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White eyes open: teaching the history wars in an Indigenous studies unit at the University of Ballarat

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Introduction

Since 1994, units in Indigenous studies have been offered as electives to students enrolled by the School of Behavioural and Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Ballarat. Involving the study of Indigenous culture, history and politics, these units have attracted much interest and new units have been developed in response to student demand. One such unit, entitled *Myths and Massacres*, introduces students to contemporary debate concerning the historiography of frontier violence, and encourages them to consider the implications of this debate for national identity, culture and politics, as well as history. This paper presents an overview of the context of Indigenous studies at the University, reviews the broad subject matter of the *Myths and Massacres* unit and discusses some of the implications of offering the unit.

Myths and Massacres: the Historiography of Violence against Indigenous Australians. offered for the first time in 2005, comprises a survey of the debate over the nature and extent of frontier violence in Australia. It reviews positions held by various non-Indigenous and Indigenous historians, commentators and politicians, and the evidence which supports the theories which have been advanced. The 'history wars' debate over frontier violence, as it has been called (Macintyre & Clark 2003), has developed from criticisms made in 2000 by Keith Windschuttle, a media analyst, former history teacher and political commentator, of the work of Henry Reynolds and others (Windschuttle 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2000d). In 1981, Henry Reynolds, a historian based at James Cook University and who specialised in Indigenous history, estimated that approximately 20,000 Aborigines were killed in direct violence by non-Indigenous people on the Australian frontier, compared to around 2000 to 2500 non-Indigenous people killed by Aborigines (Reynolds 1995, pp. 121-22), and these estimates have been widely accepted as feasible by prominent historians such as Broome (2003, pp. 89-90). However, Windschuttle attained both considerable notoriety and celebrity by disputing these figures, contending that they are unsupported by evidence or reason. He went further, arguing that many historians, including Reynolds, who had researched the history of frontier conflict, had deliberately inflated the numbers of Aboriginal deaths and had colluded to promote a politicised version of history which emphasised the white conquest of Aboriginal Australia as shameful, regardless of evidence to the contrary. He accused historians Reynolds and Lyndall Ryan, amongst others, of fabricating or misrepresenting historical evidence and of falsely reporting numbers of Aboriginal deaths (Windschuttle 2002, pp. 139, 143, 166; 2003). In his study examining the historiography of frontier violence in colonial Tasmania, Windschuttle characterised Tasmanian Aborigines as 'primitive' (Windschuttle 2002, pp. 185, 386, 399), violent and motivated by greed to instigate attacks and plunder poorly defended European settlers (Windschuttle 2002, pp. 107-08, 111).

The Myths and Massacres unit encourages students to investigate the nature of this debate, to explore the motivations of the historians and commentators who took part in it and to consider the impact of the debate on Australian culture and politics. In doing so, Ballarat students who generally have little direct involvement with Indigenous Australians were invited to consider their personal responses to the debated arguments and to reflect on their reasoning

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in adopting these responses. Consideration was given to traditional racist stereotyped views of Indigenous peoples held by non-Indigenous Australians, as well as to the criticisms of these views. The unit content thus requires students to do more than study the sequence of past events: it demands examination of the presuppositions students hold of the nature of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures and of their interactions in the past and present.

The University of Ballarat's development of Indigenous policy

The Ballarat campuses of the University of Ballarat are on Wathaurong land, but few Wathaurong descendants remain. The Wathaurong population was depleted in the nineteenth century as a result of introduced diseases (see Blaskett 1979 pp. 273-298; Clark 1990, pp. 287-88), violence (Clark 1995, pp. 169-75; Cannon 1993 pp. 143-4; Christie 1979, pp. 60-1) and forced relocation (Clark 1995, pp. 169-75). Consequently, most of the current Indigenous population of Ballarat originate from outside of the Ballarat region. The Ballarat and District Aboriginal Co-operative (known as the Ballarat Co-op) provides a range of services to support the region's Indigenous population. The University of Ballarat is a multi-campus regional university drawing students from the Central Highlands and the Wimmera regions of Western Victoria, as well as many from Melbourne. Increasingly it is attracting international students. There are nine different Schools within the higher education sector, and in addition to the Indigenous history and culture units offered by the School of Behavioural and Social Sciences and Humanities, the School of Business offers some units in Indigenous tourism.

