies

The rationale for OES is to study the ways humans interact with and relate to natural environments which are understood to include those environments which have had minimal human influence (VCAA, 2005). The OES curriculum specifically addresses Indigenous relationships with the natural environment prior to European arrival. From the arrival of Europeans the focus is on peoples' relationships with the natural environment. This does not preclude an inclusion of Indigenous views. In fact Gough, Pleasants and Black (2006) incorporate Indigenous viewpoints throughout the text book that supports this area of study. As questions of race and ethnicity are an explicit part of OES studies it is rich site to consider how the mutually constitutive relationship between black and white might be playing out in this context. I will focus on two aspects of the OES curriculum and text book here.

The first is the way in which the OES is framed around relationships with natural environments. While this is a legitimate and important way of thinking about people and the environment, when framed through discourses of race it becomes difficult to avoid the motif of the ecologically noble savage as it is closely linked to a moral superiority attached to nature. Indigenous people are construed as having a closer relationship to nature than is possible for non-Indigenous people. Alongside this, Shaw (2006) highlights how studies of indigeneity have tended to focus on non-urban experiences and that in Australia there is a discomfort with urban indigeneity. The OES curriculum is located in a social context which reiterates an idealised view of Indigenous people belonging in nature. The ecologically noble savage is a powerful motif that shapes and reflects relationships around the natural environment and race and one of

the ways in which this plays itself out is through the reduction to good/bad in terms of understanding relationships with nature.

The language shifts that occur around the terms non-Indigenous and Australian in the curriculum documents provide another point to consider how the constitutive relationships of race are playing out in this context. Both the terms non-Indigenous and Australian are employed somewhat interchangeably when discussing relationships with the environment. This is particularly evident in the section on contemporary relationships. While the term non-Indigenous suggests all people who do not identify themselves as Indigenous, who counts as an Australian is unclear. In a section on changing views of the Australian environment the authors suggest that

Australians view the environment differently from the early European settlers. We no longer see the outdoor environment as totally hostile and alien... Many Australians now also see their role as conservers or protectors of the environment...Not all Australians share these views. There are those who see the environment as a resource to be exploited for short-term gain, or who believe that development is necessary. (Gough et al., 2006, pp. 155-156)

Undoubtedly the ways in which Europeans view the environment has changed and is very varied. But this statement does more than describe a situation. Australians, in this context, are those of settler or European descent. Indigenous people appear to be absent when this statement is read through the rubric of race as relational. Because Indigenous people are absent in this story of changing and varied relationships with the environment they are reiterated as timeless beings (Buege, 1996). Their absence suggests that Indigenous peoples' relationship with the natural environment has not changed, irrespective of the huge social upheaval that has occurred since the arrival of Europeans in Australia.

Similar slippage occurs around the concepts of conservation and sustainability that are used in the OES text. Earlier in the text there are numerous references made to the different relationships that Indigenous knowledge and Western knowledge afford. "*Indigenous people see the land as a part of themselves*" (Gough, et al., 2006, p. 181, original emphasis) and they "feel it is their responsibility to look after it" (p. 181). Buege (1996) comments that relationships of native people and land are quite complex. Gough et al. (2006) write that the views of Indigenous people are as varied as the environments to which they have kinship, but this variation is not described in the way

the authors go on to describe the range of ways which other people interact with the land. This includes as landholders and landowners, scientists, adventurers, naturalists and conservationists whose relationships with the land varies from an economic resource, a laboratory, a gymnasium or friend, an inspiration, and a temple or a museum (Gough, et al., 2006). This subtly reiterates that Indigenous people, knowledge and relationships with the environment are fixed in way that the diversity of Australians' relationships to the land is not.

Both of these examples may seem small points to be making, but when viewed through the motif of the ecologically noble savage two things occur. First, the relationships Indigenous people have with the environment are idealised in a way that may have little to do with contemporary issues or concerns. Second, the way in which race is mutually constituted is obscured. The processes through which Indigenous are cast as good and non-Indigenous as bad and who benefits from this remain outside the frame of questioning. As Grande (1999) reminds us the way in which Indigenous people are seen in relation to white people serves the needs of white people.

