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Living and working in conservative times: Is there a role for academic activism?

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Introduction

Educational work and work practices are changing in Australia and around the globe. This has impacted academic work as well as the expansion of postschooling opportunities in the adult and further education sector. During the 1970s, organisations and social movement groups in the voluntary sector promoted individual opportunities for learners and for community social change. By the 1980s, much of this work was directed away from a more personal orientation of individual empowerment to a more focussed approach on 'second chance' learning for adults who had experienced limited success at school. These shifts were prompted in part by the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) attention on global employment and economic productivity, and by the extent to which Australian education and training might better position the nation to compete on the global stage.

Lifelong learning, as a policy concept, became a useful mechanism for combining ongoing learning throughout life and an improved system of accredited learning to support national productivity. By the latter part of the 20th Century that particular policy influence had prompted substantial changes in government funding, resulting in a proliferation of private-for-profit providers (what we now know as registered training organisations) and non-government organisations. Many of the latter morphed from being voluntary structures in the 1970s into private-not-for-profit agencies in response to the increasingly accredited welfare-to-work funding culture in the voluntary sector. These shifts were also accompanied by substantial increases in employment opportunities for adult educators and trainers – although not necessarily with secure industrial conditions attached. Other changes included continued differentiation of 'second chance' learners as each successive national policy fine-tuned its understanding of the different equity groups requiring support to improve their participation in education and training, for example non-English speaking background learners, people with disabilities, women, Indigenous people, youth, people with literacy difficulties, the unemployed and so on. Such refinements were, in part, recognition that not all barriers to learning resulted from inadequate or interrupted schooling.

While many of the principles underpinning the expansion of opportunity for postschool leavers and adults were established by a report on the needs in technical and further education, commonly known as the Kangan Report (ACTFE, 1974), the formation and ongoing development of our current vocational education and training (VET) system in Australia consolidated the divisions between the knowledge practices of the voluntary sector, broadly defined, and those of the technical trades so influential in steering initiatives to grow workplace productivity. This manifested in tendencies to prioritise masculinist trades and knowledge practices over generative knowledges produced through community engagement, presume little difference between rural and metropolitan delivery and conflate feminised industries and everything ‘cultural’: Indigenous, multicultural, disability, youth (see for example Butler [1997], Butler & Lawrence [1996]; Connole & Butler [1995]). Other instances, in the adult literacy field for example, illustrated how Australia’s economic reform agenda would not be achieved without the backing of adult literacy expertise (Wickert, 1991), but this expertise was often ‘bolted on’ rather than being used to open up interdependencies *between* work knowledges and literacy practices.

Such moments of significant industrial change, and their associated policy windows (Ryan, 2011), had implications for staff who were working in Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs) at the time. On the one hand academic work in the CAEs included teaching both distance and face-to-face, course development, materials production and engagement with relevant professions, and governance processes including how a department determined its course profile and funding priorities. The CAE ‘teaching’ culture, was not known for factoring workload opportunities for research and research supervision. On the other hand, the combination of dynamic social and industrial change associated with workplace reform and ‘second chance’ learning meant that my CAE academic work was already both academic and intellectual. The introduction of the *Higher Education Funding Act 1988* may have made this distinction official by the incorporation of research as part of my new university workload. In reality, I simply continued to frame my work as both academic and intellectual, focusing on the contradictions and tensions associated with training, gaining and maintaining employment.

Within this context academic work was not simply ‘teaching about training reform’. I understood it as preparing educators to work with policy and its historical complexities to best prepare the learners with whom they worked for complex employment environments that were about much more than job skills and knowledge.¹ This required them and me to position ourselves in relation to the neoliberal influences in government policy that reconfigured public education and welfare services as part of the consumer oriented business transactions driving wider reform. These reforms promoted privatisation of public services and policy techniques that over time shifted from removing barriers to learning, to strategies that progressively shifted blame to individuals for their inability to gain and maintain employment. This was accompanied by a steady rise in the language of human capital and the notion of a life constantly acquitted against externally defined and calibrated measures of productivity and its ‘other’ – waste. Engaging with educators, CEOs, policy-makers, curriculum developers and colleagues involved questioning the enduring claim that education played a neutral part in these calibrating practices. I noted two particular themes from this work: the proactive role assigned to adult literacy in social and economic productivity debates; and, the repeated *rejection* of the view that whiteness – a discursive system renewing hierarchies of racial ordering – might be present in mainstream policy documents shaping our understanding of flexibility, inclusion, equality and agency.

