

Time, indigeneity and white anti-racism in Australia

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Time is one mechanism through which Indigenous-modern dichotomies are created and maintained and an enduring trope of difference in the settler-colonial imaginary. This article explores the strange temporality of indigeneity within 'progressive' discourses in Australia. Taking Johannes Fabian's concept of 'allochronism' as a point of departure, and drawing on ethnography of non-Indigenous people working in Indigenous health in the Northern Territory, I show how there is a kind of cultural Lamarckianism in operation. 'Western' individuals are seen to inherit the cumulative cultural knowledge, acquired over centuries, of germ theory and responsible alcohol consumption. By contrast, Indigenous people are seen to struggle with banking and infectious diseases because they have not had sufficient time to develop the appropriate cultural knowledge. Through the anthropomorphising of culture and the culturalisation of individuals, the Indigenous person/culture becomes the 40,000-year history of human occupation of the continent. I point to the limits of this settler-colonial imaginary and potential alternatives.

Keywords: Time, temporality, Indigenous, Australia, anti-racism, race, colonisation, postcolonial

INTRODUCTION

In my experience, individual (Aboriginal) people all have different ideas of what things should be tried, or how things should be done. It is similar in our society. How could you get all of Europe to agree on ways to do things? Look how long it has taken for the European Union to form! And Europe has only had a couple of thousand years to develop their differences. Aboriginal groups have had 40,000 years to develop theirs!! (Email to author, Fieldnotes 24/03/05)

This article explores some temporal mechanisms at work within progressive narratives of Indigenous affairs in Australia. I show how a temporal iteration of orientalism characterised by Johannes Fabian as 'anthropological time' both complicates and sustains discourses of Indigenous improvement. The discourses of interest in this article are those of white people who work in Indigenous affairs. The discussion is grounded in ethnographic research conducted at the pseudonymous Darwin Institute of Indigenous Health, a research institute that aims to improve the state of Indigenous health through high-quality public health research into health problems that include chronic disease, infectious disease, alcohol and drug use and mental illness. The group I call

'white anti-racists' consists of men and women who largely identify as white, grew up and received university degrees in southern capitals of Australia, and moved to Darwin with the intention of using their education and skills to improve the lot of the nation's most disadvantaged group.¹

While the individual viewpoints of each white anti-racist varied, most converged around a common set of beliefs.² White anti-racists working in Indigenous affairs believe that Indigenous disadvantage stems from colonisation, dispossession, ongoing structural violence, racism and transgenerational trauma. They consider that the state has a responsibility to address the harms of colonisation and its aftermath through targeted programs that are ideally led by Indigenous people themselves.

As the opening quote illustrates, temporality is a feature of this set of beliefs, most clearly observed in the oft-quoted phrase: Indigenous culture is the 'oldest living culture on earth'.³ Time is a crucial mechanism through which Indigenous-modern dichotomies are created and maintained and an enduring trope of difference in the settler-colonial imaginary. Fabian and others have demonstrated the ways that 'anthropological time' produced a secularised, naturalised and spatialised temporality of the 'primitive' who by definition has no future (Fabian 1983; Wolfe 1999). In what follows, I briefly outline the role and legacies of evolutionary time in anthropology, and in wider societal understandings of indigeneity. I describe how classical anthropological notions of culture were influential at the dawn of the 'self-determination' era of Indigenous affairs in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Then, drawing on ethnography of non-Indigenous people working in Indigenous health in the Northern Territory and analysis of anti-racist discourses of Indigenous disadvantage, I illustrate the workings of anthropological time or 'allochronism'. I aim to outline the temporal aspects of what Povinelli refers to as 'internal semantic disciplines' imposed on indigenous peoples in settler-colonial nations (Povinelli 2011b: 29).

These semantic disciplines produce what I call cultural Lamarckianism. Western individuals are seen to inherit the cumulative cultural knowledge, acquired over centuries, of germ theory and responsible alcohol consumption. By contrast, Indigenous people are seen to struggle with banking and infectious diseases because they have not had sufficient time to develop the appropriate cultural knowledge. Practices performed in Indigenous communities over three generations, such as petrol sniffing, are seen as eternally new. Through the anthropomorphising of culture and the culturalisation of individuals, the Indigenous person/culture becomes the 40,000-year history of human occupation of the continent. The melding of culture, time and Aboriginal personhood produces both the perpetual ending of indigeneity and the perpetual newness of modernity.

In the concluding section of the paper, I consider the prospects for ending allochronism and allowing Indigenous Australians to accumulate the time of modernity. I show how the culture of white anti-racism makes it particularly difficult for progressive Australians to abandon the time of indigeneity. White anti-racists are reluctant to let go of allochronism as the alternatives appear to be incorporation and assimilation, which are consistent with the temporal concept of 'homochronism'. Indigenous

culture cannot ever be seen as ending, as this will imply that we have ended it. While the beginning of Indigenous culture is thought to be so far in the past as to be irrelevant, its ending is at once ever imminent and permanently deferred. I suggest that insisting on a distinction between Indigenous culture and Indigenous people and allowing Indigenous people to accrue the time of modernity is one possible—but problematic—avenue to escaping temporal dichotomies.

