

# “Under Erasure”: Suppressed and Trans-Ethnic Māori Identities

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*The questions raised by Māori identity are not static, but complex and changing over time. The ethnicity known as “Māori” came into existence in colonial New Zealand as a new, pan-tribal identity concept, in response to the trauma of invasion and dispossession by large numbers of mainly British settlers. Ideas of Māori identity have changed over the course of succeeding generations in response to wider social and economic changes. While inter-ethnic marriages and other sexual liaisons have been common throughout the Māori-Pākehā relationship, the nature of such unions, and the identity choices available to their descendants, have varied according to era and social locus. In colonial families, the memory of a Māori ancestor was often deliberately suppressed, and children were encouraged to deny that part of their history and “become” European New Zealanders: a classic form of what we call “trans-ethnicity.” From a Māori perspective, the relationship with Pākehā has been marked by a series of losses: loss of land, language, social cohesion, even loss of knowledge of whakapapa (genealogy). This article explores this last form of loss, which leads to “suppressed” Māori identities, and possible effects of attempting to recover such lost Māori identity rights.*

**Key words:** ethnicity; Māori; Pākehā; suppressed identity; trans-ethnicity; *whakapapa*

## 1 Introduction

Aotearoa New Zealand is a small, sea-bounded country that has been called a “social laboratory”<sup>1</sup> and for many years has enjoyed a reputation for “the best race relations in the world.”<sup>2</sup> It is a settler-Indigenous nation-state<sup>3</sup> where the primary bicultural relationship is between the Indigenous Māori people and the settler white people, of mainly British origin, locally known as “Pākehā”—though not without contestation.<sup>4</sup> The ethnicity name Pākehā recognizes the relationship with Māori formalized in Te Tiriti o Waitangi—the Treaty of Waitangi.<sup>5</sup> Te reo Māori (the Māori language) is an official national language.<sup>6</sup> Ethnic identity is based on self-identification: no system of official ethnic registration exists. Māori-Pākehā mixed marriages and families have been common and accepted in Aotearoa New Zealand for several generations. Yet, like all nations built on primary relationships between Indigenous and settler groups, this largely cordial co-existence of Māori and Pākehā has proceeded against a violent backdrop of colonialism, Eurocentrism, and white norms. For these reasons, Aotearoa New Zealand makes a rich context for examining complex questions of contemporary Indigenous identity and settler-Indigenous relationships.

The catalyst for this article was a rumor about Makere that has been going around in local academic circles for twenty-plus years: that she claims an “invented” or “made-up” Māori identity. Eventually this accusation was repeated to Georgina, in a conversation where Makere was referred to as “our own version of Dolezal” (see discussion of Rachel Dolezal below in the sections on

“transracialism” and “fake” Māori identity). When pressed, the informant described having known Makere several decades earlier when she had presented herself as Pākehā, and gave the name of a prominent Māori leader who had known her parents as being Pākehā, even though this would be as expected for a family who had disowned a Māori ancestor in earlier generations. This conversation prompted Georgina to seek dialogue with Makere about her Māori identity, which eventually led to co-writing this article.<sup>7</sup> From a Māori perspective, the claim to be Māori made by Makere depends on being able to identify a Māori ancestor: to make a claim to *whakapapa* (genealogy). To invent *whakapapa* is a very serious transgression of Māori social norms, which is why this rumor has taken a heavy toll on Makere.

Such a rumor creates an ethical dilemma for those who hear it: on the one hand, it is unethical to accept such a rumor as truth without giving the person concerned the right to explain. On the other hand, unless one knows the details of the person’s family tree, one cannot deny the charge outright. Our dialogue prompted us to think about Māori identity for those who may grow up thinking they are Pākehā, only later to find out they are Māori by *whakapapa*. Our use of the deconstructive phrase “under erasure” in the article title is ironic,<sup>8</sup> expressing the feeling of annihilation experienced by a Māori person whose *whakapapa* is denied by others. We include examples from published scholarship as well as our own lives to enrich our discussions of complex Māori identities, including those that are “suppressed” and “trans-ethnic.” These two terms are not currently widely used in relation to Māori identity, so below we delineate these terms as they operate in the Aotearoa New Zealand context, from a Māori perspective. While recognizing similar patterns in other comparable countries, we resist the pressure to make generalizations.