Therefore engagement involved using intellectual resources that were not always promoted in mainstream education theories. In fact, those alternative resources often argued that whiteness was akin to a parasitic discourse attaching itself to familiar hosts such as lifelong learning, student-centred learning and self-directed learning, silently secreting its poisonous ideas about racial hierarchies as it established itself within these hosts (see Shore [2004] for further discussion). I argued that dominant understandings of Australia’s training reform neglected to address major inequalities of experience that diverse equity groups were exposed to *in* employment. By not addressing these contradictions many training packages and associated units of competence continued to ignore the workplace realities associated with preparing people for the workplace.

In this respect, from early in my academic career I understood university work as both academic teaching and intellectual ‘activism’

that drew attention to practices of racialised power and how they operated. I have argued that the effect of the neoliberal turn, on public education in particular, has been to undermine a broader platform ‘that every citizen in society has the social, economic, educational, cultural and recreational wherewithal to enjoy life and draw the most personal satisfaction from it’ (Dunstan cited in Social Inclusion Board, 2009, p. 2). In our current times, I argue that this platform has been well and truly hijacked by the economic imperatives of the marketplace metaphor that has overtaken educational policy making. It is important for educational researchers to assert our right to combine the traditions of teaching and intellectual work that have long histories in both CAE and university work and to ask ourselves: What counts as intellectual activism in our contemporary landscape?

In the remainder of this lecture I revisit opportunities that have enabled me to structure a working life as an academic and activist. This has included beginning with the assumption that educational theory building plays an active role in endorsing racialised assumptions that order and assess human value. This has particular relevance where notions of innovation, flexibility and improvement are invoked as part of global population surveys and national inquiries designed to address a looming economic or social crisis and the manner in which education is drawn in to solving such problems.

First, I introduce OECD surveys of adult literacy, which are organised nationally through the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and provide amongst other things population profiles of adult literacy and numeracy competence.

Next, I look at how these ideas about human capacity and competence are picked up in the recently released white paper *Our North, Our Future: A Vision for Developing North Australia* (Australian Government, 2015). This paper appears to be unaware of the historical and cultural lineage of some of its recommendations. I link these insights to ongoing work that indicates this is not unusual for such mechanisms of public consultation. Finally, I return to the context of my current academic work, and note changes to the day-to-day conditions of work that impact on academic and intellectual work since I first joined the academy. I suggest my approach to adult literacy surveys and *Our North, Our Future* provides an illustration, not of academic work, but of intellectual activism that is critical for

our times. This work also needs to be cautious about its claims and constantly negotiated if it is to avoid consolidating traditional divides between theory and practice.

Downloaded for life: disrupting adult literacy myths

I have been following Australian and OECD studies of adult literacy, numeracy and information processing for more than two decades. These global measuring practices have had a bearing on many things such as educational funding priorities, target groups, data required to demonstrate learning outcomes, professional networks that receive support and those that are defunded, research questions demanding urgent attention, and the conferences, journals, consultants and academics deemed appropriate to contribute to those debates that define what counts as adult literacy and numeracy provision. The international survey results provide population profiles of skills across domains such as written prose, literacy required to complete various forms, problem solving, using technology and working with numbers. Through quite complex statistical and survey procedures, five levels of proficiency are extrapolated across national populations, with Level 1 in each domain representing the lowest level of skill and Level 5 the highest. The benchmark for everyday proficiency is Level 3. Performance at Level 1 or Level 2 in any particular domain indicates that the *minimum* requirements for everyday participation in that domain are not being met. Past survey-result releases have indicated substantial percentages of the population achieving Level 1 and Level 2 representation in each domain. Every time survey results are released, there is media outcry as to why a developed country such as ours could, at any one point in time and in any of the above domains, have between 40–60% of the population not meeting the foundation skills (Level 3) needed for day-to-day work and life (ABS (McLennan), 1997; ABS, 2006; 2013).²

