

White Guilt, Aboriginal Culturalism and the Impoverishment of Tertiary Education in Australia

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Abstract:

Much scholarship in Australia and elsewhere, across a range of disciplines analyses how ‘white’ hegemony has informed and continues to inform the academy among other cultural institutions, and how the invisibility of ‘white’ privilege has discriminated against minorities such as Indigenous people. Attempting to redress this, many universities have implemented a raft of policies such as the Aboriginalisation of staffing, race-based appointments and promotions, privileging of particular forms of Aboriginal knowledge over disciplinary knowledge, and Aboriginal control over research involving Aboriginal matters. While well-intentioned, we argue that these policies are contributing to the emergence of another problematic monolithic category which is undermining its own and the university’s putative objectives such as equity. Whereas Whiteness Studies and Critical Race Theory point to ideological teaching, research biases, and other barriers to equity for Indigenous people, there is little scrutiny of how one outcome of the above-mentioned policies is the same: ideological teaching and research biases with deleterious consequences beyond their oppositional strategic value. Moreover, succour is given to the promotion of aggressive race-based division which in turn feeds and informs the policies of ostensible redress. This is counterproductive to the progression of the equity agenda in respect of Aborigines that these policies are presumed to support. Nevertheless, the supporting discourse remains powerful and enjoys the status of orthodoxy. Not only do these policies receive little scholarly scrutiny, any attempt to do so attracts scathing critique. Following Elizabeth Rata’s analyses of a similar policy agenda in New Zealand universities, we provide an example from one Australian university (hereinafter ‘the university’) by way of illustrating how these policies are proving counterproductive to the universities’ aims, and in turn their wider objectives.

Keywords: Aboriginal Australians; culturalism; identity politics; tertiary education; white guilt.

Introduction

The policies, processes and practices implemented by Australian universities to facilitate a social justice/equity agenda in respect of Aborigines have resulted in the emergence of another problematic monolithic category which is undermining this agenda. It is proving counterproductive in attempts to facilitate inclusion, collaboration and an environment free from discrimination. This follows a similar dynamic identified by Elizabeth Rata in New Zealand universities, where a culturalist discourse has developed from the recognition of a “politicized category of people classified according to a shared history and racial ancestry” (Rata, “Knowledge and the Politics of Culture” 330). This paper draws on the experiences of many decades of teaching Aboriginal Studies in tertiary institutions and how that has changed over time. It argues that the embrace of a culturalist discourse has perverted what the university states as its core values—academic freedom, excellence and integrity. Yet this discourse has received little scholarly scrutiny.

According to a culturalist discourse, cultural identity derives from genetic inheritance, a timeless essence that ties insiders to each other and differentiates them from outsider others. It forms individuals' and groups' single/prime identity and renders all other identifications (with nation, gender or sexuality, say) secondary. These are culturalist notions, and in the ethnic case, a primordial cultural identity *must* be expressed, from an essentialised racial base, in order for it to be meaningful (Kuper 241). Culturalism reifies this unitary identity above all others and invites identity-based politics in which leverage is obtained through notions of a radically distinctive collective cultural identity. Identity politics demands special recognition of this identity and recompense for its unfair treatment. While it may not matter how individuals define their identity, it becomes problematic when institutions develop policies and deliver services based on cultures and identities that are authoritatively proposed as deriving from a fixed essence. One of the outcomes according to Frank Furedi can be the "weaponisation of identity" as institutions become beholden to demands made under the guise of cultural authority ("Identity Obsession").

While there has been little critique of culturalism, two major texts released in 2018—Kwame Appiah's *The Lies that Bind* and Francis Fukuyama's *Identity*—suggest an emerging critical analysis of the essentialist identities on which culturalism is based and its problematic outcomes. As Appiah writes, "identity talk has exploded through [his] lifetime," providing the basis for many modern political movements, "from new populist movements to Islamist fighters" (*The Lies that Bind* xiii). Novelists too have begun to discuss some of the limitations (and absurdities) of identity politics. For example, Lexi Freiman satirises identity orthodoxies and problematises the certainty of identity categories as the teenage protagonist struggles to understand her social world where new identity categories appear and disappear in a seemingly illogical manner. In her angst-ridden search for an identity that will allow her to be included rather than excluded, she is initially told that "transgender people" are equivalent to "women of colour" but subsequently that "transgender women can be too white to be women of colour" (Freiman 38, 124). John Safran's investigation of 'white' nationalist, anti-immigration groups in Australia also points out the contradictions in identity discourse where a "leading white nationalist" (3) in Sydney has an Aboriginal¹ mother, an Italian father and a Vietnamese wife. And at a 2015 Reclaim Australia rally opposing immigration, one of the main speakers to the crowd, over half of which were Asian, Indian and African, was himself a Sri Lankan immigrant.

In this paper, we point to how identity politics increasingly underpin university policies and practices, despite their cascading deleterious consequences. As Rata found in New Zealand, a culturalist agenda has been adopted in respect of Aboriginal administration, research and teaching at universities, and that agenda betrays core mission and goals. Identity politics demand that Aboriginal identity be performative and sustained by a self-conscious identity political narrative, and we argue that it creates a mythic reality that has negative consequences for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and the university itself. The processes implemented to progress the agenda undermine university goals of equity that the processes were set up to address. They override and sometimes lead to the abandonment entirely of explicit long-standing protocols, policies and practices in relation to anti-discrimination, academic freedom and critical thought. Indeed, universities are not so much captive to the demands of the discourse as "complicit in its production" (Moore et al 275) by virtue of their

¹ We use the term 'Aboriginal' interchangeably with 'Indigenous.' While there is currently some tension over naming, it depends on the context. The term Indigenous is capitalised in the Australian context only. We use uncapitalised 'indigenous' to refer to all other indigenous people including Maori.

new but implicit mission to absolve white guilt for colonial racism² (Thiele 186; Pearson, *Up from the Mission* 229; Steele 27). We suggest that parity for Aboriginal students will not be achieved through protocols, policies and practices that are underpinned by culturalism. We argue that this has simply produced another monolithic discourse.