Our research approach in this article fits under the umbrella of “post-qualitative inquiry,”<sup>9</sup> a strategy to enlarge the boundaries of traditional qualitative research and better align with poststructuralist ideas, which have been found useful by scholars writing in critical traditions, including feminist and Indigenous research. Poststructuralist incredulity towards the “grand narratives” of traditional western theory and research has catalyzed the “auto-turn” in research, which begins from the insider researcher as a source of data, and in which narrative genres are inherent. Using narratives in research harnesses the radical teaching power of stories,<sup>10</sup> and auto-ethnographic approaches blur the boundary between data collection and analysis.<sup>11</sup> Our analysis draws on our own experiential narratives of suppressed and trans-ethnic Māori identities, combined with critical readings of relevant literature. These two strands complement each other and allow us, using this small-scale study, to tackle this complex topic in a relatable yet logically and ethically rigorous way.

The next section traces how Māori identity has changed since early colonial times, with examples of some of the ironies and contradictions of contemporary Māori identity. Then come personal vignettes from each author about the effects of suppressed Māori identity in our own lives. The following two sections disambiguate suppressed Māori identity from the notions of “transracialism” and “fake” Māori identity claims, respectively. Finally, the concluding section considers what is at stake in recovering suppressed Māori identities.

## 2 Māori Ethnicity, Trans-Ethnicity, and Suppressed Ethnicity

The concept of *ethnicity* is relational, which means that an ethnicity comes into being *through* contact between two (or more) different cultures.<sup>12</sup> Ethnicity updates the pseudo-biological concept of “race” that was ejected from the lexicon of science over fifty years ago, despite its ongoing influence on everyday life, especially in the USA.<sup>13</sup> Using inverted commas as “scare quotes” around the word “race” signals its disputed status as a pseudo-concept or fallacy. The exact meaning and significance of ethnicity varies widely in practice, according to the detailed nature of the intercultural relationship in each social context. Ethnicity, as a concept, combines two disparate

aspects: primordial (ancestry/heritage) and situational (choices/behaviors).<sup>14</sup> The ethnic identity of “Māori” came into existence in about 1850, adding to pre-existing Indigenous cultural identities of *hapū/ivi* (kinship/tribal groups), when the Indigenous people of Aotearoa began to encounter European settlers in large numbers.<sup>15</sup>

To understand contemporary Māori identity, it is necessary to appreciate the full meaning and distinction between these two key concepts of ethnicity and culture, which are used interchangeably in everyday settings: e.g., a school consisting of approximately equal numbers of Māori and Pākehā students is referred to as a “bicultural” school, whereas it would be more accurate to call it a “bi-ethnic” school.

Māori ethnic identity—in terms of accepted notions of what it means to be Māori, and who counts as Māori—has shifted over time, as the Māori-Pākehā intercultural relationship has evolved in response to wider social and economic changes. Inter-ethnic liaisons and marriages have been common throughout the history of this relationship, but the acceptability of such unions has changed over time, from both Pākehā and Māori perspectives, as have the identity choices available to their descendants. In earlier times, the identity choices available were black-and-white: until 1951, the Māori population was counted in a separate census, and until 1926, “persons identified as half-caste were allocated to either the Māori or European population on the basis of their mode of living.”<sup>16</sup>