EVOLUTIONARY TIME, ANTHROPOLOGICAL TIME

From the moment Australia was first colonised, Indigenous culture has been considered by many Europeans to be on the verge of death. The inevitable extinction of ‘primitive races’ had been a European trope since the late 1700s, but was consolidated with the rise of ‘social Darwinism’ in the late nineteenth century (McGregor 1997; Brantlinger 2003; Douglas and Ballard 2008). Before Darwin, ‘primitive’ races were thought to be at risk of extinction through any combination of tribal or colonial warfare, introduced diseases, and ‘self-extinction’ via the destructive effects of ‘savage’ customs. This third cause of death removed the coloniser from picture completely, locating the beginning of death before European contact (Brantlinger 2003).

The work of scholars such as Alfred Russell Wallace and E.B. Tylor in the mid to late-nineteenth century gave the theory of ‘self-extinction’ new life. They drew on theories of evolution to argue that, at some time in the evolutionary past, physical evolution due to natural selection ceased to operate on man because he had enough mental capacity to outwit evolutionary forces through clothes, tools and dwellings (Wallace 1864: clxv). From that distant point in history onwards, the mental evolution of the races differed, as each tackled the demands of mastering their environments. Those in the cold climates of Europe had greater environmental demands to meet, and thus were more intellectually developed. Race extinction was seen as the natural consequence. If races differed in their mental development, it followed for Wallace that those ‘low and mentally undeveloped populations with which Europeans come into contact’ were destined for ‘inevitable extinction’ (Wallace 1864: clxv). The anthropology of the Australians was seen as an urgent task critical to understanding man’s past.⁴ In the twentieth century social evolutionism was widely critiqued, not least for naturalising the devastating effects of colonialism. But as I explore below, the notion of the primitive in mortal danger from the moment that the coloniser sets eyes on him has echoes in contemporary representations of Indigenous Australians.

As the discipline most closely associated with colonialism’s ‘others’, anthropology has reflected and produced global discourses of difference. Historians of anthropology have argued that since its inception, the discipline has constructed the savage ‘anti-thetically’, “caught in a network of negations” as “peoples without history, without writing, without religion, without morals, without police” (Duchet 1971: 11 cited in Fabian 1991: 195; Wolf 1982). The savage other is the object and civilised man is the subject. This is, of course, a common story across the ‘Great Divides’ of modernity, be they male and female, culture and nature, human and non-human (Latour 1987). But

there are two aspects of the 'Indigenous other' that may be distinctive among modernity's 'others'. The first is that 'almost as soon as travel accounts appear and congeal into a literary genre, savage societies are depicted as "past," that is, as no longer existing in their original, undisturbed condition' (Fabian 1991: 195). This reflects and produces the western obsession with the authenticity of the 'other' that is always slipping from one's grasp.

The twentieth century repudiation of evolutionism bequeathed a second distinctive aspect of this kind of 'otherness'. This is the concept that stands for what savages *have* (rather than what they lack), and what begins to die as soon as it is observed by white people: their culture. The concept of culture was the great triumph of twentieth century anthropology. As I will argue below, it continues to be a central idea in the interpretation and management of human difference, including Indigenous affairs.

In *Time and the Other* (1983), Fabian outlines the temporal effects of the 'anthropological' concept of culture (a disciplinary generalisation I will address shortly), arguing that creating knowledge about anthropology's subjects involves creating temporal distance. In the classical version of the culture concept dominant in anthropology until at least the 1970s, the other is grounded in the past and seen as relatively unchanging.⁵ Statements such as 'Group X are matrilineal' are grounded in an 'anthropological present' that produces objects that are homogenous and static in time. He coins the term *allochronism* to describe this placement of the other in a different time to ourselves, a move which denies the coevalness of the anthropologist and her subject, the empirical fact of their shared space-time in the act of ethnography. As Fabian puts it, 'Coevalness is anthropology's problem with time' (Fabian 1983: 37). By virtue of possessing culture, authentic Indigenous people inhabit an unchanging anthropological present that produces a profoundly different relation to time from that of Western observers. As I will show, while anthropology has arguably outgrown this critique, some white anti-racists engaged in Indigenous affairs have yet to come to terms with 'anthropology's problem with time'.

