



Truth-myths of New Zealand

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Abstract

This article probes the gap between different cultural perspectives in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand, a nation-state founded on a bicultural encounter between indigenous Māori and settler British. One source of misunderstandings is a set of distorted versions of historical and social reality that have been promulgated through schooling and national media. These distortions of truth take the form of certain dubious, denigratory ideas about Māori, accepted as commonsense truth by Pākehā (European New Zealanders) to bolster their feelings of security and superiority in relation to Māori. I refer to these ideologies as the ‘truth-myths of New Zealand’ that operate like thought weapons of Whitepower within the apparently harmonious social context of Aotearoa New Zealand, dubbed with a longstanding reputation for the ‘best race relations in the world’. The purpose of this article is to focus in on the truth-myths themselves, represented by three typical statements of key ideas, presenting and explaining each one, and commenting on their significance and ongoing influence in national education, and society more generally.

Keywords Agnotology · Aotearoa · Biculturalism · Māori · New Zealand · Pākehā · Treaty of Waitangi · Truth-myths

1 Introduction: culture and identity in Aotearoa New Zealand

This article continues my ongoing investigation of contemporary Māori identity, in which cultural difference is a key theoretical concept. Being an ethnic identity label, Māori is a ‘relational’ category, in accordance with anthropological definitions of ethnicity as an outcome of contact between different cultural groups (Eriksen, 2002). Before the British invasion of Aotearoa, the Māori ethnic identity did not exist; the autochthonous peoples of Aotearoa identified themselves by whakapapa (genealogy) and tribal kingroup. The trauma of the British invasion catalysed a new, pan-tribal identity, for which the name ‘Māori’ (a word traditionally meaning

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‘normal, ordinary’) began to be used from about 1850 (Williams, 1971, p. 179). In anthropological terms, then, the origin of the Māori identity is a classic case of ethnicity formation. The histories of Aotearoa that created the ethnicity of ‘Māori’ did so in relation to ‘Pākehā’, so to investigate Māori identity necessarily involves accounting for Māori-Pākehā relationships.

In previous work, I have investigated Māori cultural difference by studying examples of the gap between Māori and Pākehā perspectives on social and educational issues, such as the 1960s *Washday at the Pā* controversy, the 1991 Waikato Law School exams incident, and the increasingly common use of pōwhiri (Māori welcome ceremony) in non-Māori contexts (Stewart et al., 2015; Stewart, 2019a, 2022). Gaps in understanding between Māori and Pākehā are theorised as the workings of an intercultural ‘hyphen’ that acts as both chasm and bridge between cultures (Jones & Jenkins, 2008). This article focuses on the fallacies themselves—untruths invented and circulated as propaganda to serve a particular sociopolitical purpose—which contribute to these gaps in understanding, and thereby negatively impact on relationships between Māori and Pākehā people, at individual and societal levels.

The argument that motivates the writing of this paper is summarised as follows:

- (i) Claims that are widely regarded as commonsensical truths within a society can, upon closer inspection, turn out to be false. In New Zealand, some key false ideas about Māori have been widely promulgated for many generations through national schooling and school textbooks.
- (ii) Some of these claims—the *truth-myths* that operate within a society—can serve to reinforce racist and colonial attitudes and practices that are dominant within that society.
- (iii) Truth-myths therefore illustrate the serious socio-political harm that can be caused by uncritical reliance on ‘commonsense’ or ‘established matters of fact’.
- (iv) As a result, it is essential that we identify and undermine the truth-myths that operate within our societies. For those who benefit from the legacy of racist and colonial practices, this will require historical knowledge, self-criticism, and genuine openness to the testimony of those who are harmed by the legacy of these fallacious ideas.