Since then, Māori ethnicity has expanded beyond the situation where a person must choose only Māori things, rejecting all Pākehā artifacts and ways of living, in order to be accepted by self and others as Māori. In other words, a *minimal* claim to contemporary Māori ethnicity depends on the primordial aspect, i.e., *whakapapa*, and not the situational aspect, relating to way of life (since fully traditional Māori ways of life long ago became untenable under colonized conditions). Use of “minimal” above is key, because this does not mean that the rest of what it means to be Māori has fallen away or is unimportant. Community-driven revivals are blossoming in many aspects of traditional Māori culture, such as forest plant medicines, weaving, carving, tattooing, weaponry, etc. Importantly, Māori have retained their love of the language, te reo Māori, and Māori language classes continue to grow in popularity, not only among Māori, but in the overall population nationally. The point is that the category of who is accepted as Māori has greatly expanded in the past few generations, and now includes an enormous range of people, from those who know they have a Māori ancestor but are otherwise Pākehā, to those who have grown up speaking and living as Māori and could never “pass” as Pākehā. The changing nature of Māori identity over the generations demonstrates what it means to say that ethnicity is relational—dynamic, sensitive to social context, not fixed within the individual person, as implied by the fallacious pseudo-biological concept of “race” or the proto-genetic “fractions of origin” model of Māori identity (Stewart-Harawira 1993: 27).

The concept of “culture” is itself complex and contested, with many layers of meaning, both specialist and general. In the general population, culture is often associated with museum artifacts, arts and crafts, iconography, and the like. Culture also has a symbolic level, such as the narratives and metaphors of Māori heritage, which give rise to Māori philosophical values and ethics. As the descriptions in the previous paragraph make clear, Māori culture has been forced to change and hybridize, adopting western technologies and sources, in the wake of British colonization. This history means that *any* contemporary Māori identity, in relation to technologies and lifestyles, is of necessity a “hybrid” form of identity. Here the notion of cultural hybridity is used, not in any pejorative sense, but simply to reflect the realities of Māori life under Pākehā domination. To recognize hybridity as ubiquitous in contemporary Māori identity clarifies its distinction from “trans-ethnic” Māori identities, as explored in this article.

Being Māori today is made more problematic by the overly negative representations of Māori in media and the national imaginary.<sup>17</sup> Each individual person who identifies as Māori must

grapple with these negative images in coming to understand what it means to be Māori in the contemporary social milieu.

For example, Jon Warren<sup>18</sup> writes about having one Māori grandparent: identifying as Māori, going to a hostel for Māori girls, but being white-skinned: “always, there was this pre-occupation with white” (Warren 1994: 28). Warren recalls feeling confused about her identity: “The truth was, I didn’t know who I was. But there was always someone willing to tell me” (Warren 1994: 28).

In another example, Reina Whaitiri<sup>19</sup> recounts a more typical experience of racism, as one of only two Māori girls attending her private boarding school. She was nicknamed “Hone Heke” by fellow students as a racist caricature, and was often chosen to represent the school as a “token gesture” (Whaitiri 1992: 10) when, for example, the school was welcoming important visitors.

A simple model to help trace the complex dynamic changes in Māori identity divides the span of history into three large eras: pre-modern, modern, and post-modern.<sup>20</sup> Images of pre-modern Māori identity abound in sources such as museum displays, the pre-1900 Māori portraits by (among others) Gottfried Lindauer,<sup>21</sup> and the drawings and descriptions of pre-European Māori life in books for children absorbed by generations of New Zealanders.<sup>22</sup> Dominant discourses regard these pre-modern images as “real Māori”: interesting and admirable, but all long in the past and irrelevant today. Modern Māori identities are typically those of the working class of modernity: road workers and laborers, those who service our modern urban lifestyles, and their *whānau* (extended family) members who are over-represented in the nation’s prisons, hospitals, and sensationalized media stories. Post-modern Māori identities explode in all directions: to the forefront of achievement in arts, sports, and all fields, but also to make up far too much of the underclass produced by neoliberalism, with its new social scourges of homelessness, food insecurity, and child poverty, induced by the spiraling costs of housing.