The overwhelming majority of the student population at the University of Ballarat is non-Indigenous. The 2006 Census reported that of the 190,654 people living in the Central Highlands-Wimmera region, there were 1668 Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people. Only 0.9% of the total population in the Central Highlands-Wimmera region were Indigenous people, compared with the 2.3% who were Indigenous in the 2006 Australia-wide population (ABS 2007a). The Census showed there were 952 Indigenous people aged 18 years or older in the region (ABS 2007b). Out of the approximately 22,000 students enrolled in the higher education and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sectors at the University of Ballarat in 2007 there were approximately 145 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students enrolled in the TAFE sector, and thirty-two Indigenous students enrolled in the higher education sector (University of Ballarat 2007a). Indigenous students accounted for 0.8% of the combined higher education and TAFE student body, with a concentration in the short courses offered in the TAFE sector. In the higher education sector, the percentage might be more like 0.08%.

An Aboriginal Education Centre (AEC) was established within the University in 1993. It has a manager and a small staff of Aboriginal Liaison and Education Officers working to assist current and prospective Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students who have an interest in studying at the University of Ballarat. The focus of the Centre is on providing personalised support to its students. In addition, the Centre has been effective in increasing the awareness of the University community of the needs and concerns of Indigenous people.

In 1999, the University of Ballarat adopted a *Statement on Reconciliation*, which recognises the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the Indigenous people of this land, and acknowledges the disruption and devastation to the Indigenous people brought about by the non-Indigenous occupation and settlement of Australia. In the *Statement on Reconciliation*, the University states its commitment to undertake its best efforts to educate its members and members of the regional community to recognise and understand the history and consequences of dispossession and to acknowledge and respect the culture and aspirations of Indigenous people (University of Ballarat 1999).

Unemployment rates amongst the Indigenous people of the Central Highlands Wimmera Region were reported at 25.8% at the time of the 2001 Census, compared to the rate of 5% for the general population in the Wimmera and 8.4% for the general population of the Central Highlands area. In recognition of this unacceptable level of unemployment, the

University has employed an Indigenous Employment Coordinator and has devised an Indigenous Employment Strategy for 2004-2006 (University of Ballarat 2005a). The strategy aims to actively recruit and train Indigenous applicants for jobs at the University. It aims to provide employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians across all employment categories and across all the University's six campuses, to increase ongoing positions for Indigenous staff and to provide an ongoing career development programme for Indigenous staff to provide for career development and employment retention. Additionally, the strategy states the commitment of the University to offering cultural awareness training and support.

Indigenous studies units

It is in this context that the School of Behavioural and Social Sciences and Humanities offers Indigenous studies units to higher education students. Currently non-Indigenous staff teach the units, and there is some team teaching in all of the units offered. The AEC manager presents some lectures in specific units of study within the University of Ballarat, and the Centre is generally supportive of inclusion of Indigenous units at the University; but the reality is that the Centre has not been resourced to enable Indigenous staff members to engage in teaching in the advanced Indigenous history units. To promote future Indigenous involvement in the delivery of programs, a consultative process involving the AEC, the Ballarat Co-op and higher education staff has resulted in unit planning for a new Indigenous Health unit. This unit, Indigenous Health, was offered for the first time in the second semester of 2007 to students in the Bachelor of Nursing and in the Bachelor of Arts, and taught by existing staff members and external Indigenous educators and health professionals with practical experience. This unit has come about in the context of the Victorian Nursing Council's accreditation standards for Division 2 nurses that require the study of Indigenous health (Nurses Board of Victoria 2005, p. 19).

The University's Bachelor of Arts students can elect to study individual Indigenous studies units and the course allows for students the option of taking a minor sequence in Indigenous studies. Students in some courses offered by several other Schools (for example, the School of Education and the School of Business) are also able to elect to take one or more of the Indigenous studies units.