The interpretations of the text book I have given here are through a particular lens and as Reid (2004) reminds us, are a reflection of society. It is important to be mindful that these examples are based on curriculum documents, not on what is being taught in the classroom. How teachers enact the curriculum and how students engage with the curriculum is an area that requires further research to begin to understand why students write the sorts of answers they do in the OES exam. Teachers' preparation, training and confidence in teaching about relationships with the natural environment from diverse perspectives is also an area that deserves further study. But, given the complexity of questions around race and the environment it is hardly surprising that students reduce their response to Indigenous good/non-Indigenous bad in an exam. This good/bad dyad may also provide a strategy to start to undo the form the ecologically noble savage takes with regard to race and the environment.

Colouring in whiteness

The oversimplification of binaries as occurs through good/bad, Indigenous/non-Indigenous dichotomies, works to freeze race as fixed and essential. It also works to reiterate the 'unmarked marker' of whiteness, "a continued inability to 'colour' the seeming transparency of white positionings" (Frankenberg, 1997, p. 1). Whiteness as the unmarked marker excuses us from having to engage with the question of the production of white selves. Whiteness is no less difficult to define as Indigenous, particularly in a multicultural society such as Australia. "Whiteness

is a process that not only racializes and excludes, but de-ethnicizes and *includes* otherwise ethnicized groups, as required" (Shaw, 2006, p. 865, emphasis in original). Whiteness is not fixed, nor is it tied to white bodies, rather it is tied to mobile social processes that shift and change related to the context.

Frankenberg (1997) examines the question of whether white culture is 'good' or 'bad' in relation to Cultural Sensitivity and Awareness programmes where people are guided to greater racial awareness of themselves and others. She suggests the question of whether white people and white culture are 'good' or 'bad' displaces "practical and material questions about white people's location in racial hierarchy onto very static notions of essence and original sin. It follows naturally from this displacement that whites embark urgently on the quest either to be proven innocent or to find redemption" (Frankenberg 1997, p. 18). Neither innocence nor redemption lead to greater understanding of social processes around race but rather entrench people in spaces where good/bad dichotomies appear to be a reasonable response to race based questions. Her analysis can be usefully applied to what may be occurring in the OES curriculum with regard to how relationships with the natural environment are being understood and experienced by both teachers and students.

I do not want to pursue the quest for innocence or to find redemption here, but highlight that unless we engage in the question of race and the "dominance of transhistorical, essential, asocial and universal characteristics of unmarked whiteness (Nash, 2000, cited in Shaw, 2006, p. 854) we are limited to a good/bad binary when it comes to examining human relationships with the environment. This is indeed dangerous territory as it is easy to reiterate and reify the very categories that are under scrutiny. It is also easy to romanticise notions of Indigenous knowledge and behaviour in ways that bears little resemblance to either Indigenous history or to contemporary concerns and issues. It is equally dangerous to erase race from the discussion and draw on what appears to be universal and therefore, seemingly 'objective' ways of understanding and relating to the natural environment. The question of race can not be avoided in the question of human relationships with the natural world, as race and racism are critical axes around which issues of the environment cohere (Hicks, 2006).

It seems important to bring race into the outdoor and environmental education discussion and practice. Currently the literature locates Indigenous people along the lines of the ecologically noble savage and whiteness is invisible due to its normalcy. Frankenberg (1997) reminds us that "analysing whiteness is inseparable from the critique of racism" (p. 21) and this analysis may be a way to start remaking whiteness. A closer examination of whiteness and the

ways it intersects with environment, race and ethnicity provides a strategy to examine the good/bad dyad that moves beyond holding Indigenous people up for further scrutiny. One of the compelling reasons for embarking on this trajectory is that "it could be argued that a critical understanding of how we 'do' race may yet inform us with strategies and techniques to 'undo' it" (Nayak, 2006, p. 423).

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