This message of consistently poor performance over three survey releases is inconsistent with the view of Australia as a developed country and as such very difficult for industry, education *and* community stakeholders to believe. While there is a lot of emphasis on who cannot read, who cannot write and who cannot meet expected benchmarks, the surveys are also a catalyst for more productive debates. For example, much like the lists of so called

great 20th Century thinkers, there is neither an agreed list of literacy and numeracy competences nor a timeline by which they should be achieved. Literacy is not downloaded during school years and then applied to particular tasks and social interactions throughout later life. If literacy skills are not used regularly upon leaving school, they will decline. Yes, spelling, counting and writing techniques introduced at school *are* important, as are ‘drill’ exercises. Any athlete, computer technician, electrician, CEO, librarian, word processor, doctor or dogger will tell you the importance of simple drills and quick routine responses as part of occupational capability. Nevertheless, it is the use of those drills in everyday life that constitute literacy and numeracy. We use them for a reason and in relation to a context at any given moment. It is important, therefore, to engage the persistence of back to basics and phonics mantras when discussing survey results – these techniques enable complicated practices to be assembled, often quickly and automatically, in response to an event. But it is also important to challenge short-term, tightly defined, programs that concentrate on drilling technical skills – precisely because such programs, taught in isolation from the wider social context in which language is used, have very little chance of supporting people to develop literacy *repertoires* that they can use once their program is completed.

During talks with educators, community groups and industry, a typical response to the idea of adults having literacy difficulties was there must be another explanation for low-skill levels such as the person being a migrant, having a mental health condition or an accident, having English as their second language or having missed a lot of schooling. The challenge of resolving what was obviously a looming employment skills crisis was boiled down to reducing the percentages of people with the lower Level 1 and Level 2 scores and increasing people with Level 3 scores. This would be done through providing a range of program initiatives to increase overall foundation skills – literacy, numeracy and communication skills. This focus on levels and percentage scores offered a tangible policy solution to those seeking improved labour market performance and national productivity, but often the solutions manifest in national initiatives that ignored regional and remote specificity and simplified connections between literacy and productivity.

For example, employment readiness and national or regional productivity were also caught up in the effects of economic globalisation

as they played out in local regions – new industry opportunities opening up and requiring new employment skill sets; closure of older less profitable or obsolete industries; as well as parallel initiatives playing out in other social policy areas such as refugee resettlement and enactment of skilled migration policies. In the state where I was working at the time, the car manufacturing industry provided but one example of this across the three release periods of survey results with sometimes surprising alignments between low literacy levels, high unemployment rates and closure of major industries, which had been on the receiving end of substantial government subsidies.³ The argument to be drawn across these sites was that literacy was important for gaining and maintaining employment, but unemployment was not determined by literacy levels alone. Wider debates illustrated that local changes in workplace cultures, resulting from influxes of new immigrants and refugees, placed pressure on education and training programs to ensure ‘appropriate’ socialisation into Australian workplace culture and practices as they also had to deal with some of the more obvious literacy challenges non-English speaking refugees and skilled migrants experienced. Anyone who took curry and rice, dolmades or homemade noodles for school lunch last century would likely agree that, while our food tolerances *may* have changed, other ‘cultural factors’ such as accent, clothing practices signifying religious beliefs, funeral leave and even toiletry practices – note the appearance of signs explaining appropriate use of Australian toilets over the last 10 years – collide with co-worker and employer perceptions about a person’s competence to do the job (Shore, 2010).

To return to the surveys, and what I call ‘survey talk’, it became increasingly difficult to name these obvious but unspoken links between embodied everyday practices, literacy and numeracy capability and work readiness. My intention was not to deny the importance of English as a language of power and crucial for engagement in Australian employment. Rather, my interest was in tracking the racialised assumptions of ‘competence’ and productivity that ran parallel to and criss-crossed with Level 3 requirements for everyday participation in Australian society (see Shore [2009, 2010] for more on this).

Global literature on this, while quite diverse, offers some common insights on the continuing presence of racialised codes associated with literacy, cognition and capacity to be ‘trained’. Recurring

themes range across how one conducts oneself (comportment, bodily control, manners, sexuality, hygiene, energy) to matters of integrity, ingenuity, and capacity for learning (Lake & Reynolds, 2008; Preston, 2003; Stoler 1995; Razack, 1998; Shore, 2010). These codings are invariably aligned with western metropolitan imaginaries of individual and organisational conduct – imaginaries that have taken hold in Australian popular discourse, shaping what we understand to be Australian learners, workers and citizens. This literature is particularly relevant for how we understand the degree of success of strategies that, ostensibly, promote equity, opportunity and access in our education and employment systems and public service agencies (Larkin, 2013).

