



## **Signposts that Helped a White Activist find her Way as a Critical Ally**

**Roslyn (Rose) Carnes**

Murdoch University

As a white researcher setting out on a research journey with Indigenous people, how could I deal with the paradox of being part of the problem I was seeking to address? Awareness of, and desire to minimise, the impact of my white privilege would not automatically cancel it out. Activist researchers who have challenged powerful systems have a history of being condemned and ostracised by colonial centres of power. Would it be my fate to be condemned by the colonial centre of power in which I found myself; the academy? Would I also be condemned by those not in positions of power? What signposts could show me how to act, what to do and how to undertake the research journey?

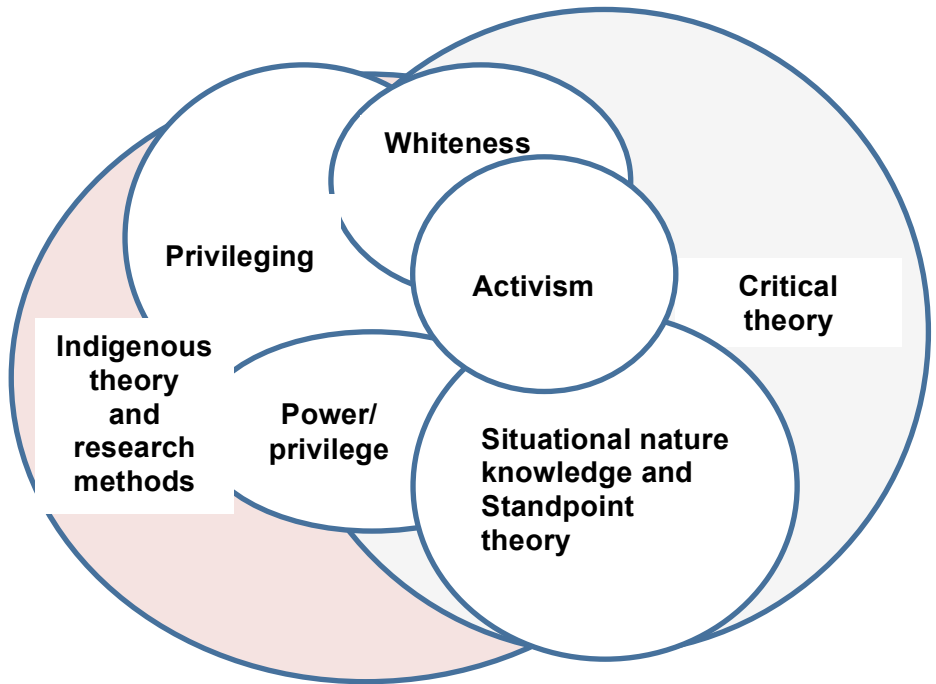
This paper outlines the intersecting theories I melded together to use as a map for a critical activist ally standpoint when conducting research in Indigenous Prisoner Education in Western Australia. Drawing on theories of whiteness, power, critical pedagogy, activism and standpoint theory, I attempt to navigate a direction that allows for the struggle, uncertainties and paradoxes that are what it means to work critically as an allied activist. I explore some of the challenges I face as a critical, activist ally who is exploring Indigenous education in Western Australian prisons. I invite audience discussion, feedback and reflection on these challenges.

## Introduction

During the course of my PhD study; "*Closing the Gap in Indigenous Prisoner Education: yarning<sup>1</sup> with ex-prisoners*" I have searched for an appropriate and ethical framework to guide the research journey as a white woman listening to, and learning from, Indigenous people. Purely Western epistemologies did not seem respectful and, as a white person, I could not morally adopt Indigenous Research Methods. The research has been occurring in the context of my active involvement with the Deaths in Custody Watch Committee (WA) and I have worked for several years in a range of advocacy roles with a community legal service in Western Australia. This paper outlines some of what I have learned as I moved from thinking based almost exclusively on Western academic teachings to including the thinking and writing of Indigenous academics. What has been happening is a shift in my world view from a typically Western stance to a place of thinking, acting and researching as a critical ally. Privileging the works of Indigenous research methodologies and theorists, I draw on standpoint theory, critical theory, and theories of whiteness, power, and activism to navigate a direction that allows for the struggle, uncertainties and paradoxes that are what it means to work critically as an allied activist. Figure 1 provides a visual map for a critical activist ally standpoint.