Australian Background

Attempts to demonstrate Aboriginal alterity have a long history in Australia and have resulted in discrimination based on this difference. Early anthropological understandings of Aboriginal cultures were that they were static, timeless, bounded, knowable and utterly different from non-Aboriginal cultures (McConaghy xi). Named “Aboriginalism” (Attwood, “Introduction” i), this discourse establishes individual Aborigines as metonymic representatives of ‘the’ culture, individuals whose selfhoods, behaviours and lives are determined by their ethnicity, and shared with others of the category.

From the 1930s, Australian governments adopted an assimilatory approach to Aboriginal governance in which citizen equality demanded the abandonment of cultural difference, yet Aboriginal people were still categorised according to blood quantum. From the late 1960s, in line with emerging social movements for equality in the US and across the western world, Australian governments sought to overturn the earlier marginalisation of Aboriginal people and ameliorate its impacts. Assimilation predicated on false colonialist universalism gave way to culturalist recognition of socio-cultural particularity and difference from others, and the inclusion of Aboriginal people as equal if different citizens. Categorising Aboriginal people according to blood quantum was no longer acceptable and anyone with Aboriginal ancestry was encouraged to identify, in the expectation that such recognition would help to recover ‘traditional’ culture and so restore self-esteem and capacity to negotiate modernity (Attwood, *Rights* 343-344). This approach required the inclusion of all Aboriginal people within a single population category (that is, pan-Aboriginality), defined by perceived collective boundedness, individual sameness and radical difference from others (Morris 66).

Through political and performative means since the 1970s culturalist advent, the Aboriginal population has become a national pan-Aboriginal imagined community, sharing a hyperreal Aboriginality and unitary identity (see Moore, et al.; Hill). In addition, those whose skin colour, phenotype, language, social structure and connection to country best demonstrate that culture, have become talismans for the wider political movement (Langton, “Aborigines;” Rolls, “The Northern Territory”). Hence, for example the Garma Festival is held annually in remote Arnhem Land. To gain recognition of their authenticity and receive funding, ‘detribalised’ populations have found it in their interests to enact ‘traditional’ practices (like smoking ceremonies), speak heritage language, have knowledge (of, for example, land management), and claim particular social arrangements (such as extended family).³ In addition, Maria Lane,

² Black American scholar Shelby Steele argues that after worldwide challenges to imperialism and ‘white’ authority from the mid-20th century such as the civil rights movement in the US, the ‘West’ came to be seen as guilty of racism and stigmatised. In order to recover some of their lost moral authority, institutions such as universities have to atone for their racist past and demonstrate that they are free of this taint. However, rather than achieving this aim, Pearson argues that white guilt “functions the same way as racism—as a stigma” (230) and Thiele argues that this is a form of racism itself and power relations continue as before (186).

³ The need for enactment can lead to pressure on community members, even respected Elders, to speak “language” rather than their stated preference for the English terms they grew up with. It can also lead to misrepresentation of earlier generations’ difficult lives as being akin to traditional Aboriginal society (see Moore, *The Exhaustion* 25-251).

an Aboriginal academic from South Australia, has argued that access to education, particularly for urban Aboriginal people has produced a growing Aboriginal upper middle-class. She points out that they act as “spokespersons and champions of building their secure careers on the backs of, and gaining their kudos from” welfare dependant populations living remotely on homelands in traditional country (Lane qtd. in Pearson, *Radical Hope* 98). They use the discourse of disadvantage to mask their own privileged position.⁴ This has allowed these elites to mediate relationships between government and decision making and funding bodies and, according to Yolngu leader Galarrwuy Yunupingu, to build their careers on the backs of, and gain kudos from, the poorest Aboriginal populations (Yunupingu). In a post-colonial dynamic of anti-colonial nostalgia and critique of modernist society, notions of Indigeneity and Indigenous knowledge, communality, ostensible closeness to nature, spiritual powers and deep history, have been romanticised.⁵ Yet as Ariss has argued, in the 1970s pan-Aboriginality was politically necessary in order to demonstrate a united cultural distinctiveness and counter assimilation (136). Cowlshaw has shown how “the liberating power and political effects of this form of identity politics in the 1970s were overwhelming” (184). While the expectation to be “cultural” forces people into essentialisms (Muecke 40), the collective identity formed through the “strategic essentialism of pan-Aboriginality” created a strong “political community” (Paradies 355) that has been empowering for many. It has seen the growth of the Indigenous sector and the Aboriginalisation of services, including those of university centres providing support for Aboriginal students. In the 1980s and 1990s academy, the emerging fields of Critical Race Theory and Critical Whiteness Studies began interrogating whiteness to reveal its invisible power. These developments drew attention to enduring racial inequalities and the normalising of white privilege in society.⁶ At the same time they often deployed or left unexamined and in both cases reinscribed unitary conceptions of Aboriginal culture and identity. Non-Aboriginal people, particularly in the discipline of Aboriginal Studies (many of whom had entered this discipline as advocates for decolonisation), were made increasingly aware of their complicity in perpetuating white privilege in the academy and wrote about their “unsettling reflections on being a White person working in Indigenous Studies” (Lampert 23).