As Australia's national VET system evolved, few people linked its emergence to standards of employment and academic competence that were closely synchronised with racialised hierarchies of human capacity and the metropolitan imaginaries that induced preordained ideas about worker and learner bodies. During this period my academic teaching, unit materials development, and advocacy for adult literacy specialisations in VET teacher education courses travelled alongside conference presentations, seminars to industry groups, meetings with adult literacy teachers, contributions to policy and research priority briefings and meetings with government agencies. Trainers, educators and policy makers had pressing questions about what to do when they fronted up to their classes or policy briefings. Therefore, what I call intellectual activism was not undertaken in isolation. It mattered to them and to me how we could engage with each other in ways that continued to think 'practice' in the context of the historical, political and racialised dimensions of power at work in their organisations and with their learners. What guided my work at the time was a grounded appreciation of the extent to which 'survey talk' about literacy was caught within discourses that promoted the metropolitan nature of work as racially neutral (Butler, 1997; Shore, 2010). The juggernaut known as Australia's VET system did not always make this intellectual activism easy, given that the twin contexts of 'education as a neutral enterprise' and the official discourse of 'improvement' never really named the parasitic relationship with racialised hierarchies and how they relied on but never spoke of whiteness as a racialising entity in establishing expectations of competence.

Improving the north, empowering the south: disrupting development myths

History has been built on the application of ingenuity to the challenges of development. (Australian Government, 2015, p. 4)

Fast forward some 20 years from the release of the first international OECD literacy survey results and, not surprisingly, complex themes of productivity, development and improvement still feature in policy debates. *Our North, Our Future* is a recent Australian Government initiative that responds to pressing challenges facing Australia, challenges that are inextricably associated with the popular imaginaries of what it means to be a learner, worker and citizen in this nation. However, in this case the distinctive theme of ‘improvement’ is directed North, from a metropolitan centre in the South that believes the North is not making the best use of its resources. Moreover, the policy framework canvases far more than education and training in its improvement agenda. *Our North, Our Future* is an ambitious development plan that sets its tone early with a growth strategy that will substantially change engagement between people, communities, industries and government agencies:

More human capital means more dynamism, creativity and innovation. It means more entrepreneurs to tackle the opportunities and challenges of the north, and provide the workforce for the cities that will grow there. (Australian Government, 2015, p. 4)

Wide ranging proposals for mining, infrastructure (including roads and NBN networking capacity), tropical health initiatives, tourism, land care, changes to Native Title and much more will contribute to knowing the North anew. However, my experiences of engaging with adult literacy surveys and the racialised grammars underpinning them, provide different ways of understanding the improvement agendas in this new national agenda of knowing and growing the North. While others have noted similar past ‘rallying cries’ for northern development (Anderson, 2015), my interest is in how education and training opportunities are filtered through the metropolitan sensibilities of ‘yet-to-be’ residents and workers who will come north and as a result be living ‘away from their families and without typical suburban conveniences such as shopping malls,

medical facilities, services and entertainment and sporting facilities' (Australian Government, 2015, p. 104). While matters such as paved and usable roads, internet (of any kind), regular public transport services and public shelters to guard from wind, dust, heat and rain are serious impediments to participation in education and training, a more relevant issue for my talk tonight are four features of sociality – land, language, culture and family, which are repeatedly raised by Indigenous residents who are generally living *close* to family in regions classified by southern Australia as remote and very remote (Shore, Chisholm, Bat, Harris, Kell & Reaburn, 2014). Paradoxically, these four features are linked to potential for economic empowerment through tourism and cultural training for diverse workforces. Yet, at various points throughout the document they are also aligned in negative ways with cultural practices that drain the national economy and stain the reputation of Australia's *productive* citizens.