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<sup>1</sup> Yarning is a culturally appropriate alternative to interviewing. It is "an informal and relaxed discussion through which both the researcher and participant journey together visiting places and topics of interest relevant to the research study."(Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010: 38).



*Figure 1: Conceptual map for a critical activist ally standpoint*

## **Why Standpoint Theory?**

Based on a paradigm of knowledge being acquired through interaction with the world, standpoint approaches are more than a description of a viewpoint or perspective. Standpoint approaches see knowledge as gained through interaction and relationship with the surrounding environment. "Human beings transform their environment that in turn transforms them"(Polhaus 2002: 284). Standpoint theory has been seen as a vehicle for valuing the voices of the marginalised, disadvantaged and oppressed whose experiences have not been given credence in the construction of dominant knowledge.

A standpoint is not necessarily constituted by an homogenous group of individuals and is more than a simple reflection of social positioning (Nakata 2007: 214). Nakata goes on to say that he sees standpoint theory as a "method of inquiry... a way of theorizing knowledge from a particular and interested position" (Nakata 2007: 215). Standpoint approaches use "experiences of the marginalised to generate critical questions about the lives of marginalised people and of those in the dominant groups, as well as about the systematic structural and symbolic relations between them" (Harding 1995:128).

Marx's discussions of the oppression of the working class and their unique understanding of capitalist society are credited with distinguishing a standpoint approach to knowledge (Ellis & Fopp 2009). Marx believed that the power of the dominant discourse led to the knowledge of the working class being disregarded. Similarly, feminists saw women's knowledge being marginalised in a culture where a masculine viewpoint had the most power (Harding 1991, 1995). The most prominent voices of feminists were traditionally white women. Moreton-Robinson's landmark book, *Talkin' up to the white woman* (2000), provides a thorough analysis of the ways in which the traditional white analyses of power imbalance based on gender alone did not take into account the impact of race. In fact, she claims that even considering multiple forms of disadvantage such as gender, sexuality, race and class do not consider the impact of invisible whiteness on the power imbalance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous women.

Harding (1991: 271-271) encouraged academics and teachers from the more advantaged groups in society to find ways to embrace standpoint theory and the voices of the disadvantaged. She did not however provide any

clues as to how this might happen, saying it was much too complex to address in the context of her publication.

Australian academic Nakata (2007) has written about an Indigenous standpoint providing a vehicle for previously unheard and unacknowledged Indigenous voices. Such a standpoint provides a place from which to challenge the hegemony of white privilege and entitlement. Nakata (2004: 5) also refers to the power of Indigenous academics engaging in dialogue with the non-Indigenous research community; that it is the circulation of ideas, thinking and intellectualism that can have the biggest impact on research as a whole. It is my hope to contribute to this circulation of ideas, thinking and intellectualism by learning from the voices of Indigenous Australians and critiquing the white institutions that perpetuate the privilege of whiteness.

As a wadjella<sup>2</sup> I needed to be very careful how I engaged in such a shared space. The guides for non-Indigenous academics on how to respectfully utilise learning from Indigenous people are far and few between (Cross-Townsend 2011: 74). As Cross-Townsend says, “the social reality of Indigenous oppression and inequity can be difficult to intellectually and emotionally relate to for dominant culture learners.” As I considered the writings of Polhaus (2002), Nakata (2004, 2007) and Harding (1991) five central characteristics of a standpoint theory emerged. These five characteristics, which have provided a guide in navigating this nebulous territory, were;

- knowledge is situational and based on interactions with the world;

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<sup>2</sup> Commonly used Noongar word for “white fella” and used by both Indigenous and white people in Western Australia as a way of identifying as non-Indigenous.

