The Incantatory Power of Critical Racial and Decolonial Literacies: Launch of Debbie Bargallie and Nilmini Fernando (eds.), *Critical Racial and Decolonial Literacies: Breaking the Silence*

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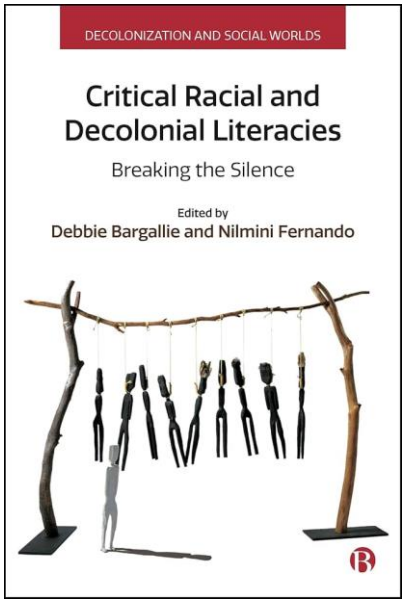

I acknowledge the Wallumattagal clan of the Darug Nation, whose cultures and customs have nurtured and continue to nurture this land since the Dreamtime. I pay my respects to the Elders past, present, and future, to the Ancestors and the Land and Water, its knowledges, Dreaming, and culture—embodied within and throughout Darug Ngura. The power of this acknowledgement's registering of the fact that all knowledges, both human and more-than-human, are indissociably embodied resonates with *Critical Racial and Decolonial Literacies: Breaking the Silence* (Bargallie & Fernando, 2024). It's an honour to have been asked to launch this outstanding and urgently important volume.

This volume of essays at every stage marks and analyses the manner in which race and coloniality operate through what must not be seen as a paradox but, rather, as an inextricable double-bind: on the one hand, the chapters of this book insistently draw attention to the destructive impact of race and coloniality on the settler state's targeted bodies—race always already operates on the affective, psychic, and physical materiality of the body. Simultaneously, the various authors proceed rigorously to unpack how the racialised body is necessarily enmeshed within structural and institutional relations of racial and settler colonial power that generate the power effects of both race and colonialism while simultaneously effacing the structurality of these power relations and reducing them in the process to atomised and individualistic experiences (Bargallie & Fernando, 2024). The innovative power of this collection lies in how it so brilliantly negotiates this double-bind to "Unmask the Racial Contract" (Bargallie, 2020) of white supremacy that continues to interpellate and capture its targeted subjects. In the face of this racial-settler power of

interpellation and captivity, the book operates as an invaluable manual that works to enable a collective politics of liberation—precisely by offering, to cite Bargallie and Fernando, “a language to identify, name and contest racist experiences” and thereby providing us with “the tools to undertake necessary work to transform the structures of white supremacy” (2024, p. 2).

I apologise in advance that, due to time constraints, I won’t be able to discuss all of the chapters in the volume; rather, I’ll focus on a sample of chapters that, for me, encapsulate the key concerns of the collection.

In their chapter on “Being Woke to Anti-Intellectualism,” Carlson and Day (2024) situate the historical conditions that have underpinned settler attempts to silence, discredit, and dismantle anti-racist and anti-colonial knowledges and pedagogies in the Australian settler state. “At the very moment,” they write, “when Indigenous truths erupted into the national psyche, race-literate and decolonial narratives to the ‘peaceful settlement’ of Australia came under sustained attack” (Carlson & Day, 2024, p. 16) from a wave of political, media, and academic speakers and forces. This is a familiar tactic of white supremacist culture: whenever a previously racially subjugated and/or colonised people intervene to dismantle and overthrow structures of oppression, their work becomes the focus of national settler campaigns to neutralise and discredit their urgent social justice work. I love the fact that Carlson and Day unequivocally name these destructive settler campaigns as anti-intellectual. So-called Australia is a deeply anti-intellectual country. It is so, I think, precisely because critical knowledges at all times present a threat to a status quo predicated on reproducing the numbing historical lies that erase and neutralise the foundational facts of violence that have attended and that continue to subtend the very modus operandi of this settler nation. These unpalatable facts include colonial invasion, Frontier Wars, genocidal massacres, Stolen Generations, the White Australia policy, and the ongoing toll of mass Indigenous incarceration and deaths in custody.

In the face of the institutionalised lies of the white supremacist settler state, as Carlin (2024) underscores in her chapter, the teaching of critical racial and decolonial

literacies is framed by its detractors as a form of “brainwashing students,” which purportedly leaves students “alienated” and “disenfranchised” (Carlin, 2024, p. 51). However, Carlin emphasises,

> “my experience as an educator is the opposite: I found students crave conversations about race, racism and identity.... They crave these conversations because they know what it is like to move around the world feeling ... racialized. They experience life through a racial lens and in positions of relative power or disempowerment. Race already shapes social structures” (2024, p. 51).