The rest of this section discusses these general points as they apply in Aotearoa New Zealand, a ‘modern Western’ nation-state founded on a bilateral, bicultural encounter between indigenous Māori and settler British, formalised in the Treaty of Waitangi (1840), which is widely recognised as the founding document of New Zealand. This treaty was written and signed in two versions, one English, the other written in te reo Māori (the Māori language). In 1840, written forms of te reo Māori had only recently been invented (Jones & Jenkins, 2011). Now, over 180 years later, te reo Māori is an official national language (New Zealand Legislation, 1987), one of very few indigenous languages to be accorded this kind of status.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Māori version of the above Treaty) manifests and represents the embedded ‘gap’ in understanding between the Indigenous peoples (iwi) of Aotearoa, and their European fellow New Zealanders (Orange, 1987). The Māori

version includes the invented word ‘kawanatanga’ for ‘governorship’ to avoid the use of tino rangatiratanga (self-determination, sovereignty), since the translator (the local missionary) knew the rangatira (leaders) would not sign a document that transferred that to the British Governor. Te Tiriti is the national founding document, the basis of the New Zealand origin story, and of the implausible claim that iwi Māori agreeably ‘signed away’ their entire world. The Treaty is still speaking, in the sense of being an ongoing source of intercultural tension and learning (Consedine & Consedine, 2012; Yukich, 2018).

Cultural gaps in understanding point to different ways of thinking, and support arguments for the existence of at least some degree of epistemological diversity (Herrnstein Smith, 2005; Ruitenberg & Phillips, 2012). My interest in binaries derives from decades of work teaching and developing the Māori science curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2020), about which I wrote my doctoral thesis, inventing the concept of Kaupapa Māori Science to mean a local/Māori critique/critical form of science (Stewart, 2007, 2020a). The key curriculum question for Pūtaiao concerns the *relationship* between science and Māori knowledge; a relationship that is theoretically dense and complex, yet is usually reduced to a problematic binary question of the typical form: ‘Is Māori knowledge a form of science, or not?’ (Stewart, 2019b). The problem with this question is that it has no correct ‘hard’ or scientific answer, due to the slippage in meaning of its constituent terms. The only truthful answer is ‘it depends’ on how both science and Māori knowledge are being defined, since available definitions of both vary widely. I have written extensively about the science-Mātauranga Māori debate (see references, below) but it is not the focus topic of this paper. That debate leads to this paper, because I am more interested in exploring Pākehā myths than Māori claims to science.

At more general levels, binary concepts per se have developed a negative reputation amongst social scientists, from being associated with hierarchical thinking, which invariably favours the wealthy societal elite. As a Māori researcher concerned with the question of Māori cultural difference, I am centrally concerned with binaries, real and reified, and the difference between the two. The topic of Māori cultural difference involves a mixture of both. One or two ‘real’ or scientific binaries are refracted through multiple lenses to produce a spectrum of reified binaries in relation to Māori identity, including and accounting for ‘Māori science’. The mainstream academic reaction has often been to reject binary thinking as being ‘wrong’ or inadequate. Conversely, a Māori analyst (such as myself) might wish to play with and invert the binary, rather than pretending it never existed. One key binary relates to the name of the country: New Zealand according to the dominant culture, Aotearoa as a Māori version. The combination ‘Aotearoa New Zealand’ is a strategic reference to the attempt to reconstruct a bicultural nation—New Zealand for the dominant White nation-state and Aotearoa as a spatial location of te ao Māori (the Māori world).

It seems obvious that a binary concept is a powerful basic cognitive tool for language and thinking, since it captures the logic of identity: same + different. We learn language by refining binary concepts—a word refers to *this* and not *that*. The human brain, it seems, is geared to using binaries in learning, knowing, and teaching. It is a basic tenet of contemporary sociolinguistics that all natural languages are considered

equal in status as languages (May, 2012). The two languages, English and te reo Māori, thus form a natural, scientific or ‘real’ (as opposed to ‘reified’) binary, which is embedded in the national culture and identity of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Another real binary inheres in the claim to be Māori, for which a minimum requirement is a whakapapa link to one or more tūpuna (Māori ancestor). A person’s genetic antecedents are a matter of biographical fact, so according to this definition, the identity category of ‘Māori’ gives rise to a second natural or scientific binary. Language and familial ancestry are two of the most complicated of all identity topics, entangled in influences from many directions of social life and intellectual disciplines. The indigenous Māori practice and category of ‘whāngai’ distinguishes between biological and other children in a family, for whakapapa purposes. But (to take just one example) current reproductive technologies, with gamete donation and surrogacy, add very significant complications to the principles and practices of whakapapa knowledge.