## Carnes: White Activist Ally

- such interactions shape who I am and how I think and act;
- as I interact from a position in the world a standpoint will evolve;
- no standpoint in and of itself is total and complete in how it represents the world.

Most importantly, “a standpoint is more than a socially positioned experience; it is an engagement with the kinds of questions found from that position and experience” (Polhaus 2002: 287). Therefore, core questions provided a reference point of stability amongst the ill-defined and tenuous space of a critical activist ally standpoint.

The essential, signpost questions that emerged to guide my critical activist ally standpoint are listed in Figure 2. These are the questions that I have utilised at a macro level in developing the research and at the micro level of daily decision making for the research project. They are the guiding star on the conceptual map of a critical, activist ally standpoint. The questions provide a clarity and transparency in why I am doing this research and the angle from which I am viewing the topic of prisoner education.

How has colonial history impacted on sovereign First Nations people?

How can the sovereignty of First Nations people be respected?

What can be learned from listening to First Nations people?

How can I be sure that I am not making things worse for First Nations people?

Am I following an agenda of importance to First Nations people?

Do I have permission from the right people?

*Figure 2: Signpost questions for an allied activist*

There is a challenge to those who question the epistemologies of traditional academia. We cannot simply add ways of thinking, being and doing of the marginalised to the pre-existing paradigms of the mainstream (Harding 1991: 20). Like oil and water, the two do not mix. On the other hand, if a more radical approach is taken by marginalised, usually silenced groups, they are often dismissed by the dominant voices. As Marcuse (1968: 143) said, "when truth cannot be realised within the established social order, it always appears to the latter as mere utopia". My standpoint as a critical, activist ally may be open, transparent and therefore have integrity but some of what I say, even some of the signpost questions, will not be accepted by the established, dominant social order as credible and may well be dismissed as "mere utopia"

## Critical Theory

Critical theory has offered a radical perspective of the world since the founding of the Frankfurt School in 1923 (Anderson and Herr 2007: 406). The term "critical theory" is somewhat misleading as there is no one "theory". Rather, there are a multitude of viewpoints that fall under the broad umbrella of "Critical Theory" (Gibson 1986: 3). All critical theorists, however, have a common focus on society, structures and systems in context rather than the search for positivist truth (Gibson 1986: 16).

Based on reading key critical and Indigenous critical theorists, I believed my conceptual map of a Critical Activist Ally Standpoint fell broadly under the umbrella of Critical Theory. My research project, and my way of working were also committed to:

- Privileging of Indigenous voices as the experts on their own lives (Kovach 2005, 2009; Martin 2003; Rigney 1997; Smith 1999, Smythe et al 2006: 6-7).
- A vision of justice and equality (Kincheloe 2008: 6; Moreton-Robinson 2000)
- Alleviation of disadvantage and suffering (Kincheloe 2008: 11)
- Acknowledging education as an inherently political act (Kincheloe 2008: 8; Beresford 2003; Gillborn 2009; Shor 1993)
- Ensuring that people are not hurt in the process of education or research (Kincheloe 2008: 13; Orr et al 2009)
- Being critical of itself, its approach and "of the social forces that make up its own basis." (Marcuse 1968: 156).



- Reading of the word alongside the world (Kincheloe 2008: 23, 31; Friere 1997: 75)
- Awareness and analysis of how power works, what it is and how it might be more equitably be distributed (Smythe et al 2006: 6-7).

While Grande (2007: 320) refers to the important place of critical theory in Indigenous research she cautions that it is limited as it was largely developed using “Western epistemological frames”. Because of this I place the map of a Critical Activist Ally Standpoint at the very edge of the critical theory concept and falling, in part, slightly outside of it, as Indigenous theory has created its own theoretical place from its own unique frames. As can be seen in figure 1, I have some elements outside of the Western frame that forged Critical Theory in order to honour the impact of Indigenous thinking on the development of this framework; to illustrate the intention to place this project at least partly “beyond colonialist practice” (Grande, 2007).

