

Chapter 21

The Black Academy: A Renaissance Seen Through a Paradigmatic Prism

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ABSTRACT

The continent nominated by Westerners “Terra Australis Incognita” was land occupied for tens of thousands of years; home to peoples whose surviving descendants, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, could claim to have sustained the world’s oldest culture. The colonists occupying the territory, however, declared it “terra nullius,” a land with no recognized claim. The colonial attitude to Indigenous culture was similar, treating it as “Intellectual nullius.” From the colonial occupation to the 1980s became the “Dark Ages for Indigenous Knowledge,” in which the trans-generational capability, engaged in Western knowledge, was rare. In this chapter, this history is revisited on a path to current contributions of the Black Academy to higher education. These are advanced here as: an Indigenous perspective; an oppositional approach; integrative Indigenous knowledge; contemporary Indigenous knowledge; and pure Indigenous knowledge. Reflecting on the research paradigm involved, emerging contributions of the Black Academy represent a supercomplex renaissance.

INTRODUCTION

The reach of the colonial arm was much broader than mere land acquisition and military appropriation. On the homelands of nearly five hundred Aboriginal and Torres Islander nations the might of the clenched colonial fist swept away much of everyday life for the indigene on their now conquered land. While spoils were abundant for the acquirers, their haste to satisfy an almost insatiable economic thirst purged Indigenous knowledges and knowledge systems tens of thousands of years in the making. In the mid-1990s the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association (VAEAI) produced a bumper sticker that said “Education and land go hand in hand.” While this is something that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have always professed, it proved to be somewhat prophetic in relation to the elevation of Indigenous knowledges and knowledge systems in the general academy.

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Colonial endeavor rarely wanders far from the base script whether it be a people, acquisition of land or, pertinent to this chapter, knowledge production and transfer. In fact, the apparent dichotomy between colonization of land and the colonization of the mind carries more analogous intersections than one might expect. Parallels are tracked in this chapter in order to demonstrate how Indigenous representation in higher education in Australia, referred to here as the “Black Academy,” has challenged traditional underpinnings in research and more specifically, education research, leading to the emancipation of the Black Academy through an intellectual renaissance. In the context of a nexus with colonialism and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander’s recent emancipation through knowledge systems, a multilayered paradigmatic prism is employed to reveal the variety of underpinning intellectual intents and platforms, including indigenous ontologies, axiologies, epistemologies, and methodologies. It is the intention in this chapter to review how Indigenous knowledges have today contributed to the “supercomplexity” of knowledge in universities. This includes the exploration of what the implications of Indigenous Knowledge are and the derivative complexities that will need to be considered as we position both “Traditional Knowledge” and “Indigenous Knowledge” in the life and fabric of a modern Australian University.

To comprehend the emancipation of the Black Academy as an intellectual dynamic requires appreciation of the systemic subjugation that has applied. The British colonial enterprise learnt much from the mistakes made in earlier expeditionary endeavors. In 1770 the English Mariner James Cook set foot on the sovereign land of the Eora Nations claiming it for his King, George III and attributing to it the out of place and highly innocuous name of “New South Wales.” Cook had been dispatched to the Pacific with the astronomical task of observing the transit of Venus. Back as far as Aristotle there were references to the existence of “Terra Australis Incognita” or an unknown land of the south. After Cook’s scientific obligations had been fulfilled he circumnavigated Aotearoa and continued his colonial appropriations.

On that land the first significant imperial “boots on the ground” in New South Wales didn’t occur until 1788 with the “First Fleet” landing in a Gadigal inlet in 1788. The mind of the colonizers bore the scars and the consequences of the United States Continental War and were still raw. The reality of what the Provincial Congress Massachusetts in 1775 had ignited in terms of defying colonial rule led in a mere eight years to a rag tag militia subduing in convincing terms the might of the world power of the day, the British Empire. The following waves of colonizers in this great southern land came with scars that translated into harsh conditions that would never allow another uprising war of independence on distant shores again. Colonial occupation was an evolving science and differing models can be easily juxtaposed to other colonial endeavors of about the time. Examples of this are the Maori Treaty of Waitangi and South Africa’s apartheid, which had its genesis from Dutch colonization and then British colonization through the occupation of the Cape of Good Hope in 1795. The focus here, however, is on a brutal epoch of colonial power for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and one of its less recognized longitudinal effects on knowledge production and exchange.

The 1967 referendum presents as a high point in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander recognition and to today the referendum itself enjoys the status as the highest “Yes” vote of 90.77% in electoral history. The actual fiat read somewhat innocuously—allowing the federal government to make laws for Aborigines and allowing Indigenous people to be counted in the census. This paved the way for a raft of emancipatory programs that, even with the best of intentions, still struggle to close gaps in basic social indicators. One area that has developed in almost four decades since the 1967 referendum is tertiary education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. With the dissolution of state run “Aborigine Protection Acts” the educational apartheid that was practised in forms of overt and covert exclusion post-year eight disappeared. It was not until the 1980s, however, that targeted measures were put in place

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