Knowledge of whakapapa is still carefully maintained and taught within communities, but like all Māori knowledge, much has been lost in the onslaught of the dominant culture, with a sustained campaign of attack against Māori language and knowledge pursued for political goals of ethnocultural assimilation (Jackson, 1992; Smith, 2000a, 2000b). Occasionally an individual with no whakapapa tries to pass themselves off as ‘being’ Māori, or conceals their non-Māori heritage, but only those who can ‘whakapapa Māori’ to make those links to tūpuna have the right to identify as Māori (Stewart & Stewart-Harawira, 2020). False claims of Māori identity amount to inventing ancestors, which is viewed very negatively by Māori, given the key role of whakapapa in Māori knowledge bases.

A strong value in the national psyche of Aotearoa New Zealand is a sense of fairness—often expressed as ‘giving someone a fair go’—also known as ‘the Kiwi way’—and this sense of fairness extends to defending the individual right to ethnic self-identity. Hence, by comparison with other settler-indigenous societies, notably the USA, South Africa and Australia, public displays of overt anti-Māori racism are relatively rare and subtle in Aotearoa New Zealand, as the examples in the following paragraph show. Such incidents are so aberrant as to command attention in national media, and are subject to legal and social sanction. In contrast, private, subtle incidents of racism—what are termed ‘micro-aggressions’—are often invisible except to the victim in the moment, and far more prevalent than most would care to admit.

These two examples illustrate public racism in the contemporary Māori-Pākehā relationship. When in 2019 some restaurant diners scoffed in racist terms at a young waitress for correctly pronouncing the Māori words in the names of dishes on the menu, her manager relieved her of the rest of her shift, and gave her support (Neilson, 2019). In April 2022, a woman was asked by other mothers to cover up her moko kauae (chin tattoo) or leave a children’s playground. A few weeks later, a local gathering of around 400 people was held in response, to celebrate moko kauae, with learning and healing outcomes (Laing, 2022). Events like these provide a library of stories or ‘lessons’ from which the people of Aotearoa New Zealand can learn (or not) about how to be with each other, in bicultural and multicultural relationships.

Social media participate in these debates in several ways: such stories are often picked up from an initial post on Facebook or Twitter, and such platforms also

facilitate the kinds of creative community responses mentioned above. On the other hand, social media allow extreme racist views to be aired very freely, to an extent that raises the question of whether or not the ‘Kiwi way’ still exists at all (Elers & Jayan, 2020; Houkamau et al., 2017). Social media have also become the tools of powerful international political groups, who are busily exploiting the opportunities they offer for psychic warfare in a globalised era (Martin, 2021).

Studying the ‘intercultural hyphen’ or gap in understanding between Māori and Pākehā leads me to think that it arises from two basic causes; one being ‘real’ cultural difference, and the other being agnotology, which is ‘constructed’ or managed ignorance (Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008). It is helpful to spell out the difference between these two different causes of misunderstanding. This article focuses on the agnotology aspect—the manufacture, for political ends, of Pākehā ignorance about Māori and the history of the Pākehā relationship with Māori.

1.1 Agnotology as a theory of Pākehā ignorance of Māori

The word ‘agnotology’ was coined in 1992 by Iain Boal and Robert Proctor (2008) to mean the study of ignorance and its cultural production, using the negating prefix ‘a’ before the root ‘gno’ meaning ‘to know’. Proctor posits agnotology as a ‘missing term’ and pair for epistemology: ignorance is to agnotology as knowledge is to epistemology (Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008). Proctor points out the inherently colonising nature of typical Western images of knowledge and ignorance: ‘Light floods the darkness, keys are found to unlock locks, ignorance is washed away, teaching uplifts out of ignorance, which is thereby destroyed or chased, and so forth’ (Proctor, 2008, p. 5). Proctor delineates a three-part typology of ignorance: the first type as native state (or resource); the second type as lost realm (selective choice or passive construct); and the third type as a deliberately engineered, strategic ploy (active construct).

The first type, ignorance as native state, is characterised as an absence or deficit of knowledge, which is associated with certain groups, such as children, students, apprentices, and interns—those who are recognised as lacking in knowledge. As such, this first type of ignorance could reasonably be assumed to fall within the ‘normal’ territory of epistemology—except that ‘mainstream epistemology has itself been part of the problem rather than part of the solution, generating its own distinct ignorances’ (Mills, 2008, p. 230). The conceptual coherence of the concept of ‘agnotology’ thus depends on accepting the politicised, historicised, non-neutral nature of Western philosophy, including epistemology, and the implications of this acceptance.