Where previously cultural identity was forged through long socialisation and acculturation, supported by scholarly practices energised by Critical Race Theory and Critical Whiteness Studies, it became, as Watt and Kowal claim, “more about ... fluid, subjective feelings of affinity with particular ancestors” or emotional attachment to land (6). Identity has come to rest on the problematic belief of a timeless essence, where culture is transmitted genetically through ‘blood memory.’⁷ Watt and Kowal interviewed thirty three people who learnt later in life of their Indigenous ancestry to find out how they then self-identified. Some of the interviewees said that they had always known that they were different but didn’t know why.⁸ One Tasmanian interviewee who had recently discovered an Aboriginal ancestor said, “I’ve always felt a connection with land and place ... the land spoke to me ... [it] finally made sense with that Tasmanian Aboriginal part of me” (qtd. in Watt and Kowal 8). This retrospective construct

⁴ In Australia there is a growing divide between urban elite and ‘bush’ Aboriginal people in terms of culture, politics, aspiration, socio-economic status and so on. See Mitchell Rolls for a discussion of the brokerage roles played by urban, middle class Aborigines in Aboriginal identity politics (“The Northern Territory”).

⁵ See de Rijke et al. 2016; Waitt 1997; Trigger 1997; Aveling 1998.

⁶ For examples, see Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s *Whitening Race* and *Talking up to the White Woman*; Foley; Nakata, “Indigenous Knowledge;” and Carlyson et al.

⁷ The irony is that this form of biological essentialism was used to exclude and discriminate against Aboriginal people in colonial times, but now is used by Aboriginal people to claim authenticity.

⁸ See Moore et al. for a discussion of the power of the discourse to produce reality (109-127).

becomes institutionalised and insofar as people and institutions act habitually on it, it becomes materially real. Yet it is, as Appiah points out, the narrative⁹ that holds it together (*The Lies that Bind* 199) and perpetuates it particularly for those Aboriginal people who do not have a continuing connection to country or an Aboriginal language and whose daily lives are not immersed in a traditionally-oriented social and spiritual milieu.

Despite the successes though, essentialising identities can lock Aboriginal people into a “prison of romanticisation” (Paradies 363; Muecke 40). Over time essentialisms can reproduce the boundaries of race. As Cowlishaw writes “the fundamentalist assertion about a unified Aboriginal identity, which was so refreshing 30 years ago, has become frayed and often burdensome” (185) as determining who is authentically Aboriginal troubles many communities. Critical Race theorisation and associated Whiteness Studies depend on the assertion of a pan-Aboriginal identity and reinforce the very structures that the 1970s activist politics attempted to dismantle. In today’s politics they contribute to the entrenchment of another problematic monolithic category and its institutional succour. As Cowlishaw points out “Aboriginal identity is *de rigueur*” in institutional settings (189).

As the Indigenous population increases¹⁰ and diversifies, and individuals integrate within the wider community, there is an increasing risk of the narrative of marginalised difference unravelling. An emerging body of work is pointing out the inherent flaws in the beliefs on which culturalism and identity politics are based. On the basis of his studies in several African situations for instance, van Binsbergen problematises the notion that

a human being ... at any one moment in time [has] ... only one ‘culture’, and in that culture she lives her entire life as if she has no option, as if displaying the distinctive features that mark her as an adherent of that culture are free from ostentatiousness and from strategically calculated effect upon her social environment—free from performativity. (39)

Appiah has demonstrated how these ideas are “unhelpful or just plain wrong” (*The Lies that Bind* xvi). Identities, he argues, are multifaceted, unstable, and their differences often illusory. As Jean-Francois Bayart points out, “[T]he identities we talk about so pompously, as if they existed independently of those who express them, are made (and unmade) only through the mediation of ... identificatory acts, in short, by their enunciation” (92). That is, identities are held together by narrative, not essence.

Shelby Steele talks of racial identity as a mask that is worn consciously but leads to “inner duplicity” (172). Like Steele himself, in Australia not all Aboriginal people are prepared to remain within this “prison” of culturalism.¹¹ Some refuse to be limited by the simplistic either/or binary that is described by Noel Pearson as an “impoverished conception of identity”

⁹ An example of this narrative is noted in the recent article in the Tasmanian newspaper *The Mercury*, in which smoking ceremonies are represented as traditional Tasmanian Aboriginal welcome practices, cleansing participants “of negative energy and stress” (McCauley). There is no evidence that Tasmanians engaged in this practice.

¹⁰ An outcome of government policy is the rapidly growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population, particularly along the eastern seaboard. Between the 1996 and 2016 censuses, this population increased by 84%. According to Watt and Kowal, this was partly due to people whose families had been assimilated for generations, discovering or rediscovering Aboriginal ancestors and identifying under the government criteria (6).

¹¹ See, for example, Bindi Cole Chocka’s changed understanding of her identity (Peel).

(*Up From the Mission* 332-343). Pearson writes about the layered identities that make him who he is and similarly, Kerry Pholi who worked as a mid-level bureaucrat holding Aboriginal-identified positions, wrote of the consequences where an organization was captive to identity politics:

As a professional Aborigine, I could harangue a room full of people with real qualifications and decades of experience with whatever self-serving, uninformed drivel that happened to pop into my head. For this nonsense I would be rapturously applauded, never questioned, and paid well above my qualifications and experience. (Pholi)

Realising that her career was “built on racism,” Pholi left her identified position and found it empowering to “simply identify as a human being” (Pholi). Like Steele, Pholi and Pearson want to be respected for their talent, not “endured for their culture” (Pholi). Faced with this kind of dissent, many Aboriginal leaders manipulate the culturalist binary in order to protect the politics and obscure their own and many others’ departures from the idealized type it creates. They do so to protect the assertion that identification beyond the authorized Aboriginal subject is anti-Aboriginal (see Moore, “Aboriginal Agency”).