CULTURE IN ANTHROPOLOGY AND INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

This account necessarily sidesteps decades of debate over the culture concept. 'Anthropological culture' and the 'anthropological present' are inevitably straw men in Fabian's analysis. His book collated evidence for the epistemological conditions of possibility of anthropology (and perhaps for all knowledge-making about the other)—naturalising and temporal distancing—at the expense of presenting the breadth of anthropological theory and practice.⁶ Completed in 1978, it was written just as Said's *Orientalism* appeared (Said 1978) in the wake of Asad's foundational critique of anthropology and colonialism (Asad 1973), and was published 3 years before *Writing Culture* heralded a reflexive turn in anthropology and another round of crisis of the culture concept (Clifford and Marcus 1986). To be sure, contestation about the meaning of culture was already nothing new, with Kroeber and Kluckhohn famously identifying 164 different definitions in 1952 (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952). Much debate

before that review concerned the role of biological versus social influences on cultural development and transmission, and whether cultures could be classified hierarchically (Stocking 1968). From the 1970s on, fuelled by critiques of the role of anthropology in colonialism,⁷ anthropology's classical notion of culture was cast as bounded, homogenous, autonomous, small-scale and unchanging, and relentlessly criticised (Fabian's critique is one example; Merlan's 'intercultural' is another (Merlan 1998)). At the same time, a rehabilitated culture concept—historicised, distributed, and hybridised—was appropriated by cultural studies and imported by sociology, geography and other disciplines (Hall 1993; Kahn 1995).

However, the complex intellectual history of 'culture' does not diminish the power of what one might call the 'classical' anthropological culture concept within anthropology and beyond. Fabian's argument remains powerful because the idea of the 'other' as authentic, homogenous and radically different from the West remains powerful, particularly beyond academic settings, such as the media and bureaucratic spheres (Michaels 1993; Povinelli 2002; Muecke 2004; Lea 2008). And despite widespread debate and transformation of the culture concept within anthropology, when the concept travels between spheres, it tends towards its classical norms—at least when it is applied to Indigenous people.

An anthropological notion of culture has served as the discursive cornerstone of Indigenous policy and Indigenous identity in Australia since the late 1960s (Rowse 2000; Lea 2008; Sutton 2009; Veracini 2010; Austin-Broos 2011; McGregor 2011; Sullivan 2011). Two of the best-known conduits for anthropology in Indigenous policy were economist H.C. 'Nugget' Coombs and anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner. Stanner's 1968 Boyer Lectures are considered a turning point in the academic and policy discourse of Indigenous affairs. Coombs, a prominent economist highly influenced by the foremost anthropologists of his day, became a leading figure in Aboriginal policy after his retirement in 1968 and was largely responsible for 1970s land rights policies. Together with bureaucrat and diplomat Barrie Dexter, Stanner and Coombs made up the Commonwealth Council for Aboriginal Affairs created by the Prime Minister in 1967 to advise the government. The council went on to have a major role in Indigenous policy for the next decade (Stanner 1979; Rowse 2000; Hinkson and Beckett 2008).

Accounts by Rowse and others concur that these and other contemporaneous leaders of Indigenous policy were influenced by dominant anthropological accounts of culture, and were prolific producers of anthropological knowledge. The culture concept they espoused fitted better with Aboriginal people in remote areas, and they struggled to understand the needs of urban-living Indigenous people (Rowse 2000). Those who they considered had already 'lost' their culture, like the Aboriginal people of New South Wales, had their land base removed by the state and were expected to move to towns and get jobs. Allochronic Indigenous people living in remote areas were granted land rights, while synchronous urban-living Indigenous people lost their access to lands as many reserves were closed from the 1930s to 1960s. Similarly, the regime of Indigenous native title that emerged in the 1990s is premised on 'traditionality' in opposition to 'modernity' (see D. Martin this volume). The point of this brief

account of the culture concept in Indigenous policy is that anthropological ideas of culture have been influential since the late 1960s. The modest proposal of this paper is that these influences continued into the 2000s and are decipherable in the discourses of white anti-racism.

As we embark on the argument, it is important to note that my critique of temporal constructions of indigeneity within white anti-racist discourses does not imply (i) that Indigenous people do not participate in and endorse allochronistic constructions of themselves; or (ii) that there are no significant differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people that beg explanation (by anthropologists, anti-racists, and others).

To expand on the first point: although the empirical material I draw on, and hence my argument, is focused on the temporal habits of white anti-racists, discourses of indigeneity in Australia and elsewhere are thoroughly intercultural (Merlan 1998; Hinkson and Smith 2005; Dalley and Martin this volume). These are products of collaborative relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people that span the spectrum of oppressive and affirmative relations. Indigenous people are neither the passive victims of imposed anthropological notions of temporality nor fully in control of their deployment. To take but one example, the phrase 'oldest living culture on earth' is as likely to be used by Indigenous people as by non-Indigenous people. The use of the temporal devices outlined in this article by Indigenous people is a subject ripe for analysis, but outside the scope of this paper.

Turning to the second point, my critique of allochronism in white anti-racist discourse should not be taken as a dismissal of the reality of Indigenous difference. My analysis of the use of temporality in constructions of Indigenous difference does not deny that in many areas of Australia, particularly remote areas, Indigenous populations are considerably and systematically different from the non-Indigenous people around them. White anti-racists who work in Indigenous communities may seek and find radically different ontologies as they absorb Indigenous languages and experience hunting trips, ceremonies and funerals. The enjoyment of alterity is often paired with frustration with the less desirable differences borne by Indigenous communities. Poor nutrition, high rates of alcohol and drug abuse, and poor hygiene are phenomena seen at higher rates in Indigenous communities that people working in Indigenous affairs must account for, professionally and personally. In other work I explore how white anti-racists struggle to explain Indigenous differences. They favour structural explanations that pin the blame for disadvantage wholly on the state and colonisation and avoid the moral perils of 'victim-blaming' (Kowal 2008, 2015). Ill-health is seen as a product of history, lack of resources, ongoing oppression and racism and cultural difference. Temporality is another aspect of structural explanations for disadvantage in which the ineffectiveness of health interventions is pinned on a deep incompatibility between Western and Indigenous timescales.