I have argued previously that the racial organisation of workers and work spaces is not always easy to see (Shore, 2009), yet over time I have shifted position on this to suggest that the racial organisation of living, learning and labouring in Australia and in particular in *Our North, Our Future* is somewhat easy to trace. It goes something like this. The overarching frame of future development relies on more human capital, entrepreneurialism and innovation – from the South. We are reminded the overall inquiry 'is not a giveaway' (p. 115). Dollars spent are expected to generate 'effort from someone living or working in the north' (p. 115), so there should be no expectation of rivers of cash flowing North but there is a substantial expectation that the South will receive large returns on its investment. Moreover, funding initiatives from this policy framework are expected to be the first and last opportunity the North will be given to activate this improvement agenda. We are told the main reasons for past failures appear to be lack of foresight and limited markets (p. 1) but the intention this time is for the North to reach full potential by 2035 (p. 122).

The Northern population is defined in general terms (p. 134) and it is acknowledged that 'the people of the North have successfully dealt with the challenges of living and working in the region' (p. 132), but five pages on, an overview of Indigenous Australians living and working in the region presents a very different picture:

Indigenous Australians of working age who live in remote areas are over three times more likely to be on welfare than other Australians of working age. The major source of personal income for more than 50 per cent of Indigenous Australians (aged 18-64) in remote areas is income support or Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP). In very remote regions this jumps up to more than 60 per cent. A range of factors contribute to higher levels of income support and CDEP in remote and very remote areas including the lack of job opportunities, participation in customary activities and entrenched intergenerational poverty and social dysfunction. (Australian Government, 2015, p. 137)

While the broad ranging inquiry lists many existing education and training policies, the key changes regarding schooling are to do with improving literacy, numeracy and school attendance (p. 154):

- *The Government has provided \$22 million over four years to Good to Great Schools Australia to implement the **Flexible Literacy for Remote Primary Schools** programme, which aims to reduce the disparity between metropolitan and remote students' literacy outcomes in remote areas of northern Australia. Teachers in participating schools will improve their pedagogical practice through the implementation of Direct or Explicit Direct Instruction teaching approaches.*
- ***School Enrolment and Attendance Measure (SEAM)** – the School Enrolment and Attendance Measure (SEAM) – provides practical support to parents in selected Northern Territory communities to help get their kids to school. As a last resort, if parents do not comply with their legal requirements and no special circumstances apply, their income support payment may be suspended.*
- *The **Remote School Attendance Strategy (RSAS)** – provides a community based model to provide targeted assistance to improve school attendance in around 70 remote communities with long standing school attendance issues in the Northern Territory, Western Australia, South Australia.*

In a reminder of past VET reforms, ‘trades and vocational education are being elevated to the centre of Australia’s economy putting the focus on ensuring Australian workers are highly skilled and job ready’ (p. 154). These initiatives sit alongside a list of teacher education and higher education access projects that have already attempted to address the complex range of challenges facing remote and very remote residents.

However, the authors of the paper are apparently unaware of how they have aligned living in remote areas and ‘participation in customary activities’ with ‘social dysfunction’ and ‘entrenched intergenerational poverty’ (p. 137). Nor do the authors seem to acknowledge (specifically in recommendations for educational improvements) how connection to land, land maintenance practices, mother-tongue proficiency and relationships with family and clan are critical if Indigenous children are to achieve in western schooling environments – and hence also necessary for the next generations who will live in and sustain remote and very remote regions long after the 2035 development deadline has passed. New pedagogical initiatives (Direct or Explicit Direct Instruction) associated with the Flexible Literacy for Remote Primary Schools initiative noted above promise to reduce disparities between remote and metropolitan learning. These curriculum initiatives appear to be correctors to teacher behaviour, to assist them through the introduction of pedagogies which provide less room for interpretation in the delivery phase – in effect, introducing teacher proofing strategies to reduce the influence of any individual teacher in the overall implementation of pedagogical practices in ‘participating schools’ (p. 154). While teachers are provided with curriculum materials, as intended correctives, explicit punishments are outlined for the families of the students – ‘income support payment may be suspended’ (p. 154) – if they do not fall in line with this one last chance to meet the South’s expectations of them as respectable parents, respectable families, respectable communities.