Colonial families often suppressed the memory of a Māori ancestor, and succeeding generations were encouraged to deny that part of their history and “become” European New Zealanders. In those earlier times, children of mixed marriages were obliged to make a stark binary choice (or have it made for them): either Māori or Pākehā; one way of life and social milieu or the other. For such persons, living at a time when Indigenous Māori social structures had recently been violently disrupted and made illegal, “crossing over” into Pākehā culture must have been an attractive option. Adoption and going into state care were common factors in such losses of contact with, and knowledge of, *whakapapa*. Those Māori who crossed over could be considered “trans-ethnic” Pākehā. Three or more generations later, Māori ethnicity choices are now fluid and complex, more like a continuum than an either-or binary, and (re-)claiming a Māori ancestor may have advantages. What happens when descendants of such a suppressed Māori ancestor seek to recover their memory?

A person who announces a new identity as Māori, sometimes dubbed a “born again” Māori, often belongs in this category of “suppressed” Māori identities and could be considered a “trans-ethnic Māori” person. Such individuals typically “pass” as Pākehā—unmarked by brown skin or typical “Māori features.” For example, Fiona Cram<sup>23</sup> writes about being such a Māori, raised as white, “looking at my skin, looking at my parents’ skin, and believing I was white” (Cram 1994: 21). “Who are all these Māori kids’ Dad?” “They’re your cousins.” “But I’m white aren’t I?” (Cram 1994: 21). Cram documents her “steep learning curve” in acquiring enough knowledge to be accepted as Māori (Cram 1994: 23). “I know about being a ‘born-again’ Māori. Meant as an insult but proudly accepted as the truth. A *whakapapa* that needs some work, lots of questions to raise again” (Cram 1994: 23), and concludes:

We each have a multitude of identities that we either get assigned or choose. With gender and ethnicity, a look is usually enough to enable others to classify us—male, white, Māori. But sometimes we can escape this assignation and our ethnicity becomes a choice [...] Many

of us weren't raised as Māori but can still learn and can still be Māori. It's there in our hearts, our minds, our guts, if we listen carefully enough. (Cram 1994: 24)

Cram's use of "choice" in this quote may be misleading, since recovering a formerly suppressed Māori identity is often fraught with difficulty, misunderstanding, and painful emotions. The "choice" to acknowledge previously forgotten Māori ancestors may be viewed negatively by others, perhaps bringing forth violence in the form of wrath from family members, and rejection in social and professional circles.

Applying the concept of trans-ethnicity to the Māori-Pākehā relationship is a way to theorize the historical suppression of Māori ancestry and contemporary processes of recovering and reclaiming Māori identity. In earlier colonial times, Māori-to-Pākehā trans-ethnicity was used to gain entry into the emergent modern mainstream society of New Zealand. Over the generations, the families of suppressed Māori ancestors may develop "Māori branches" and "Pākehā branches" (extending the metaphor of the "family tree"). Ethnicity choices have gradually changed and complexified, and today, at a national level, having a Māori ancestor has become more of an asset, rather than something of which to be ashamed and hide. Māori bloodlines once buried out of sight are again being acknowledged. Contemporary Pākehā-to-Māori trans-ethnicity signals a commitment to honor previously suppressed family antecedents and histories.

Losses of Māori land, language, sociopolitical autonomy, and traditional livelihoods have been inevitable outcomes of deliberate colonizing processes beyond our control. Māori identity was marginalized and forced underground (under the "skin"), as colonization left Māori with little option but to outwardly assimilate, leading to cultural hybridity as noted above. Whaitiri gives examples from her experience of travelling or meeting people from overseas, when this point was misapprehended by those from other countries who "scoffed" or "sneered" at her for calling herself Māori or Polynesian (Whaitiri 1992: 13).<sup>25</sup> This disjunction arises from the difference between the concepts of "race" and "ethnicity." Ethnicity does not reside in technology, nor in material artifacts, and many people master multiple languages and cultures. Those who scoffed at Whaitiri's Māori identity were displaying their own lack of understanding of the concepts of ethnicity, culture, and Māori identity. Focus on these concepts continues in the next section, in accounts written by each co-author of the effects of "suppressed" and "trans-ethnic" Māori identities in our own lives.

### 3 Personal Vignettes of Suppressed and Trans-Ethnic Māori Identity

The named accounts below share identity stories of each co-author.