In other words, in contradistinction to the white supremacist fable that critical race studies “imports” or “imposes” race from some mythical “outside,” critical racial and decolonial pedagogies expose that race is a priori the medium through which we live and breathe in the context of the white supremacist settler state.

I mentioned in my opening that the power of this book resides in its insistence on situating racial and settler power structures within the lived realities of embodiment. The very title of Blanch’s (2024) chapter, “Shedding the Colonial Skin and Digging Deep as a Decolonial Praxis,” eloquently exposes the enmeshing of one’s living flesh within the violent matrices of racial and settler power. In marking her identity as a sovereign Indigenous woman, Blanch writes:

> “As sovereign beings, we enter confronting and dangerous spaces of settler colonialism with a strong desire to disrupt and change damaged landscapes. This raises the question of our bodies as damaged landscapes, especially in the sense of what work we do as sovereign bodies in the context of landscape/bodies when blood is spilt” (2024, p. 79).

The power of Blanch’s writing here resides in her refusal to reproduce the Euro-anthropocentric and settler colonial split between subject and object, body and psyche, and between living flesh and living Country—as the very ground that at once sustains and nourishes life and that, simultaneously, is also the target of settler campaigns of environmental destruction and injustice. Chapters such as Blanch’s work to disrupt settler binaries and offer readers wholistic and integral knowledges by which to understand the heterogeneous modalities of violence that score both

human and more-than-human bodies. In Blanch's eloquent hands, we see how racism operates at the very capillary level of something like hair—she unpacks how hair is racialised, instrumentalised, and weaponised by the racial settler state and, simultaneously, how Indigenous sovereignties play out at the very quotidian level of the hairdressing salon where Blanch's niece worked, and how her Indigenous niece's material presence and work effectively transformed the everyday space of a hairdressing salon. Blanch states:

> "We own this space, we are confident in this space. This is our space when we are all here, we claim this space simply because our niece works here. It is a Black space when we come here. This is a powerful concept. Our hair is cared for; it's loved because she [our niece] works here" (2024, p. 86).

What we see here is a stunning reversal of power, where the microphysics of everyday Indigenous sovereignties reclaim an otherwise colonised and racialised space into a Black place of love, nurture, and celebration. "Our voices and bodies," Blanch concludes, "undertake performances that engage in a process of decolonization as acts of resistance and refusal" (2024, p. 88). Even then, as this book documents the enormity of the power of the settler state's regimes of racial violence, it powerfully maps all of the quotidian acts of embodied resistance that work, even at microphysical levels such as the care for hair, to contest and contingently overturn these same regimes.

The innovative power of Bargallie and Fernando's book resides in the way in which they have assembled an extraordinary heterogeneity of interdisciplinary contributors who are doing the critical work of anti-racism and decoloniality across different disciplines, fields, and sectors. In her chapter, Liu, for instance, outlines her productive deployment of critical race and decolonial theories in the context of business studies; she thereby works to name and expose "the ideological roots of business management" and to clarify how "white supremacy is the water in which Western businesses swim" (Liu, 2024, p. 114); in the process, she aims for "students to question the oppressive nature of capitalism and reimagine ways of living and being in the world" (Liu, 2024, p. 113). As Liu makes abundantly clear, her critical pedagogical interventions are met with active resistance, fear, and often derision

from both her colleagues and some of her students. Regardless, she perseveres and remarks on how being part of the collective work of this book is, for her, an energising experience. Liu says:

> "In telling our stories as anti-racist scholars and educators with one another, you have all borne witness to my struggles and I bear witness to the struggles faced by my fellow contributors to this volume… In these solidaristic connections with each other lie the possibilities for critical hope and transformation" (2024, p. 119).

The collective voices that inscribe the different chapters of this book materialise the ground for critical hope and transformation. This is not to say that the book traffics in the neoliberal ruse of compulsory optimism, as yet another form of denegated violence. On the contrary, many of the book's contributors expose the struggles they endure in the course of attempting to materialise their anti-colonial and anti-racist work. In her chapter, Foley talks of the ritualised dismissals of her work by the white supremacist colleagues of her art institution. Discussing the powerful work *Annihilation of the Blacks* that graces the book's cover and that attests to a settler massacre of Badtjala people, she writes:

> "I will never forget receiving the harshest criticism from staff in the sculpture department, while standing in front of *Annihilation of the Blacks*, my educator's comments at a critique were that my work 'didn't say anything and was just a full stop.' I was wounded and so paralysed that I could not speak back" (Foley, 2024, p. 126).