Policy windows are not always what they seem nor are the accompanying inquiries, reviews, and consultations processes that are (arguably) important mechanisms of the contemporary democratic process. On the one hand, such processes provide an opportunity to discuss issues that may be suppressed by the cumbersome workings of bureaucracies. Alternative forms of intellectual activism are necessary to counteract neoliberalism, itself a grotesque form of policy

activism in my view, which has consolidated over the last 25 years the neoliberal notion of a measured life as the ultimate framework for national productivity and social improvement. On the other hand, these inquiry processes as democratic sites for activism are also fraught. They require us to be alert to the union of those calibrating practices of neoliberalism and the racialised assumptions about competence and capacity that underpin contemporary improvement agendas such as *Our North, Our Future* and in their union provide such an exemplary instance of metropolitan whiteness at work.

Ghassan Hage understands these mechanisms of democratic engagement as '*rituals of White empowerment* – seasonal festivals where White Australians renew the belief in their possession of the power to talk and make decisions about Third World-looking Australians' (Hage, 1998, p. 241 emphasis in original).⁴ This perspective on empowerment takes its cue from an extensive body of literature on whiteness that sees it as 'a transnational form of racial identification ... global in its power and personal in its meaning' (Lake & Reynolds, after Du Bois, 2008, p. 3), which facilitates hierarchies of consciousness about human capacity within occupations and across organisations. It is not simply about skin colour, although that is an important basis for how the rituals operate. Rather, whiteness is envisaged more broadly as a 'fantasy position of cultural dominance born out of the history of European expansion' (Hage, 1998, p. 20), which underpins the view of a nation state governed by White multiculturalist southern practices. Other activists, to use the term in its broadest sense, provide practical examples of how such consultative processes directed toward vulnerable communities or designed to avoid looming crises of health, homelessness, regional waste and even recognition disputes over political processes of citizenship are caught up in ongoing practices of colonialism, and that these appear to have changed little over the years (P. Dodson, 1996/2010; M. Dodson, 2015; Henderson, 2015; Morrison, 2015a, b).

Within this frame, the proposed initiatives for Northern development yet again activate new forms of colonialism, this time by 'road' rather than sea. The government agrees to work with 'willing communities' to generate 'projects that demonstrate the benefits of reform for Indigenous and non-Indigenous investors' (Australian Government, 2015, p. 5). This will include \$17 million for 'willing Indigenous communities' (p. 11) and economic pilot programs (again

for ‘willing communities’) that will promote economic programs without undermining Indigenous land rights more broadly. These are important initiatives that will strengthen the communities in which children and adults can thrive. Similarly, with regard to schooling and developing the workforce, *Our North, Our Future* summons willing Australians with skills mismatches to participate in further education and training (p. 106). Nothing is inherently wrong with these initiatives, bar the deafening silence that accompanies those global and local expressions of what George Lipsitz describes as a ‘possessive investment in whiteness’:

a reality renewed every day through a broad span of practices ranging from urban renewal and freeway construction to discriminatory zoning and home loan policies, from the weaknesses and non-enforcement of civil rights laws to tax laws that give favoured treatment to money made from past and present forms of discrimination while inhibiting inter-generational transfers of wealth within communities of color. The possessive investment in whiteness is about assets as well as attitudes; it is about property as well as pigment. It does not stem primarily from personal acts of prejudice by individuals but from shared social structures that skew access to resources, opportunities, and life chances along racial lines. (Lipsitz, 2000, p. 519).⁵

In *Our North, Our Future* possessive investments in whiteness are most apparent in the multiple expressions that erase dispossession of land *and* labour (consider the Indigenous labour that has sustained education, cattle and health industries across Northern Australia). These metropolitan inquiry rituals position land, language, family and culture as goods to be developed in the service of the South and essential for growing tourism, but apparently irrelevant when it comes to schooling and workforce development. The coalition of willing communities and people, and systems and industries that will improve Northern Australia can only be conjured into existence if we are aware of its shadow side – a vast ‘unwilling’ populace whose standards need to be lifted. In this policy moment, *Our North, Our Future* re-enacts a move that goes to the heart of the metaphor so often invoked around Indigenous politics (for Northern Australian improvement is always and already about Indigenous Australia) – the ‘gap’ – and the need to close it. While I understand the physical

and spiritual suffering experienced by low life expectancy, poor education outcomes, poor child health and low economic security, this most recent ‘improvement’ agenda illustrates in a range of ways the negative stereotypes operating to position Indigenous people and culture as dysfunctional and also not part of the general population, not counted as human.