Understanding the ways that non-Indigenous people construct Indigenous disadvantage, including through discourses of temporality, does not make Indigenous people more or less different, or more or less healthy, than they were prior to such insights. Rather, the intent of this analysis is that those who interpret and act on

Indigenous disadvantage (whether they are academics, professionals or bureaucrats) better understand the lens through which we view it.

ALLOCHRONISM IN ANTI-RACIST DISCOURSE

The subjects of this article, contemporary settler Australians who support Indigenous rights, are likely to be white,⁸ educated, middle-class, and by definition are politically progressive. I use the term ‘white anti-racist’ as shorthand for all these features. People who self-identify with these attributes support the principles of the self-determination era that were dominant in Indigenous policy from the late 1960s into the 2000s. My particular ethnographic work has been with settler Australians who work in Indigenous health, although white anti-racists that work with Indigenous people in other arenas (including justice, the environment, education or the arts) employ and produce similar discourses (Kowal 2015).⁹ Contemporary white anti-racists share an understanding of Indigenous culture that draws on twentieth century anthropology and the temporal idiosyncrasies it inherited from earlier evolutionary ideas about race. In the hands of twenty-first century white anti-racists, these epistemological building blocks lead to a melding of time, culture and personhood.

The first illustration of this melding is a comment from the internet activist group GetUp’s blog site for their 2010 campaign to support remote outstations. Outstations are hundreds of tiny remote communities in the Northern Territory, most with less than twenty people, that are under threat from government plans to cut funding for essential services and effectively force residents to move to larger remote communities or urban areas (Altman 2006). One contributor to the blog says:

Indigenous culture has, especially in the North, an unending life to this day of up to and over 40,000 years. Living through mini ice ages, the death of the megafauna and many other amazing changes we can not conceive upon. That amount of cultural knowledge of the world and human nature is beyond comprehension to us, and has value we can not conceive of.¹⁰

Here, Indigenous culture is anthropomorphised, discussed *as if it were* an actual person that has lived through mini ice ages and the extinction of megafauna. Although the cultural background of the author, identified only as ‘Mark’, is unclear, his presumably European ancestors lived through ice ages and alongside megafauna no less than the humans who populated Sahul (the landmass that became Australia) some 50,000 years ago. Yet Mark feels, as many white anti-racists do, that Europeans do not have the capacity to comprehend this ‘unending life’ of Indigenous culture. A researcher at the Darwin Institute of Indigenous Health conveyed a similar sentiment when discussing Indigenous connections to land and the difficulty non-Indigenous people face in understanding them: ‘Maybe a sixth-generation farmer might start to have a sense of place that is also narrative. Just multiply that by 40,000 years and you can start to understand Indigenous connections to country’ (Fieldnotes 30/06/05).

When the cultural concept central to classical anthropology, past-directed and static, is applied to Indigenous people, it is personified, immortalised, and made radically alterior. This implies a complementary process by which Indigenous people are seen to inhabit ancestral time such that they are *the same as* their personified Culture. People who identify as Indigenous contain an essence, or inhabit time, in such a way that they embody the history of human occupation of the continent.¹¹

White anti-racists at the Institute routinely talked about contemporary Indigenous people in terms of the estimated time of occupancy of humans on the Australian land mass. The quote at the start of this article is taken from an email discussion on how Indigenous people have internally differing views (itself only a notable topic because of the homogenisation of Aboriginal viewpoints within dominant discourses). In this example, 'European culture' has a 2000 year history and 'Aboriginal culture' has a 40,000 year history with no consideration for historical continuities and ruptures that belie those timelines, let alone variation internal to those monolithic racial categories. The author appeals to historical time to date 'European culture', and to anthropological (or more literally archaeological) time for 'Indigenous culture'. This disciplinary division of labour stretches the temporal horizon of Europeans to the Roman Empire, and that of Indigenous people to the upper limit of radiocarbon dating (Zimmerman and Angel 1986).

THE TIME OF IMPROVEMENT

In the year 2000, a cross-cultural educator and employee of a Christian development organisation based in Northern Territory's Arnhem Land published a book entitled *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die* (Trudgen 2000). It was (and continues to be) a huge success. When I moved to Darwin from Melbourne at the end of 2000 to work as a doctor, several people told me to read it. I duly bought a copy, read it, and was deeply moved by its message: improving Indigenous health was a matter of restoring traditional authority and drawing on Indigenous 'high' culture to develop a 'cultural knowledge base' for modern diseases.