Proctor’s second and third types of ignorance—the passive and active forms of politically motivated ‘not-knowing’—build on from the colonising implications of seeing ignorance as ‘the mother who must die for science to be born’ (a ‘brutal’ patriarchal metaphor attributed to Johannes Kepler, see Proctor, 2008, p. 4). The second form of ignorance includes amnesia and blindspots; the human knack of ‘ignoring’ what it is inconvenient to know (Salecl, 2020). The third form of

ignorance is misinformation or propaganda—deliberately misleading ideas spread for political gain.

Agnotology, on this reasoning, is a radical critique of the Whiteness of epistemology (Mills, 2007), which explains why the concept appeared so recently, in the post-disciplinary era (Peters, 1999), at a point in time when ‘truth’ was becoming increasingly politicised, destabilised, commodified, and weaponised (Giroux, 2019). The emergence of post-modernism, post-structuralism and the other ‘posts’ is partly in response to the exposure of the Whiteness of epistemology: agnotology is born of the posts (Mills, 2020). Sexism and racism have reinforced each other in the construction of current power arrangements, and go together with other forms of unfair treatment of other people. But in focusing on the Māori-Pākehā dynamic, this discussion includes only racism. Whiteness has been so normalised for the last several centuries that the word has only recently become more generally used. Whiteness is a racial concept, used as the basis of an identity, which is why I use a capital for it. But since my project focuses on Māori identity, I will not examine the concept of Whiteness.

An important disclaimer concerns my use of the word ‘race’—which I insist on placing in scare quotes as a textual reminder of its fictional nature. This paper is situated and written in Aotearoa New Zealand, where the usage differs from countries where ‘race’ is still part of social reality, even if in politer terms now than in the past. The concept of ‘race’ may be a fiction, but this does not invalidate racial pride, nor does it mean that racism does not exist.

The pseudo-concept of ‘race’ was an invention of the modern period, which means ‘race’ plays a fundamental role in structuring modernity and the modern academic disciplines, including disciplinary philosophy. Western or mainstream philosophy is therefore by definition ‘White’ philosophy (Mika & Peters, 2015). It seems useful for Māori purposes to examine how agnotology explains the work of the truth-myths that maintain Pākehā ignorance about Māori.

A few ‘ideas’ about New Zealand history and culture were invented by Pākehā for use as anti-Māori weapons of discourse. Over time, these ideas have become accepted as ‘commonsense’ truth by Pākehā (European New Zealanders), bolstering their sense of security and superiority relative to Māori. Thanks to the national schooling system, presumably over the generations Māori have come to take them as ‘true’ in the scientific sense, as well. I call these ideologies the *truth-myths of New Zealand* and see them as operating like thought weapons of Whitepower within the contemporary social context of a country that enjoys a longstanding international reputation for having the ‘best race relations in the world’ (Human Rights Commission, 2017).

These anti-Māori colonising ideologies, promulgated as truth in New Zealand, evolved and took on various shades and forms of expression down through the decades of colonisation, as development of a local European history began to build a sense of national identity, distinct from that of its (mainly British) forebears. In 1943 (mid-WWII), the struggle to establish a local European identity was expressed by Kiwi poet, Allen Curnow, as needing to learn ‘the trick of standing upright here’ (Simpson, 1986). This line refers to being ‘antipodean’ in the sense

of living on the opposite side of the world from the originary culture of Mother Britain, or 'home' as Britain was referred to until recently (Stewart et al, 2017).

Ironically, it was the successes of the Māori Battalion at key moments of WWII in Europe that cemented the role of Māori in the developing modern nation of New Zealand, even if only in the national imaginary, a dream of equality often breached in practice, as returning soldiers found out. In the 1950s and 1960s, it was still acceptable to deny Māori the right to buy alcohol, stay in hotels and rent housing because of being Māori. Such social denigration explains why many children of Māori-Pākehā marriages chose to identify as New Zealand European, and conceal or disown their Māori sides.