#### *Makere*

As the source of *mātauranga* Māori (Māori knowledge) and the fabric of Māori social structures, the loss of *whakapapa* or knowledge of one's genealogy is not only devastating at a personal level, it erases whole bodies of knowledge, the recovery of which can be painful and difficult. Like others, I, too, was raised in a family where "stories circulated and myths abounded" (Wanhalla 2010: 1)<sup>24</sup> and misinformation was rife, particularly about our grandfather's parents. Names were changed and children abandoned, for no obvious reasons other than, perhaps, to obscure the multiple liaisons of our Pākehā great-grandmother.

My maternal grandfather was the son of a Waitaha/Kati Mamoe ancestor who is officially recorded as having no *uri* (descendants). Raised in his early years by his Pākehā mother and her Pākehā husband, before being first abandoned, then placed in state care, the Māori connections were easily erased. In 1993, I wrote the following:

Growing up in Christchurch in the 1950s meant I had little contact with Māori, who were virtually invisible in Canterbury at that time. Can I, a fair-skinned, blue-eyed person, whose Māori genealogy is uncertain, claim myself to be Māori, have the right to speak as Māori? Colonisation succeeded in assimilating my forebears into the race of ‘the Britons of the South Pacific.’ On the basis of upbringing and looks, I am unhesitatingly constructed by the majority as being non-Māori. Nonetheless, identifying myself for most of my life as a non-Māori, whilst experiencing within myself an ever-increasing sense of being Māori, of being recognised by other Māori, of being haunted, if ‘haunted’ be the word, by dreams, by visions, by unquestionably Māori tīpuna from the other world, I too have found it difficult to survive in either world. Why then have I in recent years had such a strong need to identify myself as Māori? And to what extent does my upbringing, appearance, and uncertain *whakapapa* matter?<sup>25</sup>

As I reflect backwards over the decades, the *kuia* (female elders) who taught me with such wisdom and (usually) patience over the years are very much present. I hear them often, most notably in times of difficulty or chaos, and I am vividly reminded of my obligations to them to “care for the people.” The challenge of living in two worlds was far heavier, far more difficult for them. For myself, although straddling two worlds has often been painful, it has taught me much. Perhaps the journey to get to here has done likewise.

I was first asked the question, “What tribe are you from?” when I was in my teens, and it astonished me. While infrequent, it recurred often enough during my teen and early adult years for me to badger my mother for answers. The consistent response that “my granny was a good woman” was puzzling and unhelpful (as it turned out, my mother had never met the “granny” in question and my grandfather never spoke of her). Eventually it was the challenge “I know you are Māori, so why don’t you get off the fence?” that provoked what became an intensely frustrating journey and one that I periodically quit. Years of research involving historical records, oral narratives, whanau consultations, and mentoring by the hapu brought deeper understanding of the ongoing violences wrought by colonization, not the least of which has been the erasure of particular genealogies, both consciously and unconsciously. When eventually my *whakapapa* was given and affirmed, the lack of “written proof” was not only confusing and unsettling, it provoked flat denials by some family members, despite the affirmation by those who had known my grandfather. Those denials have left their mark on some of my adult children.

The politics of identity plays out in complicated and frequently disturbing ways. Its legacy reaches back to the early days of colonization—to the early settlers who sought to acquire Māori land and Māori wives, to the establishment of the Māori Land Courts to record the “owners” of Māori land (at least for those who succeeded in attending the Courts) eventually to be transferred into European title, and to the installation of an education system whose goal was to Christianize and civilize while teaching the tenets of “mine” and “thine.” For some, it might be argued that those tenets were learned all too well.

