Nakata, Martin. Disciplining the savages: savaging the disciplines. viii, 247 pp., map, bibliogr. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007. $44.95 (paper)

This work represents a significant shift in Indigenous research, a turnaround that centres the native viewpoint and turns the academic gaze back upon itself. This decolonization is apparent in the clever title, which effectively changes the status of Indigenous people in research from object to subject. However, the work goes beyond merely buttressing anticolonial positions, proposing a vision of future research and an Indigenous Standpoint theory.

In part one, Nakata critiques early colonial research from his own islands of the Torres Strait. He exposes the spiritual, linguistic, psychological, physiological, and anthropological inscriptions of Islander People and communities that informed policy and interactions between colonizers and colonized. His own family’s stories give depth and meaning to his analysis of the impact that this flawed research had on the Islander community, prioritizing the Indigenous voice. The abusive practices of this research are clearly linked to the colonization of language, mind, body, senses, community, and even the soul of the Torres Strait Islander. But at the same time a picture of Islander agency emerges as part of the untold history of contact, an unwritten standpoint developed in Islander networks.

An analysis follows in part two of the ways formal education has been used in ‘disciplining the Islander’ and the ways research has been used in ‘disciplining Indigenous Knowledge’. Once again stories from Nakata’s own community and personal experience serve to centre the Indigenous voice and validate the analysis from an Islander Standpoint. This analysis is placed in the context of the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge systems into academic and scientific literature, problematizing global interactions with Indigenous Peoples and challenging the false dichotomy between Western and Indigenous knowledge.

‘The Cultural Interface’ is used throughout the text as a framework for exploring the dialogical exchange between Indigenous and non-Indigenous systems, as well as situating the lifeworlds of contemporary Islanders in the dynamic space between ancestral and Western realities. In part three the interface is problematized as a highly contested domain of
competing interests and political tensions and is explored in depth to lay the foundation for the discussion addressing an Indigenous Standpoint theory.

Nakata’s final chapter asks, ‘How are Indigenous students, academics and researchers in the disciplines to navigate the complexities of Indigenous experience within such contested spaces?’ He asserts that an Indigenous Standpoint theory must provide more than the production of subjective narrative to disrupt objectified accounts; that it must be reflexive and provide a distinction between experience and standpoint, investigating the social relations within which the ‘knower’ knows. It is not a simple reflection of experience, but must develop arguments which answer to the Indigenous logic and assumptions on which they are built. Nakata stresses that Indigenous lived experience at the ‘cultural interface’ is merely the point of entry for the investigation, not the case under investigation. He describes this process as a push-pull between Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives, a confusing struggle to centre the native researcher within the constraints of a limiting dichotomy. The physical experience and memory of this day-to-day struggle can be used to create a more nuanced understanding of tensions created within these dualities, generating innovations from the possibilities in the spaces between Indigenous and non-Indigenous positions.

While this is at times a dense and difficult read, Nakata creates the concept of ‘cultural interface’, which allows the researcher, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, the legitimacy of exploring relations and spaces inhabited by scholars in various academic disciplines. Nakata strongly posits that identity is not about being in a place but being connected to place. He argues that he and his daughters have lived outside the Torres Strait for most of their lives, but that does not make them any less Islander. This is possible through memories and affiliations, a sense of belonging and concepts that are still being defined by other Torres Strait scholars. While Nakata critically unpacks the historical concepts that gave rise to this book, he hints at the need for new and more productive engagement in conceptualizing Islanders. He does not do this himself but opens the way for other scholars to do so. While the book may seem excessively critical of conceptual frameworks, it enables these difficult dialogues about concepts and inscriptions to happen. This makes it an important work for all researchers who are working across cultures; an opportunity to reflect on how one presents oneself to the gaze of the host community as well as how one produces descriptions of what one has ‘understood’.

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