Culturalism and Identity Politics in Australian Universities

Identity politics have become increasingly visible on university campuses since the 1980s,¹² since emerging from the wider emancipatory and social justice-oriented discourse of the 1970s that sought, as we have said, to include previously marginalised Aboriginal voices and redress on-going inequality. The aforementioned Critical Race and Whiteness Studies theorists place themselves at the forefront of these goals. The authors of this paper support the address of inequalities and endorse the role of universities in lifting the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students and improving outcomes for Aboriginal staff. Our argument is not with these aims but with the identity politics discourse that is perpetuating the problems that it purports to solve. With Francis Fukuyama (“Against Identity Politics” 106), our critique of identity politics acknowledges that the circumstances are real and need redress. We wholeheartedly support the aim of Universities Australia¹³ to achieve parity by 2021 for Indigenous students and staff. Our critique is not of the goal but of the approach to achieving it.

Recent examples in Australian universities demonstrate the prevalence of politics based on identity. The 2018 debate over the hosting of the Ramsay Centre for Western civilisation is one of them. The merits of offering an undergraduate degree on Western civilisation was questioned on the basis that Western civilisation was “the incubator of colonialism, patriarchy, and environmental destruction” (Fukuyama, *Identity* 114). Some, such as academic staff at Sydney University, argued that it would teach cultural supremacism and pander to racism and general discrimination (see McGowan). Others, as noted in the national newspaper, *The Australian* on 6 June 2018, claimed that objections to a centre for Western civilisation contravened notions of academic freedom. Another example is the controversy over the 2018 Melbourne University’s Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) student dance performance “Where We Stand.” Racial identity was central to the performance, with the audience

¹² While universities have been at the forefront, identity politics is more widespread, for example in institutions such as those dealing with Indigenous Health, Education, Child Welfare, Housing and so on.

¹³ Universities Australia is the peak body advocating for Australian universities.

segregated according to skin colour. ‘White’ audience members were not permitted into the theatre until they signed a declaration acknowledging “their privilege and position.” The performance stopped altogether when the number of white people outnumbered those of colour. Despite the controversy over the performance, it was strongly supported by Melbourne University (see Jirik; Sammut).¹⁴ In a third recent example, a non-Aboriginal academic at Griffith University, Professor Regina Ganter, was stood down from teaching a first year Aboriginal Studies course on the basis of a Facebook post by an Aboriginal student. He alleged that Ganter’s lecture was “cooked”, “twisted” and “racist” and was “propagating a white supremacist history” (Beitzel). The university’s very quick response was to accede to the student’s demands and replace her with an Aboriginal lecturer for the remainder of the course.¹⁵ This case raises wider questions about how universities value disciplinary knowledge and research expertise in Aboriginal Studies. Griffith University’s response demonstrates the power of culturalism that is pertinent to our argument.

According to Steele, in this era of white guilt¹⁶ the first priority of institutions in the United States is to distance themselves from any hint of racial bias in order to redeem themselves from the stigma of historical racism (41). They demonstrate this by implementing processes that are believed to promote equity, as in the case of the Griffith University mentioned above, in which action was taken regardless of the veracity or otherwise of the complaint; what mattered was for the university to ensure that it could not be seen as racist. However, this approach ironically resurrects the notion that race is destiny, a notion that reinforces inequity and perverts core institutional principles.

A discourse of culturalism in respect of indigeneity has become embedded in university policies and practices, where social justice claims made in the name of those politics are deferred to and privileged above all else. As we demonstrate below, the discourse is manifested in the inclusion of folk knowledge in the curriculum and its privileging over disciplinary knowledge; in the politicisation of ethics and research; and in the marginalisation of the constructive critique of non-Aboriginal scholars with recognised expertise in the area.¹⁷ The notion of white guilt is manipulated as leverage (see Thiele; Hill; Steele) and in effect this is replacing one hegemony with another. These are the politics with which we are concerned.

The New Zealand Case

Rata has shown how the development of a culturalist discourse has been facilitated in New Zealand by the emergence of the corporate university (*The Politics* 528; 539).¹⁸ She instances

¹⁴ The student choreographer described herself as a “white-passing Indigenous person” with Maori heritage. For more information about the debate over this event see www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/the-stage-show/where-we-stand-divides-audiences/9874130 and Jeremy Sammut’s critique of the performance at <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2018/06/theatre-of-the-absurd-2/>.

¹⁵ Ganter has had a long and distinguished career in Aboriginal history and her latest book *The Contest for Aboriginal Souls* provided the basis for the lecture in question. The book has received positive reviews for its scholarly integrity and its contribution to a deeper understanding of the German Christian missions to Aboriginal people (see Tim Rowse, “Book Review” and Carol Pybus, “Book Review”). For more information on the ‘Ganser case’ see Aird and Trigger, and Prendergast.

¹⁶ The era of white guilt emerged with the growing awareness of historical racism perpetrated by ‘whites’ after the Civil Rights era (Steele 27).

¹⁷ These staff have doctorates in history, anthropology, sociology, linguistics.

¹⁸ See Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades; and Carlos Torres for an analysis of the development of corporate universities.

the commodification of indigenous knowledge as an economic resource. Maori elites with the wherewithal to negotiate with governments and universities further entrench their role by becoming the gatekeepers of indigenous knowledge. For example, research funding and services in the health sector are to be “undertaken by Maori for Maori” and according to Maori world view and methodologies. In education, she found that culturalism manifests in the inclusion of indigenous knowledge in the curriculum and in indigenous controls over academic research, this being mandated by the Maori Tertiary Education Framework and the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi (Rata, “Knowledge and the Politics” 333). Rata argues that indigenous knowledge with its “unseparated relationship between the knowledge producer and the product” is distinct from disciplinary knowledge (“Knowledge and the Politics” 333). It derives from a group’s experience and so can only be known by those in that group, and as such is inward looking and cannot be critiqued from outside, as is expected with disciplinary knowledge. This is folk knowledge which depends on one’s membership of the group. As a result, it means that only Maori can teach Maori studies. Further, indigenous knowledge and disciplinary knowledge are given equal status in New Zealand universities (Rata, “The Politics” 105). In Canada too, Widdowson and Howard have pointed out how indigenous folk/cultural knowledge underpinned by “basic human observations and unsubstantiated beliefs,” and characteristic of the pre-scientific era, is assumed to be different from but equally valid to scientific research (248).