Intimate relationships and marriages between Pākehā men and Māori women were extremely common in the 1800s throughout Aotearoa New Zealand (in a time when the local European population was mostly male). Many of these marriages involved land transactions and have been well-documented; others far less so, or not at all. Even “highly-placed” Māori women have had aspects of their histories rendered invisible. While the early whalers and settlers regularly married Māori women, often multiple times, there is far less evidence of such relationships between Pākehā women and Māori men. When the woman in question was married, it was deeply problematic and not to be discussed. The *whakapapa* records in the Māori Land Courts, widely regarded as an authoritative source of Māori genealogies, are also suspect in that they were inevitably “partial, selective and edited” (Wanhalla 2004: 14).<sup>26</sup>

Hence, secure as I am in my mixed identity as both Māori and Pākehā, I acknowledge the right of refusal of the Māori ancestry by those family members who choose to do so. The legacy of desertion, misinformation, and abandonment casts a long shadow.

*Georgina*

I have always self-identified as Māori, but sometimes I am not recognized as Māori by others: over the years I have been asked if I am part-Indian, part-Thai, etc.—even despite now wearing a *moko kōwhiri* (chin tattoo) I am still sometimes asked about my ethnicity. My parents were both bi-ethnic: my father grew up as native-speaking Māori but had one Pākehā great-grandfather (Mr. Stewart) with his other antecedents being Māori, while my mother grew up as Pākehā but had one Māori great-great-grandmother, the rest of her antecedents being Pākehā. Earlier generations of my mother's family had suppressed knowledge of the Māori ancestry. My mother "passed" as Pākehā, being fifth in a maternal descent line from her Māori ancestress, Merekaïmanu. The Māori "blood" was not only suppressed, it was also vilified, with a racist, patriarchal, proto-genetic family myth passed off as truth. When my grandfather asked for my grandmother's hand in marriage, he was told by her father about the "mixed blood" from the Māori ancestress, which was used to explain a so-called tendency towards "mental instability in the women" of the family.

When I first met Makere, she was married to a Māori man and presenting herself as his Pākehā wife. We met regularly over a few years at community meetings we both attended, before I moved away. About fifteen years later, during my doctoral thesis research, after I had read her book,<sup>27</sup> I met Makere again at a conference, now identifying as a Māori academic. Although it took a bit of talking through, I did not find it difficult to accept that she had formerly seen herself as Māori on the inside, but was seen as Pākehā in relation to her husband, since that was how it was for my mother when she was married to my father.

For my mother, her suppressed Māori identity was a defining issue of her life and a prime catalyst of her poems—her legacy and the mark she left on this world. She sublimated suppressed bi-ethnicity into creativity in weaving her word patterns. Repeatedly in her poems she paid homage to her "black-eyed ancestress" and powerful Māori ancestors. Her best-known poem,<sup>29</sup> reproduced below, shows this cross-fertilization more subtly, invoking the energy of Te Rā (the sun) that powers photosynthesis, and the soil nutrients of Papatūānuku (the earth). In this poem I see the workings of the productive tension of Māori-Pākehā biculturalism<sup>30</sup> as a liminal, uncertain space, rife with passion and the potential for enormous creativity and learning, but also for misunderstanding and danger.

**Muka**

*- a poem by Trixie Te Arama Menzies*

So may I be as the muka  
 My flax has been patu'd by stone pounders  
 I am dyed in the colours of my passions  
 But then taken and shaped by deft loving fingers  
 of the master craftswomen,  
 Disciplined into design

At the last, may I shine lustrous with inner fires  
 which were fed through green blades  
 from the body of Papatūānuku  
 Alight with radiance of Te Rā,  
 Fitted to serve

#### 4 Suppressed Māori Identity is not “Transracialism”

Rebecca Tuvel<sup>31</sup> advocated for the acceptance of “transracialism” by likening it to transgenderism, arguing that it is illogical to support the latter while denouncing the former. As examples, she cited the contrast between the public denouncement of the “transracial African American” Rachel Dolezal compared with the celebration of transgender woman Caitlyn Jenner. Tuvel’s article sparked a vigorous debate, amounting to yet another round of self-examination of philosophy as a discipline and community.<sup>32</sup> Not only the article and author but also the reviewers, editors, and board of the journal in which her article was published came under intense criticism. Responses to Tuvel were published in *Hypatia*<sup>33</sup> as well as other journals, including a special issue on “transracialism” in *Philosophy Today*.<sup>34</sup>

A basic problem with Tuvel’s argument for transracialism is that it depends on the fallacious notion of “race.” If “race” is an incoherent category, then it follows that the idea of “transracialism” is also meaningless (the contested status of both concepts is marked by placing “scare quotes” around the words). In this article, therefore, we use the term *trans-ethnicity* as a more robust alternative. Ethnicity is relational, unlike “race,” which is a category-type concept. Ethnicity is therefore more like a process, the process of a relationship. Trans-ethnicity is also a process, in which we learn and find out new information, talk with our families, and keep learning, and about which we very possibly go on thinking for the rest of our lives.

