

‘It’s cultural fraud’: the growing act of race-shifting

It has become increasingly trendy in recent years for white Australians to adopt a First Nations identity. Two Indigenous academics explain why it is causing real harm.

By VICTORIA GRIEVE-WILLIAMS

From **Inquirer** July 10, 2021
5 MINUTE READ • 🗨️ 696

“My identity as an Aboriginal person has been diluted, denuded and denigrated by those who falsely claim Aboriginal status.” **Nathan Moran, chief executive Metropolitan Aboriginal Land Council**

Nathan Moran, is one of 12 Aboriginal people I am in the process of interviewing about the problem of European and other Australians falsely claiming Aboriginal status. These interviews form the basis of a chapter in a collection of essays being planned with colleagues in Australia, as well as from the US, Canada and Finland.

We see so many people claiming to be one of us, without any experience or understanding of what this truly means. They have all the advantages of a settler colonial upbringing. Some may have discovered a long-lost ancestor; some seem to think that something, usually vague, in their family history suggests an Indigenous link, even where there isn’t one. It may be a way to gain advantage in some contexts.

The point is, it is exploitation. It has a real impact on Aboriginal people in their day-to-day lives. I know this from personal experience, and I am now seeking to document the impact of this on Aboriginal people themselves. My aim is to establish the phenomenon of Indigenous identity fraud as a viable area of research.

I have previously described how Aboriginal Australians are in a state of exception to the modern democracy that is Australia. This is a result of history. It was not planned but it is a result of various forces, including colonisation.

The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben identifies how modern democratic states must have a state of exception in order to exist: those in the state of exception -

receive the violence of that state, living precarious, violent and traumatic lives.

The fact is the Australian state has grown out of a colonial project based on the doctrine of terra nullius: the idea that there were no people on the continent with whom to establish a treaty, and no people with whom to negotiate a just and proper settlement.

Thus, Aboriginal people were denied the rights of citizens under the Constitution that created a federated Australia. We remain at great risk of cursory and summary violence, rape, imprisonment, death in custody and at the hands of vigilantes. Our children are removed at six times the rate of white children.

Our culture is either denigrated and blamed for the violence of the settler colonial state or appropriated and commodified. We are surrounded by death: death of country through overgrazing, dryland ploughing and mining; death of species; the deaths of our own family members and kin. All of the social indicators are down, and many of our people live in abject poverty and experience early, violent deaths.

Into this chaos and maelstrom come settler colonials who claim to be Aboriginal.

My first observation from the interviews that I have done with Indigenous Australians at the coalface suggest that, far from being delighted to welcome these newcomers, suddenly “proud” to be Indigenous, this movement is causing an enormous amount of stress.

The anxiety has been palpable in the people I interview. People report impacts on their health and wellbeing. One woman described a 12-year battle to keep a race shifter out of her family. Another has been hospitalised with heart issues from the stress of not being listened to by authorities.

Aboriginal people know when they are confronted by a person who is a race shifter – they know from the way they look, the way they conduct themselves, and their behaviours. Sometimes they have known this person before they “became” Aboriginal and they do not agree that “becoming Aboriginal” later in life is possible.

There are ways people speak, behave and relate to others that demonstrate their cultural way of being, and they do not see them in these people. These race shifters do not have these intangible cultural markers.

Interviewees report that race shifters are mostly well educated, articulate and aggressive, and they are oriented to getting awards, scholarships, benefits, and financial assistance.

They have sometimes accessed archival material on language, culture, family history without the permission of the Aboriginal people themselves. They use this to “prove” their Aboriginality by speaking knowledgeably about someone else’s cultural heritage. This can be devastating to the Aboriginal people involved.

They misrepresent culture and history. They often repeat the well-worn phrases, and their conversation does not reflect the complexity of lived experience as an Aboriginal person. They perform being Aboriginal to what is now a well-worn script.

One respondent to my study said: “They are spiritless people.” They have the trappings, the costume, the patter and the titles, but in fact they are not culturally oriented as an Aboriginal person.

This raises the important question of what it means to be Aboriginal – where are the values and ethics of the living culture?

Race shifters are strong in number, and they tend to band together and support each other while they exclude and silence Aboriginal people. For example, they employ and promote each other. They compete with Aboriginal people for far too few opportunities, such as places in universities, jobs, preschools, housing and financial assistance.

One respondent to my study said: “They are stealing my children’s future.”

The subjects I have interviewed reveal state and federal governments, the public service, universities and other institutions are often not interested in dealing with the issue of identity fraud. The trend has been to resist from developing policies and procedures to establish who is Aboriginal and who is not.

Aboriginal people therefore often find themselves in situations where they have to endure being supervised by race shifters, taught by them, having to share their - cultural information with them.

They can suffer, too, from being left behind when the race shifter is chosen by other white people for opportunities and representative positions.

They have also been under real pressure, even coercion, to “accept” a person as being Aboriginal when they know they are not.

In my view, the race shifting phenomenon is part of the continuing colonisation of Aboriginal people. The occupation of Aboriginal lands has now been followed by an adoption of a commodified and one-dimensional Aboriginal identity. This is distorting statistics, policy and programs, thus preventing real gains among Aboriginal people who really need it. This is a crisis.

There is a terrible irony: settler colonials are now becoming better at being “Aboriginal” than Aboriginal people themselves are. They are usurping the assistance provided by the state and excelling in their professions.

This is a recent and ultimately deadly movement. The time is ripe to address this huge issue and avert a new wave of genocide.

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