In New Zealand it is mandated that Maori methodology be used in research relating to Maori issues and that “Maori guardianship of knowledge” be paramount. This establishes a Maori elite as gatekeepers of knowledge and research (Rata, “Knowledge and the Politics” 331-332). It also creates a division within the wider Maori population¹⁹ and a fundamental binary between Maori and non-Maori, as it depends on the belief that there exists a “discrete bounded Maori ethnic population” (Lourie and Rata 21). Research becomes a politicised activity in which critique is silenced and outcomes are determined by those with vested interests. In this way academic freedom is compromised (Rata, “Knowledge and the Politics” 341-343).

The Australian Case

Despite the fundamental problems with a culturalist discourse as the basis of equity measures as aforementioned, from our experience of teaching Aboriginal Studies in the university we focus on over the last two decades it appears that it and other universities are taking this path. From our observations working within a university it appears that the leaders of the university are unable to see past the culturalist myth or have the courage to address it. As Appiah has demonstrated can happen, their unreserved support for the discourse allows the university to be seen in a “good light” in respect to its social justice credentials (*As If* 24). As Steele argues, in acknowledging historical racism institutions must demonstrate that they are free from it (24). Noel Pearson outlines the parallels in Australia (*Up from the Mission* 219-262). This becomes their primary goal in respect to equity even if it contravenes the institution’s basic mission and core principles. Under the guidance of an Aboriginal leadership team in the university, folk knowledge has been privileged over disciplinary knowledge in curriculum and teaching, racially discriminatory human resource practices have been adopted, and ideologically biased research is legitimated. These changes, examined in detail in three sections below, have diminished the critical dimension of disciplinary Aboriginal Studies and exaggerated the mythic; restricted the range of perspectives taught; and obstructed open, disinterested research.

¹⁹ Rata points out that these elites are well-educated and usually live in urban, non-kin based societies and have not lived or been socialised into Maori tribal life.

In aggregate they have worked against equity in Aboriginal outcomes. Along with educators such as Noel Pearson from Cape York (see *Radical Hope*) and Martin Nakata from the Torres Strait, (see “Cutting a Better Deal”), we argue that the adoption of the folk knowledge approach makes for an education that is precisely not what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students need if they are to become empowered citizens able to move out from the culturalist trap. Nakata argues that “Indigenous content is crowding out academic skills and disciplinary content” in tertiary institutions (qtd. in Moore et al. 175-177). Where culture is based on essentialist understandings and overemphasised in the curriculum, it can be counterproductive as it fails to account for the actual subtlety, nuance, fluidity and ambiguity of the lived Indigeneities of today. Our position is that a broad, rigorous and critical education is fundamental in addressing the achievement gap *and* the survival and maintenance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. It is also required by all students if they are to become effective policymakers or service providers in respect of Indigenous Australians.

1. Privileging folk knowledge over disciplinary knowledge

From the 1970s, Australian universities introduced Aboriginal Studies courses drawing on the revisionist histories of, for example, Henry Reynolds, C. D. Rowley and Aboriginal writers such as Kevin Gilbert and Mary Coe, which focussed on Aboriginal experiences of colonisation and dispossession, and highlighted oppression, resilience and agency. These courses were most often taught by non-Indigenous academics who were also advocates for Indigenous justice and equality.²⁰ Aboriginal Studies was informed by Bain Attwood’s critique of Aboriginal culturalist discourse (Attwood, “Introduction” 1-3). Also evolving from group-based struggles of the 1960s, Australian universities began to incorporate Indigenous writers and more subjects in Indigenous affairs into their curricula as a corrective to what Stanner called in his 1968 Boyer Lectures “The Great Australian Silence” (189), that is “a cult of forgetfulness” where Aboriginal people had been omitted from accounts of Australian history for the first six or so decades of the 20th century. Universities developed cultural awareness programs to progress social justice and equity.²¹

These were positive developments. However, it becomes problematic when Indigenous content included in university curricula is based on family stories and folk knowledge to the exclusion of disciplinary content as in the examples below. Such knowledge is radically at odds with university requirements of subjecting knowledge to rigorous peer review, independent of its producers, as Rata has demonstrated (“Knowledge and the Politics” 333). Cultural knowledge is beyond scholarly scrutiny and cannot be peer reviewed. Nevertheless, increasing numbers of units are being offered in the case study university on this basis. Disciplinary and teaching expertise are not the base requirements for their inclusion or delivery, but rather, genetic heritage. Allied to the privileging of folk knowledge is what Carey calls “advocacy scholarship” (268) exemplified by Maddison’s 2011 text *Beyond White Guilt*. Carey argues that advocacy scholarship includes scholarly practices such as Critical Race Theory and Whiteness Studies that aim to “signify respectful engagement with Indigenous people, knowledges and scholarship, and support Indigenous political struggle” (Carey 268). However, as demonstrated in the following examples, and as Carey argues, these practices have become an orthodoxy that is beyond scrutiny.

²⁰ See Moore et al. (271-281) for more detail of the history of disciplinary tertiary Aboriginal Studies.