Curnow's line also evokes the opposite orientation of *te ao Māori* (the Māori world) from *te ao Pākehā* (the Pākehā world): a difference both spatial, seeing South as 'up' to the head of the fish (*Te Ika a Māui*) that is, the Wellington district, and North as 'down' to the tail of the fish in the Far North, and temporal, with the past conceptualised as 'in front' of us and the future 'behind' our backs, since we cannot look and see what it will bring. Hence, in Māori thought, people walk backwards into the future (whereas in contemporary globalised culture we face the future, and turn our backs on the past). Curnow may as well have been referring to the intercultural gap I want to explore in this article.

This gap raises the question of the need for European New Zealanders to re-think their relationship with *te ao Māori*, which involves time and effort. The growing demand amongst Pākehā for adult classes in *te reo Māori* indicates many are taking up that challenge. Yet the weight of scholarly opinion still leans towards the view that Māori knowledge/culture/people 'really are' inferior to the European counterparts. The effect of decades, if not centuries, of anti-Māori propaganda spread through schooling and public media hangs like an invisible deadweight around the neck of the national identity of Aotearoa New Zealand.

The belief that Māori (knowledge/culture/people) have inherent deficiencies compared with European norms is known as 'deficit thinking' in educational theory and research (Pihamā, 2019). Deficit thinking, even in the guise of wanting to 'help' Māori, is a very widespread problem within schools and other educational institutions, including universities (Stewart, 2020b). One strong link in the New Zealand imaginary is the association of 'Māori' with 'criminal' (Stanley & Mihaere, 2018), which acts to support the generalised deficit binary. Elizabeth Stanley and Riki Mikaere discuss *education* (schooling) and *discipline* (imprisonment) as the 'carrot and stick' of the imposition of European control over Māori lives. The disproportionately high number of Māori prisoners in its national carceral system is cited as probably the most well-known social fact in Aotearoa New Zealand (McIntosh & Workman, 2017).

Given the refusal to recognise racism as foundational to the national knowledge systems of Aotearoa New Zealand, people are obliged to take up positions of supporting the positivistic policy responses, which tend to reify the binaries. School teachers have been encouraged to embrace *te reo Māori* for decades, but given the lack of response, are now being obliged to do so, by new teacher professional standards (Teaching Council, 2019). It is a truism that attitudes cannot be changed by law, but it is also true that setting legal expectations will generate cultural change in the teaching profession, which presumably will in turn change attitudes. What remains

to be seen is how much ‘dust’ (backlash) gets raised in the process of such a transition within a key public sector such as schooling.

The next section presents and explains three typical statements that underpin the main bases of anti-Māori racism in New Zealand.

2 Three truth-myths of New Zealand

For the purposes of this article, in order clearly to introduce the truth-myths of New Zealand that bolster its claims for supplanting Aotearoa, I will delineate and discuss three representative statements. Truth-myths pop up in various guises, in various social contexts, so I have distilled out these three statements to capture the gist of the truth-myths of New Zealand. Taken together, these three statements (below) front the key Eurocentric ideas that have masqueraded as truth in the history of the colonisation of Aotearoa by the British Crown, expressed in many different ways over time. The truth-myths examined below are:

Three typical truth-myths about Māori:

1. Māori killed off the Moriori.
2. No full or real Māori are left alive today.
3. Everything Māori is inferior to everything European.

The first two statements make factual claims, which can be investigated relatively easily. The third statement is very general. Taken together, these three statements represent the base of support for a reified hierarchical social binary in Aotearoa New Zealand, still clearly visible, still operating in the media and other domains of social discourse (Moewaka Barnes & McCreanor, 2019; Moewaka Barnes et al., 2013). The following sections focus in turn on each of these three truth-myth statements.

2.1 Truth-myth 1: Māori killed off the Moriori

The notion that Māori invaded, exterminated and replaced an earlier cultural group identified as Moriori, who previously occupied the islands of Aotearoa, is one widely believed but false claim that supports the moral right of Pākehā to appropriate these homelands and dominate their former Māori owner-occupiers. Despite its ongoing popularity, this claim is untrue; it is a fallacy, and the history of its deliberate invention and promulgation is well-documented in academic literature, so it is relatively simple to definitively overturn and reveal as anti-Māori political propaganda (The Detail, 2020). One accessible summary of its infamous history is given in Wikipedia, (2018).