Five of the eight units on offer have been run for several years. These units comprise:

- Indigenous Culture an overview of theories of the origins of Aboriginal and Islander societies, and of elements of customary lifestyle;
- Anthropology of Australian Indigenous Art to acquaint students with the anthropology of the various forms of Aboriginal art;
- Indigenous History a survey of contact between Aboriginal and Islander societies and outside forces from 1600 to 1930 and of the effects of that contact;
- Aboriginal Affairs and Indigenous Activism a review of government policies and actions in Aboriginal Affairs and of Indigenous activism from 1930 to 2000;
- Indigenous Society in Contemporary Australia an appraisal of the diverse circumstances of contemporary Aboriginal and Islander societies since 2000.

These units were devised to offer a general introduction to Indigenous culture and history, taking into account that most of the students would have had little understanding of the material at the commencement of their studies. There is an emphasis on each student developing an initial understanding of Indigenous culture and then proceeding to study historical policies relating to Aboriginal and Islander people in chronological sequence, with advanced units dealing with Indigenous political responses. The units have proved popular and in response to student demand, additional units were developed and commenced in 2004 and 2005. These are:

White Law in Black Australia – an overview of the development of British, colonial and Australian laws and procedures affecting Indigenous people;

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• Myths and Massacres: the Historiography of Violence against Indigenous Australians
- a review of contested accounts of past interracial violence on the Australian frontier.

Taught within a comparatively small regional university with a necessarily limited number of staff, the School of Behavioural and Social Sciences and Humanities has enabled the number of Indigenous units it runs to be maximised by offering most of the Indigenous studies units on a two-year rotating basis.

The 'Myths and Massacres' unit

This unit introduces students to the concepts of historiography through examination of the debate over how to characterise the ways British colonists responded to Aborigines on the Australian frontier. Preparation of the new National Museum of Australia in the 1990s posed questions about how the nation was to remember Australia's frontier history. In contention was Australia's national record: was it based on shameful intentional violence perpetrated by whites on blacks, aimed at dispossession of the Indigenous people, or was there much to celebrate in terms of cultural accommodation and peaceful co-existence? What was the real nature of the relationships that developed between Indigenous Australians and the incoming British? The Museum opted to present the variety of opinions on these issues and entitled its exhibit 'Contested Frontiers' (Casey 2003, p. xi). Interest in the issue escalated, and the Museum hosted a forum on frontier conflict in December 2001. Among the forum's participants was Keith Windschuttle, who argued that the extent of frontier violence against Aborigines and Islanders had been much exaggerated by historians who had colluded in misrepresenting the frontier as a war zone and who had engaged in what he called the 'fabrication' of Aboriginal history (Windschuttle 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2002, 2003). The Myths and Massacres unit reviews this ongoing public debate and its consequences for reconciliation. It differs from the other Indigenous history units offered at the University of Ballarat in that it engages in analysis of recent historical writings, in addition to the review of past events. As such, it provides a way for students to engage in white studies, in the context of how historians (overwhelmingly white) have sought to construct the debate over interracial violence on the Australian frontier. It also presented Indigenous viewpoints in written and film texts.

As with all the University's units, the objectives of *Myths and Massacres* have been devised with a view to three areas: knowledge, skills and values. The skills objectives include enabling students to discern how evidence relates to argument; to identify and apply different theories in assessing historical records; to assess the contribution to historical understanding of oral tradition; to analyse political, social, cultural and economic motives which may influence national leaders; and to develop research, organisation and oral and written communication skills. The 'knowledge' objectives are that students will familiarise themselves with writing about the broad themes which have emerged in the historiography on frontier violence; develop some understanding of the contesting theories regarding the size of the Indigenous population prior to British occupation and of subsequent demographic change; gain awareness of how interpretations of historical writing express current political viewpoints; and study different views of the meaning of reconciliation and how reconciliation is understood to relate to respect for the preservation and marking of historical sites associated with past conflict.

The unit's objectives which relate to 'attitudes and values' are that students will appreciate the importance of places associated with violent clashes and accounts of those clashes in establishing personal and group identity; reflect on the importance of accuracy or meaning in reconstructing an event; value human rights and consider the range of measures which can be used to uphold them; and practise tolerance and be prepared to listen to alternative points of view.

