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CONFLICT AND CULTURE
A discourse analysis of public texts on an Indigenous New Zealand tertiary institution

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

This current project begins with a brief history of Māori education since colonisation, and creates a picture of TWOA and its students and the struggle they undertook to develop into a first class education institution. Then, using Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, I offer some deconstructive possibilities which provide alternative interpretations of the media discourse that ignited the public's vilification of the institute. I describe what transpired over the time of 2005-2006 and critically examine and analyse the language used to express the two-party attack on TWOA and its Tūmuaki, Rongo Wetere. I find that the language used by politicians and media commentators positioned TWOA as an inefficient and corrupt Māori institution in need of Pākeha (NZ European) governance and management. Through an investigation of the selection and promulgation of particular tropes, the interests of the political elite are shown as serving to marginalise the institution, limit its growth and channel its students into Pākeha educational institutions. The Wānanga brought tertiary education to those New Zealanders who had hitherto been excluded or who had failed in mainstream education. Its astonishing success caused its decline.

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FOREWORD

In New Zealand's parliament in February 2005, the Honourable Ken Shirley, MP, accused Te Wānanga o Aotearoa (TWOA) of corruption, nepotism and mismanagement of funds. Shirley's attack began a year-long investigation by the Office of the Auditor General, resulting in the reconstitution of the Wānanga Council (imposed by the Crown), the resignation of the Tūmuaki (Chief Executive Officer) of TWOA and the occupation of the institution by a Crown Manager. The discussion in parliament and the national press fermented public concern, resulting in severely reduced government funding and capped student enrolments with a subsequent reduction in the programmes TWOA was able to offer. Some students were obliged to seek education in institutions they had previously avoided or withdrew from education altogether. The reorganisation, restructuring and downsizing of TWOA was completed in August 2006.

Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, at that time New Zealand's largest tertiary education provider, is a Māori education institute that provides for Māori (and others) who seek an education that is not based on Pākehā practices. For some, this is because the mainstream system had failed them. The thesis began as a research idea examining the experiences of senior staff at TWOA as they encountered the everyday difficulties of significant political and press interference in the operation and delivery of education from TWOA. However, this project's original intention and design did not gain approval from the Massey University Ethics Committee in case allowing the senior staff of TWOA to speak brought either TWOA or Massey into disrepute.

As a senior staff member of TWOA during the investigation and trial of TWOA by media, I listened to my colleagues talk about their anger, frustrations and fears and the abuse they experienced from the public. During this period, staff driving Wānanga cars were run off the road, some were assaulted and many were subjected to verbal or physical abuse or spat on. One staff member reported having the car she was driving attacked and damaged by a group of

men at a service station resulting in her refusal to use an identifiable Wānanga car again. Crisis meetings by senior staff considered the removal of signage from vehicles and counseling for stressed staff. Staff and students were advised not to wear clothing that identified their having any connection with Te Wānanga o Aotearoa.

I wanted to move away from the political rhetoric and talk about the impact of the politicians' and press discourses on my colleagues' personal and working lives. I hoped to give them a voice to speak about how it was for them working in an institution which was vilified by the public. As has been Māori experience since colonisation, our voices were silenced and this project segued into a story about how the rhetoric of politics led to a campaign of attacks against Te Wānanga o Aotearoa.

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