

Harmful: warning issued to ‘race shifters’

EXCLUSIVE

By **CAROLINE OVERINGTON**, LITERARY EDITOR

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In the US they are known as “race-shifters”; in Canada they are “Pretendians”; and in Australia, they are more commonly known as “box-tickers” – people who discover, or else simply claim an Indigenous or First Nations heritage for themselves.

Some do so because they want to adopt a more exotic profile; others because being “just white” doesn’t have quite the cachet it once did, especially in academia.

But the sheer number of people now laying claim to an Indigenous identity has begun to distort national statistics, at least according to Indigenous Australian academics and a group of international writers who took part in a lively roundtable on the topic of “race-shifting” at an anthropology conference in May.

The two Aboriginal academics, supported by colleagues from the US and Canada who have written books on the subject, say the trend toward adopting a new racial identity is causing real harm. The group plans to extend the discussion of the “self-Indigenising” movement by presenting at the Australian Anthropology Society’s national conference in November.

Australian academic Victoria Grieve-Williams, a Warraimaay historian from the NSW mid-north coast, said: “In Australia the race shifting phenomenon is pervasive and well recognised by Aboriginal people. The statistics show that the increase is not natural, but it remains a difficult conversation for Australians to have. The race shifters hold the power, they stifle debate and resist scrutiny in various ways, including attacking Aboriginal people who ask who they are in our cultural terms.

“They tend to be urban-based, clustered in southeast Australia, and raised with all the privilege of being white.

“But race-shifting is not benign: it is genocidal, colonial appropriation.”

Dr Grieve-Williams presented her argument at the Canadian Anthropology Society roundtable at the University of Guelph, Ontario, alongside co-conveners Suzanne Ingram, of the Wiradjuri nation, and Sydney University anthropologist Gaynor Macdonald. Ms Ingram is a teaching fellow in the anthropology department at the University of Sydney, where she is completing her PhD, and a board member of the NSW Aboriginal Housing Office. “Wiradjuri people have been dealing with this for a couple of decades,” Ms Ingram said.

“What interests me is not simply that race-shifting is happening and on such a vast scale, it is the ways in which it is happening. Box-ticking is a social movement. My analysis in health communication shows how it affects policy – it seems to have started in housing policy – but it has soared in the education sector, and the stats show, probably unsurprisingly, that the east coast of Australia is the epicentre.

“There is a performative element that these claims for legitimacy rely on, and Aboriginal people can clearly hear this. I have heard the most preposterous claims. How we recognise each other is up to mob locally, within our kinship networks. We are doing something about it now and I know mob elsewhere are, too, but the discussion is more open in North America than it is here.”

The Australians were supported in their presentation by Circe Sturm, a professor of anthropology in the faculty in Native American and Indigenous studies at the University of Texas at Austin, and author of a race-shifting book, *Becoming Indian: The Struggle over Cherokee Identity in the Twenty-first Century*.

Dr Sturm told *The Weekend Australian*: “People adopt a false identity for a variety of reasons, but what’s happening in the US and Canada, and I suspect in Australia, is less about financial gain. It’s motivated more by shifting systems of racial value.

“Whiteness is being devalued in some respects, becoming associated with guilt, cultural emptiness. Indigeneity is being increasingly valued, becoming associated with cultural, social, spiritual and natural connection.”

Dr Sturm’s book says “race-shifters” have common narratives to describe the “life-altering experience” of discovering a First Nations identity. “Selectively adding an indigenous identity can bring symbolic value to the perceived emptiness of their whiteness,” she said.

Dr Macdonald, who is not Indigenous, but has worked alongside the Wiradjuri people of central NSW for more than four decades, said: “I’ve seen these claims increasing since the mid-1980s,

first slowly but now to the extent that the numbers are shifting national statistics and interfering with government policy.

“Take the Closing the Gap report as an example. Year after year, we are told there is no change in Indigenous statistics. Everything has stayed the same.

“But if you are adding a whole lot of people who have lived a privileged white life, and had the benefits of good housing, and education, then for rural and remote communities, the conditions must be getting worse.

“I have met people who tell me, “Ooh, I am Wiradjuri, I feel it inside me, and I feel at home in the bush”. But they cannot tell you where Wiradjuri land is or who their kin are. Many have found some ancestral DNA, a few don't even have this, have none but all have grown into adulthood as non-Indigenous. They perform identity – they do not embody personhood. Their success and their acceptance lies in their enacting of the white imagining of Aboriginality. I call it the whitening of Aboriginality.”

Dr Macdonald estimates that 5 per cent of people counted as Indigenous in Australia are actually white people, “self-identifying” as Indigenous.

“They are well-represented in the national Indigenous elite, many gain high-prestige jobs designed for Indigenous people, claiming insider knowledge they don't possess,” she said. “Grassroots Aboriginal people resent having to deal with them but feel unable to counter this tidal wave.

“The reason this conversation is difficult for Australians is because, in the past, discussion has singled out individuals. But this is a worldwide phenomenon and it's time for a series of research initiatives because the harm is real.”

Other panellists at the Canadian conference included Darryl Leroux, associate professor in the social justice and community studies department at St Mary's University in Kijipuktuk, Nova Scotia. His book, *Distorted Descent: White Claims to Indigenous Identity*, considers the problem of “self-made Metis” in Canada. About 2.5 per cent of the population in Nova Scotia identified as Metis in the 2016 Canadian Census, compared to just 0.09 per cent in 1996. Some of the new recruits seem particularly interested in the right to hunt moose, which is restricted in some forests to Metis.

Dr Leroux researched his own family tree in Quebec, and found some Indigenous ancestors, but does not claim Indigenous identity. He said that “in keeping with my social and cultural upbringing” he continued to identify as French-Canadian.

In Canada, a second season of *Trickster* – praised for using Indigenous actors and crew – was cancelled this year, after the director Michelle Latimer, who had claimed to be of “Algonquin, Metis and French heritage, became a “Pretendian” – somebody claiming to be Indian, when she was in fact white.

Warraimaay historian Victoria Grieve-Williams reviews *Farmers or Hunter-Gatherers? The Dark Emu* debate, in *Review today*.

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Caroline Overington has twice won Australia’s most prestigious award for journalism, the Walkley Award for Investigative Journalism; she has also won the Sir Keith Murdoch award for Journalistic Excellence; and... [Read more](#)