The case of Rachel Dolezal, as signaled above, was also debated with interest in Aotearoa New Zealand. As remote onlookers, we might respect Dolezal for choosing to identify with African American people in her life (her adoptive siblings, her partner and his family) who did not share her white privilege. Dolezal staked her claim to Black identity on her involvement with Black people, i.e., on the situational dimension of ethnicity, but she could not claim the primordial aspect. Indeed, she betrayed her biological ancestry, denying her parents in her claim to Blackness.

Changing gender is a process that is seen to reside in the individual person (for the purpose of legal rights, etc.), but ethnicity is a social group category, so changing one’s ethnicity implies changing one’s social group, and therefore impacts on one’s entire family. For this and other reasons, trans-ethnicity cannot validly be regarded as similar to “transgenderism” (as used by Tuvel). To argue that both ethnicity and gender are socially constructed, so therefore both trans-ethnicity and transgenderism should be socially acceptable, lacks logical rigor, and overlooks the differences between ethnicity and gender. Tuvel missed the nuances of difference between the key concepts involved in her argument: social construction, “race,” and ethnicity.

#### 5 Suppressed Māori Identity is Not “Fake” Māori Identity

In naming Dolezal as an example of “transracial” Black identity, Tuvel seems to view “transracialism” as a pretense, involving making false claims about one’s family, as Dolezal did in “passing” as Black. “Blackface” is a notorious term for fake Black identity, originally referring to the use of theatrical makeup to create caricatures of African American characters in “blackface minstrel shows” that, by the mid-1800s, had become a “distinctive American artform.”<sup>35</sup> Today, the term “blackface” is applied to any case of assumed Black identity, including Dolezal (Botts 2018). “Transracialism” seems useful as a more formal term for “blackface” and such dubious practices, which perhaps also include Dolezal’s, as others have noted.

A topical example of identity politics is the emergence in the media of old photographs of Canadian Prime Minister Trudeau wearing blackface makeup as a student on past occasions such as a play or fancy-dress party.<sup>36</sup> The publication of the photographs generated significant backlash, even calls for him to resign, indicating the extreme sensitivity of this issue. The revelation of

blackface in his past provided Trudeau's political opponents with a major weapon to undermine his integrity. Such is the power of the politics of identity.

In the US, to "pass" as white has quite a different meaning from "passing" as Black, due to the enormous power differential between white and Black identities. It is not just approved of, it is *expected* that Black people should make efforts to "pass" as white, to the extent of cases of high-profile celebrity cases who are said to have undergone skin-lightening procedures. An everyday example is the expectation exerted on African American women to wear their hair straightened in public or to conceal their curls under straight-hair wigs. One form of "transracialism" is considered natural and right, while in the other direction it causes outrage and condemnation. These considerations highlight the superficial and uncritical nature of Tuvel's concept of "transracialism."

Different dynamics are at play in Aotearoa New Zealand, where these days it can actually be to a person's advantage to have Māori ancestry, qualifying one for education scholarships and professional roles in education and academia. Membership through *whakapapa* of a Māori kingroup (*ini* or *hapū*) can be a necessary step towards membership of trusts, political groups, or land claims. To the extent that such affirmative action measures, unlike in the contemporary United States, are not merely nominal, they are reviled as "Māori privilege" by racist commentators at all levels, from politics, to press, to academia.