## **Whiteness**

Whiteness is *not* a description of a physical characteristic. It is a social construct and is defined by Moreton-Robinson (2004: vii) as “The invisible norm against which other races are judged in the construction of identity, representation, subjectivity, nationalism and law”. Traditionally whiteness was not seen to have an impact on life or research. It was Ruth Frankenburg’s landmark research in 1993 that lifted the lid on what whiteness meant to white women and the lack of their own race consciousness. She determined that “although whiteness is apparently difficult for white people to name...it nonetheless continuously shapes white women’s experiences, practices and views of self and other...Whiteness is visible most clearly to those it

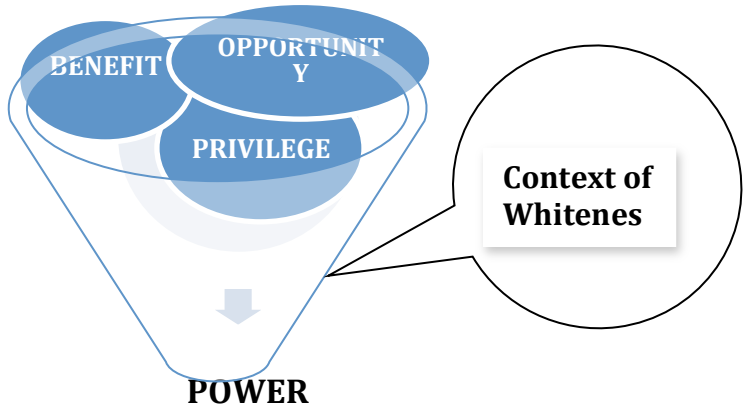
definitively excludes and those to whom it does violence. Those who are securely housed within its borders usually do not examine it" (Frankenburg 1993: 228-229).

In the same way that feminist research methods allowed the lens to be turned from the male oppressor to the female oppressed, so does critical whiteness studies allow the lens to move from focusing on the Indigenous colonised to an examination of the white coloniser. There is a view expressed by some that non-Indigenous people conducting research from a whiteness perspective could serve to re-centre whiteness and renew the privilege of being white (Haggis 2007; Martin 2008: 52; Riggs 2004, 2007). Riggs (2004: 6) addresses this by noting that, by starting with the "critiques of whiteness provided by those who are marginalised by it, then we may be more able to engage with analyses of race and whiteness that refuse to reify or fetishise". Privileging Indigenous voices in my research and conceptual map, along with an understanding of whiteness and its inherent privilege and power, is an essential signpost. It is essential if I am to ensure transparency of my own privilege and accountability to the Indigenous people I work with on the research project.

## **Power**

First published in 1974, Steven Lukes seminal text on power teases out its many facets and the range of influences upon it. He notes that the term is generally understood to mean "power over" and dominance (Lukes 2005: 73-74). Power is, however, a contested concept (Anderson and Herr 2007: 1157). Therefore, it is important to be clear that I define power as assumed privilege, benefit and opportunity being funnelled together through the context of whiteness. Whiteness creates a barrier that is difficult for Indigenous people to

penetrate at a societal and political level. While individual Indigenous people may have varying degrees of western opportunity, benefit and privilege, the degree of cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977) available in a non-Indigenous cultural context will be limited due to the influence of privileged whiteness.



*Figure 3 –power and the context of whiteness*

The above authors speaking about power are non-Indigenous. Significant Australian Indigenous authors (Moreton-Robinson 2004; Martin 2008; Walter 2009) who speak about power do so in the context of colonisation and whiteness. Walter (2009: 10) acknowledges the value of Lukes' explanation of power in allowing "us to realise that the use of power is much more than direct coercion." Both Lukes and Walter believe that the dominant group can never decide truly what is in the best interest of those who are dominated. The only ones who can decide what is in their best interest are the disadvantaged themselves (Walter 2009: 10).