²¹ However, evidence attests to such programs’ closure to critique and counterproductivity in terms of developing students’ sensitivity to Aboriginal issues. See Moore for an analysis of the program (*The Exhaustion* 177-181).

A MOOC (Massive On-line Open Course), first offered by the university in 2014, is based on folk/cultural knowledge and a clear political agenda. Both were evident in the introductory lecture, in which the presenter has said that the aims of the course were to “uphold the reputation of the university” and “provide an informative, rich-laden narrative,” but that the main aim was to “centre the stories (of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples), their culture, their sovereignty and their peoplehood.”²² The course was based on folk knowledge that could not be interrogated, as was clearly demonstrated when numerous errors of historical fact²³ were pointed out to the university leader responsible for teaching and curriculum. The errors were regarded by this university leader as different interpretations, which amounted to the acceptance of “an ‘alternative facts’ discourse” (Tregear). Another example that gives scant regard to the veracity of the knowledge is a 2007 project based at the university and described as an “Aboriginal history project funded by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.”²⁴ The project claimed to be based on an historical event in 1830, where a significant meeting was purported to have taken place at a hut on the east coast of Tasmania between an important Aboriginal chief and the government appointed Conciliator to Tasmanian Aboriginal people, George Augustus Robinson. The university website states that the project is “to facilitate the telling of Aboriginal stories about themselves, their ancestors and their history.” However, N. J. Plomley, a historian with expertise in the history of the area, revealed that this event as described could not have happened (*Weep in Silence* 903). This was pointed out several times to the then university Provost, yet twelve years later the project remains on the university’s website, lending institutional weight to the supposed facticity of this fictional event.²⁵ Evidently the claimed event is beyond critique. What appears to matter to the university is not the veracity of the knowledge but *who* is providing it.²⁶

It is as if authority and ‘truth’ derive from Aboriginal identity alone. Yet this is to privilege opinions and feelings over “reasoned deliberation,” just as Helen Pluckrose and her colleagues found in what has become known as the “grievance studies hoax”, that “truth is ... anything that feels right to [the] favoured group” (Pluckrose). This same approach to truth is illustrated in another example from the University of Queensland, where an Indigenous lecturer told how in her Aboriginal Studies undergraduate unit she “removed almost all of the anthropological texts ... (only keeping a few for students to deconstruct)” (qtd. in Mukandi and Bond 261). She said that the “experience of the course [by Aboriginal students] is what should matter to us” (qtd. in Mukandi and Bond 261). But as Fukuyama argues, any such “focus on lived experience by identity groups prioritizes ... the emotional world of the inner self over the rational examination of issues” (*Identity* 101). In addition, it limits the potential empowerment that a

²² The MOOC’s website at www.mooc-list.com/course/indigenous-studies-australia-and-new-zealand-open2study. The course is no longer offered but it ran continuously for a few years before some of its content was integrated into a university based unit.

²³ For example, the lecturer stated that Van Diemen’s Land was renamed Tasmania in 1901. It was officially gazetted as Tasmania in 1855, coming into effect on 1st January 1856.

²⁴ See <https://www.utas.edu.au/telling-places-in-country/journey-lines/tpic-expeditions/meeting-at-bark-hut>.

²⁵ Phone conversation with Dr Ian McFarlane, 7 Oct. 2019, who pointed out that N. J. B. Plomley presented evidence in *Weep in Silence* as to why this event could not have taken place.

²⁶ Aboriginal academic Moreton-Robinson argues that Aboriginal knowledges and standpoints are “*not* the search for universal truths” (“Towards an Australian” 337, our emphasis). Rather, according to Moreton-Robinson and Walter, they are about positioning Aboriginal people in the research arena (“Indigenous Methodologies” 1-18).

full critical education can provide for not only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander but all students.²⁷

Consistent with this rejection of university requirements for knowledge to be peer reviewed is the notion, based on a culturalist assumption, that only Aboriginal people are able to teach and research Aboriginal matters, by virtue of their ethnicity alone. In the university, lecturers with no disciplinary expertise—as for example, an Aboriginal person with a PhD in Fine Arts and a successful visual artist but with no knowledge of disciplinary Aboriginal Studies—are appointed to teach Aboriginal Studies. Their ethnicity is perceived as sufficient qualification. The inherent binarism in this is authorising in universities the implication that non-Aboriginal lecturers cannot so teach and research. Identity politics then, confers authority and authenticity to identity groups on the basis of their genetic heritage.

According to Steele the primary aim of universities is to demonstrate their non-racist credentials (64) and this could partly explain the lack of concern about waiving the usual requirement for disciplinary qualifications and verifiable research. Disciplinary Aboriginal Studies that focuses on the contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and the ensuing historical and contemporary relationships is diminished. Those relationships are crucial because as Appiah argues, “identity always proceeds through contrast or opposition” (*The Lies that Bind* 202). A program based on disciplinary knowledge rather than folk knowledge challenges the crude binaries of black/white and colonised/coloniser and opens up inquiry to the nuances and complexities. This is what Martin Nakata is arguing (*Disciplining* 195). Further, as Carey and Prince point out, this is to do away with the culturalist “oppositional Indigenous-versus-Western understandings of epistemologies and pedagogies” (273).

It could be expected that the disadvantage visited upon students by the substitution of scholarly units with those based on unverifiable folk knowledge and taught by people without disciplinary expertise would present a dilemma for university management, but universities appear to be caught in the bind noted by Moore et al.: “Wanting to ‘do the right thing,’ fearful of the politics, and mostly profoundly ignorant of the fine-grained yet far reaching nuances shaping this complex field, institutions are mostly ill-equipped to deal with the problems, and instead fall captive to a particular rhetoric” (274).