The reason for the popularity of this myth amongst Pākehā is clear: Māori could hardly complain about being colonised by and losing their lands to the British if they had done the same thing to the Moriori, who (according to the fallacy) were the ‘real’ original inhabitants of these islands. This truth-myth has ongoing currency amongst young generations of Pākehā. It is a powerful tool for easing the guilt that

young Pākehā might otherwise feel when they find out about the actual history in which their forebears participated.

There is ample evidence that this truth-myth was invented by colonial anthropologists and scholars of Māori history (Howe, 2022), and its anti-Māori political purpose has long been critiqued by Māori intellectuals (Walker, 2004). Crucially, in the early decades of the twentieth century, this myth was included in the pages of the *New Zealand School Journal* as well as in the classic A. W. Reed schoolbook *The Coming of the Maori to Ao-tea-roa*. Through such school texts, this expedient myth has been taught as official truth to many generations of New Zealanders as small children (Blank, 2007).

Schooling has been a primary vehicle for disseminating and perpetuating damaging distortions of Māori (pre-)history. As children we believe what we are taught at school, and it seems reasonable to say we are *entitled* to believe what we are taught at school. It is therefore entirely understandable that this truth-myth has taken on a life of its own, and many years later, still to this day continues to be a ‘convenient Kiwi truth’ passed down and promulgated within families, and utilised in the public square by politicians and the media.

In terms of agnotology, or ‘ignorance studies’ (Proctor & Schiebinger, 2008), this first truth-myth about Māori killing off the Moriori, and therefore having no grounds to complain about their treatment by the British, is an outstanding example of the third form of ignorance, according to Robert Proctor’s three-part typology explained prior, as an active, malicious spreading of damaging lies about Māori (Proctor, 2008). This particular truth-myth makes false claims purporting to be scientific truth, disseminated through schoolbooks fed to little children by teachers in their classrooms, to serve unethical political ends. To promulgate lies as truth through schooling is an especially malicious form of manufactured ignorance, which betrays the value most people in this country give to education.

2.2 Truth-myth 2: no ‘full Māori’ are left alive today

This statement is widely believed to be true in Aotearoa New Zealand today, even by Māori, but probably almost universally amongst non-Māori. The problem is that this statement succumbs to the racist basis of dominant definitions of ‘Māori’—still mired in the fallacious pseudo-concept of ‘race’ as a biological ‘essence’ often vaguely believed to be associated with an individual’s blood or genes (DNA). The dominance of the ‘blood quantum’ or ‘fractions’ definition of being Māori means a person who does not ‘look Māori’ is often challenged by others when they self-identify as Māori (Stewart-Harawira, 1998). Older versions of this truth-myth referred to the ‘blood’ (as in ‘full-blood’ or ‘mixed-blood’ Māori), but these categories are now more often referenced using fractions of cultural inheritance—half, quarter, etc. This truth-myth that there are no full Māori alive today is very influential, given the general knowledge of genetics amongst contemporary citizens of a country like Aotearoa New Zealand. Some commentators, especially right-wing politicians, go a step further, using this truth-myth to justify calls to, for example, remove the Māori seats of Parliament.

This myth appears to be true according to the evidence of our senses. Nearly every New Zealand citizen must know people in their family or peer group who are, or have been, in mixed Māori-Pākehā relationships, against which there is no public or legal discouragement. The country of New Zealand could be said to have been built on a social history of generations of happy mixed marriages and Māori-Pākehā families. The myth of ‘no full-blood Māori left’ based on inter-marriage does not on the surface appear to be a violent or cruel idea, especially from non-Māori or uncritical perspectives. After all, Māori people today obviously are lighter in skin tone than the ancestors (tūpuna) from the early contact generations who are depicted in early photographs and portraits (for example, the Lindauer portraits, see Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, 2018). Today Māori people have all sorts of mixtures of looks from their forebears, so the notion of ‘no full Māori left’ seems intuitively accurate.