Unfortunately, however, Indigenous people are excluded from access to political decision making in any real sense while non-Indigenous people continue to make decisions about what is best for “them”. As Walter (2009: 12) notes; “such ‘othering’ justifies...actions such as the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act to allow the NT intervention.” In addition, section 51, xxvi of the Australian Constitution provides for the government to:

Have power to make for the peace, order and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to:... the people of any race, for whom it is deemed necessary to make special laws (Saunders 2000: 49, 54).

The privilege and power of whiteness over Indigenous people is thus enshrined in the Australian constitution.

## **Privilege**

Black and Stone (2005: 251) believe that “privileged persons live in a distorted reality” not unlike that of someone with a chemical dependency who is in denial. While the denial serves to keep the status quo from being altered it also helps avoid the unpleasantness of the truth or the consequences of acceptance, including the need to act to bring about change.

Disadvantage is not one dimensional. There is an intersection of a multitude of variants that may privilege or disadvantage someone to a greater or lesser degree (Mcintosh 1988; Andersen and Collins 2007). No one inequality is likely to over-ride all others. Indigenous Australians are not an homogenous mass; they can be women, poor, unemployed, have a disability... or not. They can be marginalised from a number of perspectives. Different Indigenous nations may be more marginalised than others. It is important to keep this in mind to avoid

making broad, sweeping generalisations about "Aboriginal people". However, to not identify some commonalities risks watering down the potential strength of solidarity and identity, leaving whiteness once more the privileged norm.

Suffice to say here that, for the purposes of definition, privilege *as it relates to power* is entitlement or sanction that leads to advantage and dominance.

As a wadjella who experiences the entitlement of my whiteness, I was seeking ways in which I could be accountable in my research for that advantage. I could not speak for Indigenous people but I could learn from them and listen primarily to their voices in my research, both as participants and as the source of literature upon which my theoretical framework would be based.

The significance of privileging Indigenous voices in ethical research was raised by Rigney in 1997.

Aboriginal voices were not usually recorded as part of Australia's colonial history. At times, when researching and writing, I have made a somewhat arbitrary judgement call about inclusion of non-Indigenous authors whose words seem to resonate with the views of the Aboriginal authors I have read. On other occasions I used non-Indigenous authors to exemplify the thinking of their time. Also, I included the voices of present day Aboriginal people whose families have lived, and continue to live, under a regime of colonialism.

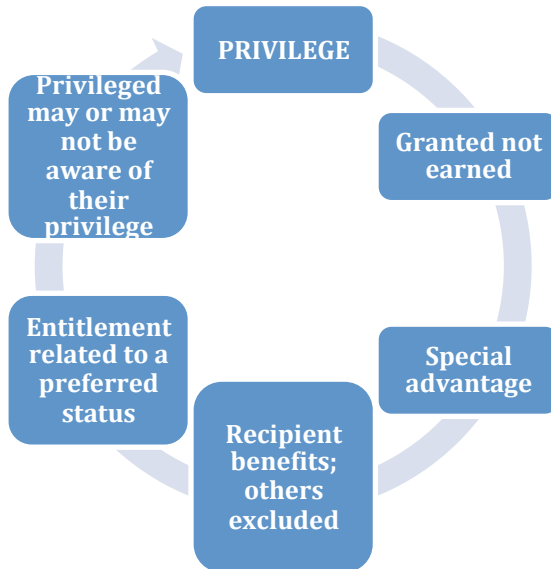


Figure 4 – understanding privilege (based on Black & Stone, 2005)

## Activism

As an activist I have not necessarily been involved in revolution. Rather I am more likely to have been making small incremental gains towards a longer term vision or goal. Activism is defined by Anderson and Herr (2007: 19-20) as “action on behalf of a cause, action that goes beyond what is conventional or routine.... Activists are typically challengers to policies and practices, trying to achieve a social goal, not to obtain power themselves.... Activism is not necessarily a good thing or a bad thing. It all depends on the cause and the actions, and a person’s judgement of what is worthwhile.”

One of the key characteristics of an activist is that they are not doing what they do to gain personal privilege and self-aggrandisement. When I am confronted by someone

suggesting that I just want to be in charge or take control, I take it as a cue to put the mirror on my own actions; not a cue to attack back and “defend myself”. I need to pause and interrogate my own actions in the light of the central questions being pursued by a Critical Activist Ally (Figure 2).