Foley marks here the wounding power of racist epistemic violence to silence its critics and the authority that educators possess to so airily dismiss a foundational work on Australia's genocidal history as saying "nothing." In this moment of institutionalised epistemic violence, Foley, as a Black artist, is caught in a white supremacist practice that effectively reproduces the very title and substance of her artwork at the symbolic level: she is the target of yet another attempt at the 'annihilation of the Blacks'. Foley's work has now, of course, become a national icon that continues to speak to the otherwise unspeakable history of this nation's genocidal campaigns and, furthermore, this very book has supplied her the ground

for her to break the racist silence that so paralysed her and to exercise her own form of retrospective justice precisely by enabling her to put on the record the institutionalised racism of her colleagues. The fact that Foley's artwork now graces the cover of Bargallie and Fernando's volume stands as a defiant act of Indigenous visual sovereignty.

A number of chapters across the book speak to the urgency of deploying anti-racist and decolonising curricula in the face of the entrenched settler-white supremacist relations of power that underpin our universities. Giannacopoulos, for example, as a legal scholar, goes right to the heart of the matter within the habitus of her own discipline of law, in her chapter "Decolonising the Curriculum in the Colonial Debtscape". In her research and teaching, she has developed and deployed a compelling ensemble of critical terms—debtscape, nomopoly, nomophilia and so on—that expose the structural violence that inscribes all levels of settler law—from the Australian Constitution down to the micro level of piecemeal legal reforms that purport to correct legal injustices—legal reform, she argues, is "a device crafted by the constitution to enable its conservation via alteration" (Giannacopoulos, 2024, p. 139), while it continues to erase and disqualify Indigenous law and sovereignties. Likewise, in his chapter Brooks refuses, as a critical race and decolonial educator, to focus on individualistic understandings of how these power relations work. He says: "We must move beyond reductive notions that racism describes a form of prejudice that is singularly locatable in the action of individuals" (Brooks, 2024, p. 299). "Against this rendering," he writes, "we must insist that racism describes acts of racial ascription that arise from specific economic and political conditions" (Brooks, 2024, p. 300)—and this is precisely the transformative critical work that the chapters of this book engage in.

The urgent valency of the critical work that this volume performs is perhaps most acutely made manifest in the harrowing context of the enormity of the Zionist genocide that is being daily perpetrated in Gaza and the punitive techniques of silencing, erasure, and dismissal that so many of our universities have deployed against their anti-Zionist, anti-colonial, and anti-racist scholars. In her contribution,

Lentin brings this into sharp focus when she says: “At the time we are speaking, what occupies me most of the time is organizing to oppose the genocide and the epistemicide in Palestine. Every single university in Gaza has been destroyed!” (Lentin, 2024, p. 312). And, we can add, a wholesale regime of genocide, ecocide, epistemicide, urbicide, scholasticide and so on has been deployed to annihilate all forms of Palestinian life in Gaza. In the face of this, the collective work of this book poses the question: how can we possibly identify ourselves as critical race and decolonising scholars if we continue to remain silent in this harrowed genocidal context?

For me, Fernando answers this question through her impassioned coining of what she terms practices of “incantation” which entail “Saying love out loud. Saying race out loud” (Fernando, 2024, p. 205) and, I would add, saying “settler colonial genocide” out loud, here in the Australian settler context and elsewhere, such as in Gaza. We must say these things out loud, says Fernando, “Over and over to evoke the energy and spirit of our textual utterances and release their transformative power into unconditioned space” (Fernando, 2024, p. 205). Bargallie and Fernando’s edited volume stands as an embodied testament to the incantatory and transformative power of critical race and decolonial literacies. The vibrant, uncompromising, and acutely urgent chapters that constitute this book embody a collectivity of voices that, in their incantatory polyphony, in their rage, pain, and in their hope, unleash all of their transformative power into the spaces and places of our everyday lives.

I congratulate Debbie Bargallie and Nilmini Fernando for bringing this outstanding book to light, and I celebrate the brilliant chapters of all the volume’s contributors. In closing, I want to end with the resonant words of Kwaymullina, Indigenous scholar and poet. In the final chapter of the book, Kwaymullina speaks to the role of what she terms the “Teacher/Decoloniser.” She eloquently maps the ethical responsibilities that such a figure must embody and she concludes by saying that this critical work can “carry us all into the dawn / of decolonised futures” (Kwaymullina, 2024, p. 321). Following Kwaymullina’s impassioned exhortation, I launch this incantatory book as it carries us all into the dawn of decolonised futures.