But there are two problems with this truth-myth; the first being that Māori identity is an ethnicity, not a race—indeed, the use of ‘race’ to mean ‘large natural divisions of the human species’ is a social construct, not a scientific concept, since ‘such natural divisions do not exist’ (Marks, 2017, p. 57). The pseudo-concept of race, which has underwritten modernity and European colonialism for several centuries, is one of the most damaging truth-myths of all time, and fundamental to the truth-myths of New Zealand. The Māori emphasis on whakapapa pays no heed to ‘fractures’ of cultural inheritance. From a Māori perspective, mixing the whakapapa of Māori ancestors with incoming European strains does not automatically ‘halve’ the claim of the next generation to identify as full Māori.

The second problem generated by this truth-myth follows on from the first: despite being a lie, this plausible truth-myth supports the overall colonising aim of assimilation of Māori to the European norms imposed by the British colonisers. Assimilation has been the key theme of the entire history of the British creation of New Zealand in Aotearoa, and concomitant colonisation of Māori. The concept of assimilation used in New Zealand anticipates (expects and looks forward to) a time when distinct Māori identities will no longer exist in living or future generations. From a Māori perspective, this attitude is experienced as one of cultural genocide or symbolic annihilation, given the basic beliefs on which it is based, which are theorised using the concepts of epistemic violence and neo-colonialism (Ashcroft et al., 2002).

2.3 Truth-myth 3: everything Māori is inferior to everything European

Compared with the above two statements, this third truth-myth is more of a general principle than a specific factual assertion. It is expressed in terms of Māori inferiority, rather than European superiority, because in the dominant traditions of New Zealand, the European is taken as the norm or standard, against which the Māori is inevitably found wanting, so comparisons are usually made in this direction. A tendency to understate the superiority of things European is subtle, but strong; a classic example of ‘normative’ discourse in Foucauldian terms. What is *not* said carries just as much force as what *is* said (McHoul & Grace, 1998).

The force of this truth-myth is very clear and directive for a child who grows up understanding themselves to be Māori. The moral and biological inferiority of Māori people, asserted by the previous two truth-myths, is hereby made general and universal. This truth-myth is a Eurocentric principle that shows how racist thinking has underpinned the entire creation of ‘New Zealand’ in Aotearoa. Not only was this racist principle held to apply to all forms of Māori material culture such as food, clothing, and housing, it was also applied to all abstract aspects of culture, such as language, religion, and social norms of family and relationships.

My father told me a poignant story that illustrates the operation of this truth-myth. He told me how his father (my grandfather, NAME) advised him to ‘marry Pākehā’ in order to better his lives, and those of his children. Various conversations with my father over the years provided glimpses of a typical self-denigration invoked in Māori people of older generations by this general principle of Māori inferiority.

The principle of Māori inferiority is the unspoken assumption behind the indignation expressed by scientists in response to the suggestion that Māori knowledge could be of any value in relation to science (Stewart, 2021a, 2021b). There are two ways of interpreting the idea of the ‘value’ of Māori knowledge for science—wisdom and data sources, but Māori knowledge is routinely viewed by scientists only as a source of data.

This truth-myth also carries the implication that since Māori knowledge is ‘less advanced’ than modern Western knowledge, it could contain no concept worth knowing that does not already exist in European thought. The problem with this truth-myth is that it risks ignoring the potential benefits and gifts of Māori difference—of a different world view and framework of knowledge.

Being a general principle, rather than a specific factual assertion, the effects of this truth-myth are even more widespread and normalised in language, subtly influential in the psyche of every academic, irrespective of background. To illustrate this, think about how difficult it is not to think of the many Indigenous societies, such as pre-European Māori, as ‘less advanced’ forms of human culture than the current globalised Euro-American society, in which Aotearoa New Zealand participates. The influence of the implied teleology of evolution for understanding our humanity is extremely deeply embedded in the psyche of even the most radical individuals, by virtue of its central influence in the disciplines (which are European-derived and arguably inherently Eurocentrist). Putatively descriptive words like ‘native’ or ‘indigenous’ are tainted by normative Eurocentric value-laden claims, aligned with negative ideas like ‘savage’ and ‘backwards’. The language of academia reinforces sociopolitical normative Whiteness, which makes sense according to the sociolinguistic rule that languages always reflect the cultures of their speakers (Lee, 1996).