Time is central to Trudgen's conception of two cultures out of sync:

When we come from our cultural knowledge base to talk to a group of people who have a different cultural knowledge base, our communication doesn't work. The people end up only getting the top, surface story because what we say to them in English doesn't make any sense. They just don't get it because they don't have the supportive cultural information to make sense out of what is being talked about. It took Westerners some 400 years to assimilate the knowledge about what these little things that cause disease and sickness are [i.e. germs]. Nobody has run any extensive programs to get the knowledge of bacteria into Aboriginal society. Nobody has done it. (Trudgen 2000: 63–4)

Another aspect of personified Indigenous culture is presented here. In this construction, Indigenous people possess a time-sense that links them back to their distant ancestors, so they lack the 'supportive cultural information' needed to understand

germs. Westerners have had 400 years for germs to diffuse into their culture,¹² Trudgen argues, but for Indigenous people, it is all brand new. The model of cultural knowledge operating here is a kind of *cultural Lamarckianism*. According to this model, both 'Indigenous people' and 'Westerners' are born with the cumulative sum of their ancestors' knowledge pre-programmed into their neurons. Western children are born with the cultural knowledge of germs that leads them to conform to hand washing and antibiotics.

At this point, I must revisit my early caveat that this analysis does not discount the ill-health of Indigenous people as a serious problem that demands explanation and action. Low rates of hand washing contribute to the spread of infectious diseases that can lead to heart failure, kidney failure, hearing loss and blindness, as well as manifold daily suffering. At the Institute, white anti-racists ascribed to the social determinants of health (a field medical anthropology has made important contributions to). Accordingly, they considered the social environment to be critical in shaping the beliefs and behaviours that contribute to or prevent disease (Carson *et al.* 2007). Engagement or disengagement with health promotion messages about hand washing or any other health behaviour was understood as a product of history, education, income, housing, social capital, racism, and cultural difference. I am neither questioning the need to formulate theories of poor health, nor putting forward an alternative explanation for low rates of hand washing.

What I *am* doing is observing that the temporal constructions of Indigenous ill-health used by some white anti-racists creates a sense that there is no way that Yolngu can learn about germs. It requires a major intervention at the root of Indigenous culture in order to allow it to assimilate germ theory, fast-tracking the slow diffusion of new knowledge through the cultural body. Yet the rapid assimilation of many modern technologies from mobile phones to electric guitars into 'Aboriginal society' without any help from cross-cultural consultants confounds Trudgen's model.

How long is long enough to assimilate a new object into Indigenous culture? At the Institute, the answer is 'a very long time'. White anti-racists frequently bemoaned the short funding periods of up to 5 years, when 'we're talking here about processes that are not just generational but they're, they're centuries' (Transcript 2: 13). Another colleague at the Institute wrote a draft chapter on petrol sniffing and sought my feedback. The chapter argued that, as Aboriginal Australians did not use drugs comparable to petrol 'as part of their traditional cultural practices', 'there is no reference point in the society against which the pharmacological, behavioural, cognitive, neurological and social consequences of petrol can be compared or understood'. Aboriginal people are thus confused about petrol sniffing and its effects. She tells us that '[t]he first recorded report of petrol sniffing was in the 1930s and, by the 1960s, the practice was prevalent amongst adolescents'. But as '[p]etrol has only been used in Aboriginal populations for less than 40 years', there has not been sufficient time to develop 'ceremonial behaviours and taboos surrounding its use', a process that may take thousands of years. These ceremonial behaviours can turn dangerous drugs into substances that can promote well-being, such as kava in the Pacific.

When we sat down to discuss her chapter, I queried her argument that Indigenous people have not been exposed to petrol sniffing for long (between 40 and 70 years) and therefore they lack a cultural framework for it. 'I'm not sure about that argument', I said. 'Oh, I know what you mean', she replied, 'other people have said that there were psychoactive substances that were used [in the past]', meaning that Indigenous culture may indeed have a cultural framework for the wider category of psychoactive substances. 'No, that's not what I was getting at', I replied. 'More like, is 70 years enough time to develop cultural knowledge about a drug? If your parents or grandparents used the drug, is that enough cultural knowledge?' (Fieldnotes 5/11/04).

Reflecting on this conversation, I interpret my comments as refusing the anthropomorphising of culture and demanding that Indigenous people become coeval with the western observer. Both of us then gave examples of what could be called 'contemporary cultural knowledge' among Indigenous people: a story told to me by a remote community teacher of students using their multiple names to draw three lots of Abstudy payments;¹³ and a story she had heard that Indigenous people living in Darwin know that once a week at 2.00 AM there is computer maintenance on the Automated Teller Machines of a particular bank and it is possible to withdraw more money than is in your account. These stories allow Indigenous persons to accumulate knowledge of their environment, to enter the time of modernity, rather than requiring them to wait for an anthropomorphised culture to develop knowledge over centuries or millennia.

An important aspect of these stories of coeval Indigenous people is that they have a negative moral valence—cheating the government (that is, the taxpayer) and the bank are not nice things to do. This points to the moral function that is served when white anti-racists draw on allochronic, anthropological time. It helps to rationalise behaviour they may otherwise view as immoral: Indigenous youth may sniff petrol and commit acts of violence, but only because it is so new to their culture.