This unit requires students to consider many accounts of extreme violence and inhumanity as they read various points of view advanced in debate about the evidence of

frontier massacres of Indigenous Australians. The unit content is offered over 13 weeks and covers four sub-themes:

- 1. The notion of historiography and the politics of history, using as an example the 'culture wars' between Reynolds and Windschuttle (see, for example, National Press Club 2001) and those who have commented on this debate (in particular, see Attwood 2005; Attwood & Foster (eds) 2003; Manne 2003);
- 2. Competing views of what can be considered to be evidence of massacres, given that there are different versions of events involving killings of Aborigines, for example, at Risdon Cove (1804), Bells Falls Gorge (1820s), Waterloo Creek (1838), and at Forrest River (1926);
- 3. How the process of reconstruction informed by historical records, oral tradition, historical imagination and contextual information takes place:
- 4. The significance of historical interpretation and commemoration for national identity and politics.

To accompany the lectures, Bain Attwood's and SG Foster's edited volume Frontier Conflict is used and also a series of readings has been compiled. This volume incorporates some of the most prominent articles concerning massacre histories selected from the considerable number of writings which have proliferated since the publication of Windschuttle's articles in Quadrant in 2000 (Windschuttle 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2000d). The reader includes works by McGuinness (2000), Windschuttle (2003) and Blainey (2003), each seeking to question what Windschuttle refers to as the 'orthodoxy' which maintains the view held by Reynolds that the Australian frontier was a war zone, with Aboriginal casualties far in excess of those of whites. In addition to selections from the work of Reynolds (2001a, 2001b), there are chapters and articles by Macintyre and Clark (2003), Boyce (2003) and Manne (2003, 2005), also opposing Windschuttle's position. Comparisons are made between the journalistic and polemic style of works such as The Black Resistance by Fergus Robinson and Barry York (1977) and Blood on the Wattle by Bruce Elder (2003), and on the other, the use of evidence and reasoning which is transparently constructed Waterloo Creek by Roger Millis (1994) and in the extensively researched 'Fantasy Island' by James Boyce (2003). A list of web sites and other materials is included in the student guide (University of Ballarat 2007b).

Students are challenged to consider the ways in which historians should approach oral accounts of past events and to review the importance of these accounts in reconstructions of massacres. Consideration is also given to the role of place names in perpetuating the memory of violence. The unit also makes use of many films, art works, poems, commemorative plaques and museum displays offering a range of interpretations of these events. Although most of the commentaries and histories have been written by non-Indigenous professional historians and journalists, many Indigenous people have responded to the Right's suggestions of Indigenous dependence and its revision of frontier conflict history by telling their understanding of the past. The unit reviewed Indigenous viewpoints about evidence and the importance of commemoration of specific massacres including the Myall Creek massacre (1838) (Bridge over the Myall Creek 2001), the La Grange massacre and subsequent punitive expeditions (1860s) (Frances & Scates 1989), the massacre at Mistake Creek (1915) (Patrick 2003), the Mowla Bluff massacre (1916) (Torres 2001), the Sturt Creek massacre of the 1920s (Desert healing 1999) and the Coniston massacres (1928) (The killing times 1985).

Some different forms of evidence were reviewed in class, such as the oral testimony relating to the McKenzie massacre on Bentinck Island (Kelly & Evans 1985) and the account of Victoria's native police given by William Thomas in 1854 (Thomas 1854). The readings included some discussions of how the interpretations represented in some commemorative monuments were revised in the light of new historical research (Frances & Scates 1989). The implications of competing interpretations of frontier violence for public history and national identity are considered in relation to the work of Hirst (2005) and Clendinnen (2006).

Extensive use was made of video materials throughout the unit. In the first week, the film, Alinta the Flame, the first episode of the Women of the Sun series (1983), was shown. This film, shot in Victoria, sought to depict the circumstances leading to a massacre of Aborigines in the 1820s. In following weeks, students were shown films which presented the protagonists of the 'history wars', televised debates between Windschuttle and Reynolds from Lateline (2001), at the National Press Club (2001) and the Sunday programme (2003). Excerpts were shown from other films, including The Killing Times (1985), Koorie: a will to win (1991), Here's my hand: a testimony to an Aboriginal memorial (1988), Island of Lies (1991), Black Man's Houses (1993), Frontier (1997), Desert Healing (1999), White Australia has a Black History (1999), The Road to Reconciliation (2000), Beneath Clouds (2002), Bridge over the Myall Creek (2001), The Tracker (2002) and Whispering in our Hearts (2003).