The White Savior position is commonly adopted by Pākehā in education in Aotearoa New Zealand (Camarrota, 2011; Stewart, 2020b) and indeed could be said to be encouraged by the state education policies. The teacher operating from the Savior position seems committed to the success of their Māori students, but unless they have challenged the truth-myths, an attitude that Māori students ‘need their help’ often falls prey to underlying deficit thinking about the student and/or their parents as inherently lacking in some way. The prevalence of White Savior attitudes in education showcases the subtle ways in which this general truth-myth operates today.

2.4 Downstream effects of the truth-myths of New Zealand

These three basic truth-myths tend to be extrapolated into other, more speculative ideas, for example, that Māori were ‘lucky’ to be colonised by the British and should be grateful, as was infamously expressed by Sir Bob Jones in the National Business Review magazine (Gathey & Flahive, 2018)—the incident brought an end to his role as regular columnist. More subjective in nature, these downstream ideas are expressed as opinion, rather than fact, but opinions authoritatively stated, as if self-evidently true, such that no reasonable person would disagree. On one hand, it is hard to argue with the proposition that, at an overall level, Māori were treated better by the British than they might have been by the French colonisers, who were the only credible threat to the British in taking over and annexing Aotearoa. On the other hand, it is difficult to agree that Māori are better off as a population now, inserted into the modern and post-modern New Zealand economies as a ready-made proletariat/underclass to support the wealthy elite sections of society, compared with pre-European Aotearoa, when our tūpuna (ancestors) lived as sovereign cultural groups, enjoying full tino rangatiratanga.

The truth-myths point to the cataclysmic effects of European colonisation on all the Indigenous peoples of the world (Iverson et al., 2000; Moorehead, 1968; Walker, 2004)—indeed, the word ‘Indigenous’ owes much to a notion of a land and people colonised by European settlers. Some White scholars continue to portray European imperialism as a force for good; for example, a 2017 article titled *The case for colonialism* was withdrawn by the publisher after receiving complaints and threats against the journal editor (Kendhammer, 2017). Similarly, in the New Zealand context, a recent academic history book (Moon, 2021) attempts to explain European colonisation of Aotearoa as a process of reaching ‘equilibrium’—thereby ‘naturalising’ colonisation in attempts to paint it as ethically neutral.

Such contemporary defences of colonialism replay the old arguments, expressed in the phrase ‘the White Man’s Burden’ that was made famous by the poetry of Rudyard Kipling as an apologist for British colonisation of India (Moore, 1968). The resilience of colonialism and its naturalisation in contemporary world affairs rests on an underlying attitude of Eurocentrism—a general, and often unconscious, belief in the superiority of European cultures and peoples, in relation to the rest of humanity (Wintle, 2021).

3 Conclusion

One key source of cultural misunderstandings between Māori and Pākehā is a set of deliberate distortions of the truth into anti-Māori propaganda, which I have delineated above in the form of three representative statements. To write an article that posits a set of typical untruths accepted as fact, told by Pākehā to harm Māori, invites criticism of my work on its truth value. A residue of science ideology lives on as a stubborn belief amongst the dominant Pākehā culture in New Zealand that Māori would have ‘died out’ by apparently natural forces, if not for inter-marriage with Europeans. Whilst seldom openly articulated, this implicit belief relies on the

pseudo-biological fallacy of ‘race’ and the racist hierarchy embodied in these truth-myths. The truth-myths support and reinforce each other, which strengthens their combined influence on discourses of national identity.

This article uses post-qualitative Kaupapa Māori research to explore questions that cannot be answered by scientific means. The criteria for post-qualitative research are more about the utility of the work in the particular, than making general truth claims. The criteria for Kaupapa Māori research follow the principles of Kaupapa Māori theory—about being Māori, opening space for Māori language, thought and practice, and staying committed to the struggle for Māori political rights (Pihama et al., 2002; Smith, 2003). My critiques seek to hold Pākehā knowledge accountable to its own truth criteria.

The records show that Pākehā have repeatedly acted unfairly in their dealings with Māori, just as in other British colonies around the world. For this reason, it would seem futile to expect my research to be well-received in the mainstream world of research, which is controlled by Euro-American interests. The value and validity of this research is thus based upon its usefulness to other Māori (or Indigenous) thinkers, than its conformity with mainstream knowledge norms, which it has attempted to show are untrustworthy according to their own criteria.

Data availability No data was generated or analysed in this work.

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