In these examples, if allochronism were to end, it would both lessen alterity and heighten it. It would allow Indigenous people to accumulate time across the human lifespan rather than being tied to the protracted timescales of anthropomorphised culture. But it would also remove the sanitising effect of anthropological culture in explaining 'immoral' behaviours. White anti-racists engaged in Indigenous improvement could no longer understand Indigenous behaviours as a 'lack of cultural knowledge base', perhaps leading to their greater pathologisation.

Some argue that this is exactly what we have seen with the Northern Territory Emergency Intervention that began in 2007, and more generally with the 'paradigm shift' in Indigenous affairs (Cowlishaw *et al.* 2006; Altman and Hinkson 2007, 2010). With the apparent end of the so-called 'self-determination' era, the reign of anthropology's culture concept in Indigenous policy, where it has been influential since the late 1960s (as explored above), may be ending. Since the early 2000s, the 'self-determination era' has been subject to a growing critique by conservative commentators and politicians who argue it amounted to artificially preserving remote communities as 'cultural museums' and was based in outmoded ideas of Indigenous culture out of

sync with modern life (Sandall 2001; Vanstone 2005).¹⁴ I will return below to the political implications of the possible end of allochronism.

My final illustration of the temporality of indigeneity shows how it is remarkably flexible. This example is from a seminar presented at the Institute about the negative effects of a remote community mission on the transmission of cultural knowledge, and the subsequent effects on health. The speaker explained:

These people have had contact only since 1939, a very small period of time in relation to their occupation of the area . . . When the kids were sent back to their parents in 1973 [when the mission closed], it had been 20 years since they had been taken from their parents . . . he explains how this was a long time, a whole generation without parenting skills, an experience that explains the serious social problems we see today. (Fieldnotes 2/6/05 4: 47)

I do not wish to deny the impact of institutionalisation on the community in question. Of interest here, however, is the juxtaposition of temporalities whereby nearly 75 years of contact with Europeans is considered a short time, and the 20 years that the mission operated in that community is described (and presumably experienced) as a long time. We can explain this as the slippage between the time of anthropological culture and the time of lived experience, in this case, the lived trauma of cultural displacement. Although 70 years of contact is but a moment in relation to the time of anthropomorphised culture, 20 human years of lost cultural transmission is enough to end it.

This depiction of an ancient, vast culture crumbling on contact with the colonising culture is a common trope in contemporary anti-racist discourse.¹⁵ While it may or may not be an accurate description of Indigenous experiences of settler colonialism, its mimicry of social evolutionary logic illustrates the legacy of evolutionism within contemporary conceptions of Indigenous temporalities. Colonisation is seen as a wave of civilising progress and a wave of death, both a tragic injustice and an unavoidable step on the inexorable march of modernity. The wave breaks at the point of first contact with the dramatic violence of the colonial frontier. In the decades and centuries that follow, the undertow of the receding wave slowly erodes culture. The assumed end of this process, alternately feared and embraced in the history of Indigenous affairs (Manne 2007), is the point of disappearance.¹⁶

The wave of colonisation continues to take its toll on Indigenous Australians. Within the settler colonial imaginary I have outlined here, when the wave finally recedes, the departed will not be the 'Indigenous race' once considered in danger of extinction. Nor will it be individual Indigenous persons, who will by default become contemporaneous with the West, finally accruing the time of modernity. Instead, the other that will have ended is our anthropological notion of culture. It is the death of allochronism itself, the negation of a negation, the end of ending.

CONCLUSION

As Fabian, Kuper and others have noted, following Said, the construction of the other is a mirror onto which we project the opposite of our self-image. Beginning in earnest in the second half of the nineteenth century, the rise of the 'primitive' provided a magical, communistic, nomadic, and promiscuous subject against which rational, capitalist, liberal democratic nations could be implicitly measured (Said 1978, 1985; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Fabian 1991; Kuper 1998; Fischer and Marcus 1999). Indigenous culture was frozen at the moment of first contact,¹⁷ the moment that unleashed an unceasing wave of death. The perpetual death of the primitive attested to the perpetual life of civilisation.

This epistemological inheritance is highly problematic for white anti-racists who acknowledge that any perceived demise of Indigenous culture is the work of colonisation and not nature. If Indigenous culture is ending, settler Australians become assimilationists, perpetrators of cultural genocide. Indigenous culture cannot ever be seen as ending, as this will imply that we have ended it. This denial of the possibility of cultural death is, of course, shared by Indigenous people and organisations who are themselves heavily invested in the survival of Aboriginal cultural distinctiveness, an impulse reinforced by governments that require Indigenous people to demonstrate their difference in order to access racialised legal and welfare regimes (see Povinelli 2002).¹⁸