In this move, I would argue that it is not demonic and extreme acts of white possession that have most effect in institutions (and inquiries). Rather, it is mundane, naturalised assumptions about worthy and wasteful citizens that best illustrate the continuation of racialised knowing at the heart of impulses to improve the North – a euphemism for Indigenous Australia/ns. From the perspective of engaging with communities *Our North, Our Future* presents a static view of Northern Australia – a region that needs help in understanding the value of its resources – and, indeed a static view of southern Australia as the savior standing ever ready to facilitate the shift from inefficiency and waste to efficiency and productivity. But more important in terms of the kind of activism I advocate, it illustrates a fundamental separation between the Northern population and Indigenous residents, and a further separation that on the one hand appreciates the benefits of Indigenous resources for tourism (culture, land, workforce awareness training for cultural engagement) as it simultaneously ostracises ‘dysfunctional’ parents and families, ‘unwilling’ communities and recalcitrant traditional owners who refuse to comply with southern *or* metropolitan views about how to live as northern Australians.

In the light of this, I want to take a short detour to talk about a group of residents I worked with who seem to be potential targets of this label, ‘the unwilling’. In a relatively large school some 2 hours by plane from Darwin, I recently I undertook work with Assistant Teachers asking them how they understood the journey to becoming a teacher if they lived in remote communities and how they commonly accessed VET or higher education programs to become a teacher.⁶ The first message from engagement with residents was that these questions had been asked, answered and extensively documented on many previous occasions (see Bat and Shore [2014] as one response to this issue). Further discussions revealed that across the Territory and in this community there was evidence of a long history of leadership and participation by willing residents in their children’s schooling. However, this was invariably overshadowed by media reports and some research studies

recycling stories of dysfunction. In particular the Aboriginal Assistant Teachers, who had achieved numerous curriculum innovations had, for many years, worked and waited to gain recognition and respect for their contributions to children's learning. Yet their work in schools was hampered by a number of things: ever-changing accreditation requirements associated with university teacher education courses; regular turnover of non-local teachers in remote and very remote schools prompting a cycle of continual orientation to local knowledge practices, language and family customs; and, navigating the practices of 'white sentries' (Williams, Thorpe & Chapman, 2003) who sought perpetual confirmation of the professional gaps between the categories Aboriginal Assistant Teacher and Registered Teacher. Most often this latter issue was about the expectations of Aboriginal Assistant Teacher work which ideally included providing cultural Aboriginal knowledge about a community and the children in that community and acting as a cultural translator, not simply of language, but of knowledge practices and important relationships necessary for strong learning for children. Invariably, these expectations were collapsed to practical requests to police children's behaviour in the classroom and misunderstanding the complexities of community consultation by reframing it as 'absent from the duty' or 'not here at school' (Shore et al, 2014). While many non-Indigenous teachers, principals and regional directors valued Assistant Teacher contributions, these issues eroded the Assistant Aboriginal teachers actual status and sense of belonging within the schooling system. This was exacerbated by a vast range of nationally driven and metropolitan oriented changes to the institutional and relational architectures of schooling.⁷ As a new policy initiative *Our North, Our Future* does little to address the pattern of past interventions which have downplayed or erased the structural arrangements that 'skew access to resources, opportunities, and life chances along racial lines' (Lipsitz, 2000, p. 519).

Academic work in measured times

I began this lecture by observing that work practices are changing. Since I began my professional working life I have observed perpetual restructuring of the university, the faculty, the department and even the notion of what counts as academic work. Digitised work processes that have been conceptualised and organised elsewhere (Smith, 2005) provide a context for engagement, all the while underpinned by an ethos of calibration. While this does include teaching, course development and supervision. It also includes activity such as industry engagement, problematically filtered through professional bodies and accreditation agencies that claim to speak with one voice for 'the profession'. In other circumstances it might mean working according to codes of professional conduct which operate akin to gag orders that control what educators (and researchers) can say in risk averse cultures.