2. Discriminatory Approach to Human Resources

University policies rightly condemn discrimination, but it is acted on selectively. It is rarely acted on when non-Aboriginal academics are discriminated against. When this happens, tacit approval is given by university leaders through their failure to challenge it. From our observations the university appears to follow the identity political logic regarding the impossibility, given historical and continuing power imbalances, of a marginalised group (Aboriginal) perpetrating racism against a more powerful group (non-Indigenous). Moreover, the university appears to believe that discrimination against non-Indigenous academics is an inevitable, perhaps even desirable, outcome of affirmative measures. Numerous attacks have been made against non-Indigenous scholars at the university, some at public venues, from accusations of racism to claims of undermining Aboriginal culture, derogatory name calling and in one case, removal from a discussion panel for not being Aboriginal. In that case, a non-Indigenous academic had agreed to an invitation from the student union to participate in a public panel discussion of the film *Samson and Delilah*. Subsequently, the invitation was revoked via email, on the basis that the event had changed and it was now to be an all

²⁷ See Nakata, “Cutting a Better Deal” and Pearson, *Radical Hope*.

Indigenous panel. In other words, the exclusion was made on the basis of race.²⁸ The acceptance of such exclusion has become normalised by the long term response from university management that asserts that it “comes with the territory.”²⁹ Interpreting this situation through Steele’s and Thiele’s framework suggests that non-Aboriginal staff are being asked to pay the wages of collective white guilt. Interpreting it through the identity politics framework suggests that it illustrates the extent to which universities are captive to a discourse that normalises discrimination.

Another illustrative case occurred in 2010 as the university’s Aboriginal policy advisory group recommended that all non-Aboriginal Aboriginal Studies academics (at the time numbering six) be replaced by Aboriginal staff within two years. As draft policy, the recommendation was circulated to senior university management, and their silence endorsed the proposal. A case was taken to the state anti-discrimination body in 2011 by two non-Aboriginal academics in relation to the proposal and it was found to potentially breach a number of sections of the state anti-discrimination legislation. Subsequently, the Vice-Chancellor advised that the university had no intention of acting on the proposal, yet many of the recommendations have since been implemented. In 2013 for instance, when the second author of this paper applied to renew his position at the end of his contract, the Aboriginal Elder (not a university employee) on the interview panel told him that “what you are doing is anti our culture.” The voice of the Elder was privileged over others on the panel and despite the applicant’s expertise, deep enduring and family connections with Aboriginal communities, laudatory student testimonials, and the support of senior academics which positioned him competitively for the position, he was unsuccessful. In November 2018, upon the position being re-advertised, and after further successful work in remote Aboriginal communities, the same person was told by the Head of School not to apply as “the politics were still the same.”³⁰

3. Facilitating Ideologically Skewed Research

Within the identity politics discourse we have discussed, research conducted by Indigenous people is held to present an Indigenous perspective and to produce Indigenous knowledge, which is not subject to normal interrogation processes. Racial ancestry is taken to bestow a different understanding that is not available to others. Universities authorise this logic. The culturalist voice at universities is ascendant and exerting increasing oversight of research relating to Aboriginal matters. As Rata has pointed out, virtually any topic can come under this category (*The Politics of Knowledge* 538).³¹ The remotest connection to Aboriginal matters is now considered of interest to Aboriginal people and so to require an extra degree of scrutiny by ethics committees. There appears to be no mechanism for challenging decisions that may be biased. The guidelines mandating the use of Indigenous research methodologies and ensuring that research will enhance the interests of Aboriginal people are ambiguous. The former grossly categorises (following the logic of pan-Aboriginality) all Aborigines as the same, and the latter can be influenced by political interests and personal animosities, mirroring research in identity politics and open to any interpretation. This is the case outlined by Carey with advocacy scholarship where “favourable representations” of Aboriginal people and “pre-determined political objectives” take priority over scholarly standards as mandated by

²⁸ Personal email conversation, 4 Sep. 2015.

²⁹ Personal communication with the then Dean of Arts, 27 August 2009.

³⁰ Conversation with applicant, 15 Nov. 2018.

³¹ For example, two Aboriginal Studies research projects proposing to explore non-Aboriginal perceptions of Aboriginal issues were obstructed on the basis of the over-zealous application of the otherwise sensible principle in the research guidelines.

universities (275). Carey has shown how this conceals the complexity of Indigenous identities and reproduces the “orthodox representations of Indigeneity” (269).

The university we focus on has appointed ethics advisors to assist researchers in negotiating these requirements. They have been appointed on the basis of ethnicity rather than expertise. Only one of the appointed advisors has any experience of the research process. This is an aspect of the inhibition of research integrity at a university by a politically active sub-group of the local Aboriginal population (since all ethics advisors are members of one Aboriginal organisation), concerned more about maintaining political orthodoxy in Aboriginal affairs, with a focus on *who* conducts research rather than on generating innovative knowledge regarding the reality of Indigenous lives (Rata, *The Politics of Knowledge* 538). This practice contradicts university research plans relating to the freedom to engage in research that may challenge the orthodoxies and has serious implications for the objectivity and rigour that must underpin research. The senior Aboriginal leader at the university is now able to collaborate closely with the notionally independent Ethics Committee to exercise control over research in Aboriginal matters no matter where in Australia the research takes place. As Cowlshaw points out, this is made possible by the notion of a unified Aboriginal identity that assumes “all Aboriginal people have a privileged access to the classical traditions with their ritual, spiritual and philosophical underpinnings” (185).