The temporal implication of this is that white anti-racists are reluctant to let go of allochronism as the alternative can only be incorporation and assimilation, a problem Kevin Birth refers to as homochronism (Birth 2008). While allochronism is the placement of the other outside the dominant flow of time, homochronism places them within it, displacing them from their own distinctive temporalities.¹⁹ Striving for statistical (or in this case, temporal) equality is necessary to 'closing the gap' of Indigenous disadvantage, but this quest presents the unending danger that the process of improvement will lessen the cultural distinctiveness of Indigenous people, thereby further colonising them. Encouraging or admitting the end of Indigenous temporal alterity may be necessary for participating in Western institutions but can also be seen to threaten Indigenous family functioning (see, for example, Austin-Broos 2004; Burbank 2006).²⁰

If allochronism is allowed to end, or indeed, is already ending, what is beginning? For white anti-racists, Indigenous people would be allowed to accumulate the time of modernity. Indigenous children would be seen as having as much capacity as white children to believe in germs and to learn to habitually wash their hands. Forty years would be seen as long enough for Indigenous people to develop social or cultural beliefs and practices about petrol sniffing. Indigenous culture would no longer be thought of as 'the oldest culture on earth', and instead would be seen as constantly changing over pre- and post-colonial periods while retaining elements of the past. Western culture would not be thought of as perpetually new.

My call to end the melding of time, personhood and culture is related to Povinelli's critique of 'the governance of the prior' and Moses' discussion of time in

Indigenous governance (Moses 2010; Povinelli 2011b). Moses argues for ‘recognizing the temporal space between past and present’ in order that ‘different questions can be asked of Aboriginal-settler encounters’ (Moses 2010: 22), following Achille Mbembe’s call to transcend current postcolonial narratives of Africa that are grounded in the past in order to create the ‘possibility of an autonomous African subject’ (Mbembe 2001: 14). Povinelli’s critique of the ‘governance of the prior’ similarly opposes the ‘past-perfect’ tense of the ‘aboriginal-native voice’ with the present or future-perfect tense of the settler (see also Povinelli 2011a,b: 23). She argues that Indigenous engagements with the dominant society (addressed in her article as ‘Indigenous critical theory’) must become ‘something otherwise than prior’ in order to ‘make a new spacing’ for itself (Povinelli 2011b: 22). This ‘new spacing’ involves refusing the temporal allocation of indigeneity to the prior, in concordance with my argument to end allochronism. However, she goes further to argue that Indigenous critical theory should refuse any alternative temporal allocation on offer, and instead claim a distinctiveness that derives from its own ‘inability to guarantee the content of its difference’, occupying ‘a particular spacing at once inside and outside’ the contradictions of liberal recognition.

While I am sympathetic to the project of building spaces that refuse the dichotomies of inclusion-exclusion, and allochronism-homochronism, I am sceptical as to whether it is possible, especially outside the sphere of academia that Povinelli’s intervention addresses. Putting aside the question of alternative temporalities, a more pressing concern is the potential political cost of ending allochronism. As Ghassan Hage has emphasised, following Bourdieu, good politics may not make good theory, and vice versa (Bourdieu 1990; Hage 1995). The conclusion of allochronism may already be in train, as indicated by the paradigm shift in Indigenous affairs heralded by the 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Intervention. If this is indeed the ending of temporal orientalism, it involves political risks for Indigenous communities once seen as ‘culturally unique’ and now re-assigned as ‘socially dysfunctional’ (Altman and Hinkson 2007, 2010). As Indigenous communities are permitted to accumulate the time of modernity, ‘difference’ is increasingly read as ‘disadvantage’. Freed—or perhaps exiled—from their temporal distinctiveness, disadvantaged Indigenous Australians would join the legions of needy non-indigenous people requiring assistance from the state. Whether this would be a welcome recognition or a tragic misrecognition remains to be seen.