In recent decades in Aotearoa New Zealand, Pākehā have staked political claims as Indigenous, in the context of debates about national identity and belonging in Aotearoa New Zealand.<sup>37</sup> In the early 2000s, for example, Member of Parliament Hon. Trevor Mallard made a speech in which he "sought to explain that non-Māori could also reasonably be regarded as 'Indigenous New Zealanders,' which did have the effect of undermining Māori claims to this status and to the rights to privileges which follow from this" (Spoonley, Macpherson, and Pearson 2004: xii).<sup>38</sup>

If Māori identity has an economic value, then clearly there is motivation for fake Māori identity claims. As already noted above, however, in Māori terms, a fake claim to Māori identity would necessitate inventing ancestors, which is such a serious transgression of Māori social norms that it would defeat its own purpose.

## 6 Conclusion: Recovering Suppressed Māori Identities

Notwithstanding the differences discussed above, there are some similarities between the processes of changing gender and trans-ethnicity, since both are highly significant, and both can be extremely traumatic processes for the person concerned. To reclaim suppressed Māori identity is politically activist work, which often comes at significant personal cost. To take stock of the wide range of identities included under the umbrella of "Māori" is to appreciate anew the power of suppression as a social tool of colonization of the "Indigenous" by assimilation to the "western."

This article attests to the resilience and flexibility of Māori identity in the face of change and opposition that can even include forms of violence. Recently it has become socially acceptable, even of economic benefit, to identify as Māori. Many families in Aotearoa New Zealand are now claiming the Māori ancestors who were once conveniently forgotten by earlier generations. In the liberal social milieu of Aotearoa New Zealand, more nuanced forms of ethnicity, such as "suppressed" Māori identity, can confound the simple lines drawn by Māori politics. In light of contemporary claims to disputed territories, to resources provided by settlement of historical grievances, to the rights to represent, and to the narration of tribal histories, there are those who might prefer some skeletons to stay locked away in old cupboards.

These days, it pays not to assume someone is “Pākehā” only to later find out they have a “Māori connection”—in other words, that their family tree boasts a Māori ancestor, who they now proudly acknowledge. In the past, Pākehā have leaned on social amnesia and the power to dominate national narratives, but as Māori identity becomes ever more socially acceptable, we can expect to see increasing numbers of trans-ethnic Māori. Māori have long been asking Pākehā to overcome their social amnesia and take account of accurate versions of our shared national history. By the same token, Māori as well as Pākehā need to recognize the trans-ethnic descendants of once-suppressed Māori ancestors.

As time goes by, the key criteria for being Māori continue to shift towards the levels of symbolic culture and philosophy, and away from material culture or physical phenotype (appearance). Knowledge of one’s ancestral Māori links, even if illegitimate or unrecorded, can have a profound, ongoing influence on a person’s life and work. Under these circumstances, what really counts as Māori knowledge? Surely not only what the Pākehā world knows.

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Kelsey, *The New Zealand Experiment* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Human Rights Commission, “Race Relations Commissioners and Conciliators Mark Significant Anniversary,” <https://www.hrc.co.nz/news/race-relations-commissioners-and-conciliators-mark-significant-anniversary>.

<sup>3</sup> Australia and Canada are others in this category. See: Avril Bell, *Relating Indigenous and Settler Identities: Beyond Domination* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> T. McCreanor, “Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones’...: Talking Pākehā Identities,” in *New Zealand Identities: Departures and Destinations*, ed. J. H. Liu, T. McCreanor, T. McIntosh, and T. Teaiwa (Wellington, New Zealand: Victoria University Press, 2005), 52-68.

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Justice, “Waitangi Tribunal,” <https://www.waitangitribunal.govt.nz>.

<sup>6</sup> New Zealand Legislation, “Māori Language Act,” <http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1987/0176/latest/DLM124116.html>.

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the authors are not related to each other, despite both having “Stewart” in their names.

<sup>8</sup> Dror Pimentel, *Heidegger with Derrida: Being Written*, trans. Nessa Olshansky-Ashtar (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

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- 21 See <http://www.lindaueronline.co.nz/maori-portraits>
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