Conclusion

We have presented evidence of a culturalist discourse in the ascendant at one Australian university, but which has resonance across most of Australia’s tertiary institutions. It is based on the flawed notion that “at the core of each identity ... is a deep similarity that binds people of that identity together” (Appiah, *The Lies that Bind* xvi). As Appiah and others have demonstrated, this is not the case for any identity category (see Appiah, *The Lies that Bind*; Fukuyama, “Against Identity Politics”; Kuper). Yet this culturalist discourse produces smaller and smaller groups, setting them in opposition to each other (Appiah, *The Lies that Bind* xvi). In the satirical novel cited at the outset of this paper, the expanding and contradictory identity designations, while exaggerated, capture the absurdity of thinking about identities as stable entities derived from some essence.

When this understanding of identities forms the basis of institutional policies and practices, it is highly consequential. In the sense that as Furedi points out, “public life today is dominated by the politicisation of identity” (“The Politicisation”). For example, such politicisation was a factor in the election of Donald Trump in the US, the Brexit vote in the UK, the rise of populism in Europe, and, as found by Safran, in the far-right nationalist agenda in Australia. A culturalist discourse can dangerously exaggerate the importance of culture, so problematising such a discourse is not a mere academic exercise. The violence is everywhere evident. Van Binsbergen gives the “horrifying real” examples of “the Nazi Holocaust, ethnic cleansing in late-twentieth century Europe and Africa,” and ethnic politics resulting in the constitutional dysfunction in many African states (55). Amartya Sen describes the horrors of the 1947 partition of India (Sen 2). In South Africa, a culturalist discourse was the foundation for apartheid (Kuper xiii).

In Australia, the privileging of essentialist notions of cultural identity is implicated in tragic outcomes for Aboriginal individuals and communities, as have been pointed out by Aboriginal commentators such as Marcia Langton (“Trapped”), Noel Pearson (*Up From the Mission*), Bess Price and Anthony Dillon among many others. In these cases culture has been deferred to over the protection of individual rights, even where Australian law has been contravened.

Writing of her Warlpiri culture in *The Weekend Australian* on 1 December 2018, Jacinta Price noted that customary law is currently used to defend men accused of violently raping their young promised wives, horrendous abuse of women and children, and murder. These are some extreme outcomes of institutionalised deference to flawed understandings of cultural identity. The case study outlined here is another instance of its counterproductivity in terms of achieving equity.

This study suggests that the university in our example is increasingly contributing to, and decreasingly critically challenging of, the wider drift to such discourse and outcomes. Its institutionalisation of the culturalist discourse has led it to actions that betray its core mission in relation to freedom of expression, critical thought, disinterested research, social inclusion, and quality teaching. Instead, changes adopted in line with the discourse create, authorise and protect from scholarly critique mythicised versions of Aboriginal cultures, identity, histories and lives. This misleads those students who may in future develop public policy and deliver government services, and adds to the dilemmas and confusions felt by Aboriginal individuals themselves. As Paradies explains, regardless of peoples' individuality, Aboriginality "coalesce[s] around specific fantasies of exclusivity, cultural alterity, marginality, physicality and morality" (357).

The university's investment in the chimeric appearance of liberatory practices such as the attempts to deal with guilt in order to facilitate a dialogue between non-Indigenous and Indigenous is productive of a sense of separatism that can, as Fukuyama has argued, be supported because they protect group identities, but can also undermine wider social cohesion and social equality. Carey points out that the "deceit" of these practices "lies in its misrecognition of binarised power relationships and the ways in which whiteness and guilt demarcate the terms by which Indigenous people may participate in the dialogue" (278). Programs offered by the Aboriginal support centre aim to enhance identity and self-esteem, but their base in essentialism entrenches indefensible cultural difference. This unified orthodox identity maintains and reinforces the crude binaries limiting the ways in which Aboriginal people can express themselves. The increasing physical separation of the support centre and its students from the wider university community is a manifestation of this separation. Where once the centre was open and welcoming to all students, a space well used by non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal students, it has become a place only for Indigenous students, with locked doors overlooked by a security camera, while over the last decade non-Aboriginal students and staff have increasingly been made to feel unwelcome. There are similarities here to the situation exposed by Steele in the United States, where the proliferation of 'black' associations in almost every sphere of life is repeating the segregation of past times, a situation that the Civil Rights movement struggled so hard against (Steele 26).

Moreover, the partisan division being nurtured at the university in the ways outlined, can contribute to making Aboriginal peoples' Aboriginality a 'burden' (Moore, *The Exhaustion* 212-243; also see Hill; Steele). It can contribute to pushing Aboriginal people into a difficult "life of simulation and dissimulation" (Moore, *The Exhaustion* 221) to maintain the masquerade of the mythicised Aboriginality.³² It denies individuals the full complexity of their lives and secures their marginality. A select minority who have the necessary identity resources and are adept at the necessary identity work are advantaged, while many are disadvantaged. The more sophisticated ways of understanding identity, such as those offered in Appiah's *The Lies that Bind*, Fukuyama's *Identity* and, in the Australian context, in Pearson's inclusive

³² See Butler's *Gender Trouble* for a discussion of the masquerade of femininity.

layered identities in *Up From the Mission*, could move the university away from the orthodox interpretations of Aboriginality that are counterproductive to the goals of social justice and equity.

The evidence leads us to conclude that the university's implementation of policies intended to progress its social justice and equity agenda give the appearance rather than actuality of equity, facilitate Aboriginal separatism rather than inclusion, and conflate cultural and disciplinary knowledge. Ironically, those policies and processes that were necessary in the 1970s to redress the previous assimilatory discourse are now destroying the very principles needed to realise core university goals and assist Aboriginal development. Despite the costs of this monolithic discourse it grows more pervasive within the university. It has become yet another problematic monolithic discourse but one that the university refuses to acknowledge and is resistant to any critique of. Such is the power of identity politics and culturalism.

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