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NOTES

- 1 This ethnography was conducted in 2004–2005 and received ethical approval from the Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services Human Research Ethics Committee (Reference 03/28). Note that I identify with the group studied, as a medical doctor who worked in Indigenous clinical medicine and health research in the Northern Territory prior to beginning the ethnography discussed here. In this way I am a ‘native ethnographer’, studying my own social group. Accordingly, the pronoun ‘we’ is used at times in this article.
- 2 I have explored this set of beliefs elsewhere as ‘postcolonial logic’ (see Kowal 2008).
- 3 This common statement makes little sense from an anthropological perspective that considers all cultures to be continuously changing throughout human history. Another common belief of white anti-racists related to time is that Indigenous people have ‘different sense’ of time to European Australians. For a typical expression of this latter idea within progressive academic discourses of Indigenous affairs, see (Janca and Bullen 2003). Of course, time has been an important subject of anthropological scholarship (see for example, Bloch 1977; Gell 1992; Munn 1992).
- 4 James Frazer wrote to Spencer that ‘The anthropological work still to be done in Australia is . . . of more importance to the history of early man than anything that can now be done in the world’ (cited in Kuper 1998). This trope of urgency in studying Aborigines to unlock knowledge about ‘man’ was a key argument for establishing the Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies (now AIATSIS) (see Peterson 1990).
- 5 Munn similarly notes in her review of the anthropology of time that the ‘anthropological present’ is focused on ‘long-term historical-myth time’, on long cycles of repetition or with the concept of eternity, while ‘the problem of the future has typically been displaced by the past-present relation’ (Munn 1992: 15).
- 6 Fabian later said he had ‘no regrets’ about this as he needed to ‘throw the wrench into the wheels of allochronic discourse’ (Fabian 2006: 143).
- 7 Time has been important in some critiques of anthropology’s role in colonialism. Allochronic distancing acts to counter genuine recognition at the colonial frontier and rationalise injustices against colonised people, an effect he calls ‘chronopolitics’ and others have called ‘temporal imperialism’ (Fitzpatrick 2004; see also Adam 2004). A related strand of literature argues that time was (and is) a crucial tool of colonisation. For example, the imposition of clock time was necessary for harnessing the colonised population as a labour force. See (Cooper 1992; Nanni 2011).
- 8 My use of the word white draws on whiteness studies. White is not a ‘natural’ category based on skin colour but, rather, is the structure through which white cultural dominance is naturalised reproduced and maintained (Frankenberg 1993). Calling the group of interest in this article ‘white’ does not intimate that they all have white skin or identify as white (although both of these conditions may apply). Rather, it implies that they willingly and unwillingly, knowingly and unknowingly, participate in the racialised societal structure that positions them as ‘white’ and accordingly grants them the privileges associated with the dominant Australian culture.
- 9 The perspectives of the white anti-racists who participated in the research were, of course, far more diverse and complex than comes across in this brief account of dominant forms of anti-racist discourse. For accounts that explore this diversity and complexity, see Kowal (2008, 2011, 2015).
- 10 ‘Mark’, Getup Outstation Campaign blog, <http://www.getup.org.au/blogs/view.php?id=1874>, accessed 15 February 2010.

- 11 Although, as discussed above, the use of these narratives of temporality by Indigenous people is beyond the purview of this article, it certainly occurs. For example, one Aboriginal researcher stated in a seminar at the Institute: 'We know how to gather information. We recognise nature and see the changes that are taking place. In our culture there are values, structures and systems that have been there for a long time and these values need to be revived so that we can move forward in a way that we already know'. [Aboriginal researcher, public seminar at the Institute (Fieldnotes 30/06/05)]. In this formulation, the historical production of knowledge from the environment is linked to the possibility of future development. Indigenous people can 'move forward' only if it is 'in a way that we already know', thus the possibility of developing new knowledge is truncated.
- 12 Possibly taking seventeenth century Dutch scientist Anton van Leeuwenhoek as the starting point.
- 13 Indigenous people in some remote regions of Australia have multiple names bestowed and used by different relatives, as well as Western names. Names will also be changed if a relative who has the same or a similar name dies. Abstudy is a government support payment for Indigenous students.
- 14 For another recent example of the role of time in these critiques, Northern Territory Minister for Regional Development and Women's Policy (and prominent Aboriginal leader) Alison Anderson commented on a policy that would support 'outstations' in the Northern Territory by enabling individual private ownership of Aboriginal land. With regards to the communal land tenure system that needs to be amended (some would say undermined) to enable private ownership, she claimed to 'understand that idea, of course I do, but not all ideas deserve to last forever, to go on unchanged until the end of time, not when circumstances around them change so that an idea that was once good becomes bad, and that is what happened here—it is time to move on' (Anderson 2013).
- 15 A strong counter-discourse exists that considers Indigenous cultures to be thriving and rejects any suggestion that they are in danger.
- 16 This is perhaps why Fabian calls anthropology the science of disappearance. Brantlinger refers to anthropology as a 'science of mourning'. For other similar formulations see (Clifford 1988; Rosaldo 1989).
- 17 On the 'freezing' effect of colonial photography, see the paper by McGrath in this volume.
- 18 Critics readily see this adoption of essentialised indigeneity by Indigenous people as strategic essentialism or false consciousness. For Achille Mbembe it is the 'imprisoning model of history' (Mbembe 2002).
- 19 Even if white anti-racists were not invested in the maintenance of anthropological culture and its associated allochronism, it may not be so easy to cast away time distancing and plunge into coevalness. Birth distinguishes between the 'intersection of different temporal subjectivities' and coevalness, arguing that a communicative exchange he shared with an informant was the former and not the latter (genuine coevalness). He argues that shared time, or even shared understanding of temporality, is not sufficient to produce coevalness, and the use of history in anthropology produces merely an 'illusory coevalness' as the Western historical clock is the reference point (Birth 2008: 14).
- 20 Note that the voluntary adoption of Western time by Indigenous people is equally problematic for white anti-racists. One solution to this is to interpret the assimilation of Western time as a covert form of resistance. A PhD thesis on the use of time in the colonisation of Kooris in Victoria describes how in 1882, Aborigines from the Coranderrk mission accused the Board that governed them 'of being "unpunctual" and "irregular" in distributing wages and rations. This implied a radical shift from the type of resistance that characterised earlier confrontations,

wherein the struggle was carried out in the name of pre-colonial traditions, rather than in the discourse of the capitalist order. But this in itself was part and parcel of the compromises and negotiations that allowed Indigenous peoples to resist assimilation successfully' (Nanni 2006: 175).

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