The unit also poses questions about whether there are patterns of frontier violence, accommodation, motives for violence and the extent of reportage of multiple killings. Students are advised of the existence of maps of massacre sites, such as that compiled for Victoria by the Koori Heritage Trust (n.d.) exhibition in 1991, and those by Dr John Morris (2005) listing locations and dates of massacres of Aborigines and Islanders and of Europeans throughout Australia. The importance of commemoration was considered, and students were shown how monuments themselves can be subject to revision in the light of historical investigation and shifting attitudes. It was noted that the efforts of the Indigenous people at Wybalenna to mark the graves of the Tasmanian people on Flinders Island had provoked such hatred amongst the non-Indigenous people of the Island that the markers had been destroyed in one night's rampage (Black Man's Houses 1993; Shakespeare 2004, p. 167).

Students were asked to consider their understanding of reconciliation and whether Australia is now divided between those who seek reconciliation and those who respond with denial of frontier deaths. In the light of the Canberra workshop on Reconciliation in June 2005, consideration was given to the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation's work on symbolism, and how political parties had backed different versions of what Reconciliation might constitute, while falling short of the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty. To supplement the review of the interpretations of Reconciliation, the students viewed footage of ceremonies to recognise and commemorate massacres at Coniston (*The Killing Times* 1985), at the Great Sandy Desert (*Whispering in our Hearts* 2003) and at Sturt Creek (*Desert Healing* 1999) and considered the ongoing impact of this history of violence on the people in those communities.

Student responses to the unit

Students who elected to study in this unit may have already developed opinions on the history wars debate, but they are asked to try to consider arguments with an open mind. In this way, they are encouraged to develop familiarity with a range of viewpoints rather than abruptly dismissing arguments they see as contrary to their views. Students were asked to reflect on patterns in the way in which positions were constructed; for example, arguments which minimised Aboriginal deaths were often seen to be promoted by writers who championed competitive individualism and who sought to undermine claims for Indigenous sovereignty and land rights. Students were asked to consider the importance and possibility of historical accuracy in historical writing about massacres of Aborigines. The students were asked to consider what evidence and analysis they would regard as 'trustworthy'. They were encouraged to conclude what they each personally believed to be likely, significant and meaningful – and to consider how their own arguments could be more persuasive as a result of their study. Despite the repugnant nature of many of the events discussed, the unit adopted a standpoint that there would be no taboo topics.

These were challenges that the students frequently found very difficult. Several found the unit too demanding and were unprepared to consider the ideological assumptions underpinning the history warriors' arguments. Many felt that the merits of the historical

accounts could only be assessed if there could be reference to a body of indisputable facts. missing the point that such 'facts' do not exist independent of the historian who interprets evidence. Some of these students sought guidance on the 'right' interpretation to place on sources and the resulting debate. For some, Windschuttle's stance was so contrary to their understandings and values that they dismissed his arguments as racist and inconsequential. resisting any serious discussion of his findings. Thus they remained somewhat bemused at the level of media attention he had drawn. Some sought solutions through assessing the inconsistencies, merits and the extent of independent corroboration available for particular views. While sometimes quick to take up a position in response to the televised history wars debates (Lateline 2001; National Press Club 2001) and to televised interviews (Sunday 2001). students tended to be more cautious and uncertain about the written works they consulted. Previously they may have assessed a printed (and most often White) history text according to its accessibility (whether in terms of language, layout or photographic evidence), its clarity in exposition of chronological events, or even its physical existence as a publication. In the course of the unit, many developed more critical awareness of the role and types of documentary, oral and physical evidence.

This was clearly an unfamiliar and discomforting journey for several of the students. A standard anonymous evaluation survey was administered to the 23 students who had completed the unit at the end of the semester in 2005 when the unit was first offered. Students commented positively on the unit's design and content, rating it at an average of 4.5 on a 5-point scale. Some students commented that their understanding had been enhanced by the use of video materials, maps and on-line lecture materials in the teaching of the unit. One noted, 'Very useful and very important. Not always easy to deal with, but fair and even opinions are given. Even when it is not so easy to do so'.