While the very important responsibility of actively involved challenging research is acknowledged (Goldberg and Essed 2002:7, Smythe et al, 2009: 4), this role comes with an element of inherent risk. Working in this way requires being “prepared to take risks, to form strategic alliances, to learn and unlearn ... power, and reach beyond a ‘fear of authority’ toward a concrete vision of the world in which oppression, violence, and brutality are transformed by a commitment to equality, liberty, and democratic struggle” (Weiner, 2003: 102). Those who have challenged or spoken out against the dominant discourse have often been ostracised in their own countries, imprisoned or exiled (Davis, 2003; van Djik, 2002; Said 1994). Friere (1997) too was out of favour for some time with the education establishment in his own country. Like them I have sought to find “imaginative routes to social change through the structures against which such change would compete” (Lakritz, 1995: 6). This paradox is a daily conundrum that weaves its way through my research processes and thinking.

## **Being An Ally**

Tatum (2009: 285) believes that allies are necessary for oppressed groups to move beyond despair, and suggests that there is a history of such people “who have resisted the role of oppressor and who have been allies to people of color”. At rallies and meetings in Perth I often hear Elders welcome those white brothers and sisters who are

there to “walk beside us”. That is how I see myself as an ally; as someone who is walking beside my Aboriginal brothers and sisters united in our humanness and a common goal of social justice for all people.

Sometimes the actions required of an ally appear divorced from the research project. I have found myself serving sausages at a barbeque, drafting submissions, picking up people at the airport, having Aboriginal people from the central desert stay with me, printing out name tags, making cups of tea and preparing draft press releases. It could be asked, “what has any of that got to do with your PhD on prisoner education?” The answer is, “well nothing; it has to do with building a strong basis of relationship and trust in the community.” The answer also is, “well everything: it has to do with building a strong basis of relationship and trust in the community.”

## **Conclusion**

As a conclusion I would like share a reflection I wrote one night after attending a Deaths in Custody Watch Committee rally in Kalgoorlie during the course of this research project. For me it encapsulates the learning I have encountered on this journey; illustrates the role of a critical, activist ally and how I continue learning what to do and how to act.

*Today I sat in the court house for the sentencing of the state government for negligence in the death of Miss Daisy's cousin in a prisoner transport van. ... Magistrate Benn was scathing of the government and imposed as harsh a penalty as he could, given their guilty plea. The highest fine under that piece of legislation to date has been \$100000. He imposed \$285,000 plus costs. So that seemed like a history making moment.*



*But it was also a very raw moment for the families... for them there had been no chance to be heard in the process.... I was struck by the way our law confines and restrains even very aware magistrates such as Benn. And how the families still suffer and had not yet been heard in a court room – over three years after the death; how they had not been able to properly let go and deal with the death and can't while all this still goes on. So the anger and grief that poured out outside the Kalgoorlie courthouse was so understandable in its rawness, strength and immediacy. It was the only opportunity to feel heard in the wadjella law processes.*

*And the biggest learning for me as I stood in that angry, hurting group of Australia's First Nations people? That all I can do is bear witness, show a bit of guts and hang in with the expression of all that rage and not try to "help". To "help" can hinder. And the journey I am taking and what I am learning is the pearl in the grime of my research journey. While the interviews and yarns I do are important, that is not the key learning ....the key learning is how to sit back and learn to feel another way of doing life... and to listen, listen, listen...*

## **Author Note**

Rose is a full time, wadjella PhD student in Education at Murdoch University. Her publication, Carnes, R. 2011. Changing Listening Frequency to Minimise White Noise and Hear Indigenous Voices. *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues*, 14(2-3), 170-184, provides an introduction to the method she strives to use in her research with Indigenous peoples. Rose is a financial member of the Deaths in Custody Watch Committee. She can be contacted at [rosecarnes@bigpond.com](mailto:rosecarnes@bigpond.com)

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