In response to these challenges I have tried to 'get behind' the work of being an academic and trace how policy ideas about employment, productivity, and education are situated within larger policy spaces that are first and foremost about popular imaginaries of being human. The two instances I have offered tonight are surveys of literacy and numeracy skills of the adult population and a recent government policy framework – *Our North, Our Future* – which aims to steer future development of Northern Australia. At least three recurring themes have emerged across this work: benchmarks of efficiency and productivity (and their opposites inefficiency and waste) that identify whether one is extended a conditional invitation to participate in an improvement agenda; a conscientious, proactive metropolitan agent and an irresponsible, unwilling wasteful 'other' both occupying primary roles in the invitation and participation process; and the neoliberal metaphor of the measured life as a framework for determining the worth of one's participation and the extent of ongoing invitations. In this context many people become the target for educational and social policy initiatives that bear ample evidence of a failure to imagine solutions beyond the racially informed ideas that steer contemporary metropolitan imaginaries of learners, workers and citizens.

Tonight, I have focussed on what I call intellectual work as activism, recognising that it draws on the legacy of many people committed to surfacing the continued passage of racialised policy making and

curriculum practices in contemporary times. Slick programs devised in isolation from the communities and people for whom they are intended are not what are needed. Nor are salvation policies from the South that project notions of waste and inefficiency on the non-metropolitan North. Listening carefully to those for whom 'improvement' is intended is always an option but it does involve working in and against those allegedly unspoken racialised affiliations of respectable learners, workers and regions that underpin conditional invitations to participate in an improvement agenda. Activism is not a counter balance to teaching, course development and policy work in a university. I believe there are two significant issues to be pursued by educators and educational researchers. First, I don't see us entering a new era of conservatism in Australia. Rather, those parasitic discourses that have always circulated responsibility for waste are mutating. The culture of neoliberalism simply provides new opportunities to attach to curriculum, policy and public discourse and so re-energise poisonous ideas about human hierarchies and possibility. Second, while children need all the support they can get in our education systems, I argue that sustained attacks on adults – workers, learners, citizens – are being given life through the very education and training structures that are supposed to support them. Many things will be needed to turn this situation around and I would argue that activism is one small but critical way in which, on many fronts, university researchers must speak against those techniques that progressively shift blame to individuals deemed to be squandering the opportunities offered them.

Endnotes

- 1 As an aside my family, friends and some industry partners rightly see this 'labour' as a particularly privileged form of work and have prompted me to keep thinking about what contribution it actually makes to the conditions for change that underpin so much of what is illustrated in this lecture.
- 2 Throughout this paper I refer to five levels of proficiency and domains such as literacy, numeracy and problem solving. In the most recent international survey a number of data collection and analysis changes were implemented. In broad terms I argue that these do not change the substantive discussion offered here. Results for the three Australian surveys do not always have direct comparability across levels but large numbers at lower levels of proficiency is a recurring feature, and indeed sometimes more than the average figures I have referenced here. The third survey – the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) – has stepped back from claiming a benchmark for participation in everyday life – what I refer to in this paper as Level 3. Now the 'proficiency levels have a descriptive purpose. ... they have no normative element and should not be understood as "standards" or "benchmarks" in the sense of defining levels of proficiency appropriate for particular purposes (e.g. access to post-secondary education or fully participating in a modern economy) or for particular population groups.' (ABS 2013). A 'below Level 1' category has been introduced for some domains resulting in six levels for some domains (literacy and numeracy) and four for others (problem solving in technology rich environments (PSTRE)).
- 3 Employment opportunities disappeared in spite of substantial re-training and subsidies to industry, as observed during my time working in South Australia (Kelton & Henderson, 2008; Martin & King, 2013). While many factors shape these issues, studies over decades indicate that local productivity and employability is governed by many things beyond an employee's academic competence.
- 4 Ghassan Hage is quite specific about the object of White fantasy in his work – 'Third World-looking Australians' – and has acknowledge that in his early work Indigenous people were absent in this framing, and in wider social discourse, as holders of capital which is unlikely to be valued by 'mainstream' education.
- 5 The small reference to civil rights laws should not distract from the relevance of this quote to Australia and in particular the current attention placed on Northern Australian development. Two immediate instances that resonate with Lipsitz's work are the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families and the Inquiry into Stolen Wages.
- 6 The project was funded by the More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (www.matsiti.edu.au) in partnership with Department of Education and Bachelor Institute and teachers and residents in the community. More details of the reports and resources are available at www.cdu.edu.au/igce
- 7 See <http://www.aitsl.edu.au/about-us/national-policies> for a range of national policies and initiatives addressing standards for teachers and principals, initial teacher education, and related developments associated with national curriculum.

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