In 2007, 25 students elected to study in the unit, but 28% of them did not submit the required final essay. Some students clearly found it difficult to conceptualise the notion of historiography and to critique historical accounts. In 2007, only five students completed the student evaluation of teaching, rating the unit at 4.8 on the 5-point scale. One student commented, 'showing video/DVD of re-enactments of events of historical significance; footage (documentaries) really interesting and informative; comprehensive unit reader'. Another observed the poor attendance at the lecture at which the evaluation was conducted and suggested, 'mandatory attendance? Unfair if people pass when they don't turn up'. This suggests that those students who did choose to grapple with the materials were aware of the challenge they had engaged in and that they may have wanted assurance that they would be credited for their efforts.

Conclusion

The students found the unit's subject matter new, shocking, challenging and absorbing. Early discussion centred on the terminology used by commentators and in common use – oppositional labels such as 'us' and 'them', 'invasion' and 'settlement', 'whites' and 'blacks', 'Indigenous' and 'non-Indigenous', 'possession' and 'dispossession' were reviewed.

Although many students had initially been either uninformed that there had been a debate over Australia's frontier history, or else inclined to dismiss unquestioningly all of Windschuttle's claims and to accept all of Reynolds', by the end of their study their written work demonstrated some deeper understanding of the complexity of the debate, of the varieties of history and of the interaction between history and politics. They appreciated that while most of the protagonists in the public debate were non-Indigenous, many Indigenous people had taken an active part in contributing historical records, in writing their histories or in filmmaking.

Students had been asked to consider different types of evidence in context and to examine how commentators and historians sought to corroborate their interpretations. What constituted 'good' and 'bad' history was not as clear as the students may have initially thought

when they commenced study in the unit; but they gained much greater awareness of the political and personal motives behind historical writing and they better understood the consequences of historical interpretations on Indigenous politics.

Students were also challenged to assess the degree of importance they place upon historical accuracy concerning the magnitude of killing on the frontier and whether this could influence their notions of reconciliation and justice. Although they were exposed to different viewpoints, no prescriptive position or easy answer was offered; students were encouraged to make their own discoveries and assessments.

Historian Peter Read has commented that 'non-Aboriginal people in the 1990s began 'to think more about our own status as non-indigenous citizens who do not belong here in the way that Aboriginal people do' (Read 1998, p. 174). Similarly, as a non-Indigenous teacher, I am always acutely aware that my experience is limited and culture-bound; I could not 'belong' to the teaching of Indigenous cultural studies. I cannot offer students any personal account of Indigenous culture, nor can I give an Indigenous viewpoint of history, or a personal insight into how that history has shaped Indigenous identity. Acutely aware of these limitations, I have nonetheless been interested to try to further students' understanding of Indigenous history writing and to develop their critical appreciation of the dilemmas of interpreting the past.

Can there be a balance between compassion inspired by the desire to uphold the primacy of shared humanity and the dispassionate accuracy demanded by a fact-driven approach to the historical discipline? Does the desire to raise these issues with students excuse a non-Indigenous academic's involvement in teaching this subject matter? Read asks 'How, if at all, can the rest of us emotionally share the same country from which Aboriginal people have been dispossessed?' (Read 1998, p. 174). Following this inquiry, it can be observed that a non-Indigenous teacher engaged in presenting a unit of the history wars is an apt exemplar for the overwhelmingly White discourse on the subject. Ideally, the unit should be taught by an Indigenous person or by a collaborative cross-cultural team; in fact, the University has not resourced its Indigenous studies area to attract Indigenous staff members. By offering this unit, it can be argued that I perpetuate the disempowerment of Indigenous Australians by denying a role for an Indigenous educator. Although the unit – and the other Indigenous offerings at the University – is offered without any opposition from the University of Ballarat's AEC, and although it may be cast as a unit exploring White as well as Indigenous studies, it is still unsatisfactory that the Indigenous viewpoints offered in the unit are in the form of audiovisual materials which are interspersed with lecture material. The unit draws students' attention to the problematic nature of the non-Indigenous interpretation of frontier and fringe intercultural violence and its legacy, just as it draws my attention to the need for more institutional and personal support for Indigenous academics and commentators in all universities, including those based in regions with relatively low Indigenous populations.

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