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# IS THIS PROFESSOR MĀORI?

## Personal reflections on identity in academia in Aotearoa New Zealand

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### Abstract

This article has been inspired by "Why Isn't My Professor Māori?" (McAllister et al., 2019), an article which appeared in this journal and addressed the under-representation of, and inequities facing, Māori academic staff in universities in Aotearoa New Zealand. I present some personal reflections and raise some questions with regard to academics with Māori heritage who struggle to identify as Māori. I also describe some of the discomfort of being in the "middle ground" of cultural identity and how this has come about, and argue that we need to engage with such troubled identities and histories if we are to decolonise ourselves and our universities.

### Keywords

Māori, Pākehā, universities, academics, cultural identity

### A challenge

"Why Isn't My Professor Māori?" proclaims the title of a recent article appearing in this journal (McAllister et al., 2019). I had heard of the article before it was photocopied and placed on the coffee table at work recently by a Pākehā graduate student. There was a note asking staff to read it and think about what it had to say concerning the very disappointing under-representation of Māori staff, particularly at senior levels, in the universities of Aotearoa New Zealand. It was compelling in the evidence it presented and the argument it made for a fundamental culture change in the way we teach, conduct research, and address the inequities facing Māori staff.

My first reaction was that I was delighted that a Pākehā graduate student had not only sought out, read and been inspired by this article, but also taken action to provoke a reaction from staff. I believe we need change in our institutions to embrace mātauranga Māori in all we do. We need to change our attitudes, systems and processes, and our staffing. I earnestly hope that this article will be a challenge that our universities will face and embrace.

Yet there is also a profoundly personal dimension to this challenge. For some of us, there is unease and discomfort, as there should be. My second reaction to seeing the article on the coffee table was to think to myself: "But I am Māori and I am a professor—and there are others like me. Only the students don't know that. I don't speak te reo, I am not steeped in tikanga Māori, I don't look Māori and I would be very uncomfortable—and worse, a fraud—presenting myself as a Māori professor who could speak as, and for, Māori."

### Ko wai hoki au?/Who really am I?

I write this in response to Tara McAllister et al.'s (2019) article as an attempt to question myself,

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my identity and my role. This article is an exploration of the complex and unsettling space between cultures. It strongly supports the call within McAllister et al.'s (2019) article for universities to move beyond the rhetoric of equity and diversity and make real change. But it asks that we take the conversation further—that we examine our personal identities and commitments.

I am descended from Tahu Pōtiki, the eponymous ancestor of Kāi Tahu iwi, through my great-great-great-grandmother Wharerimu Brown, on my father's side. I have always known of my ties to Kāi Tahu and Wharerimu, largely thanks to my Pākehā mother, who maintained a handwritten family tree showing the burgeoning family that resulted from the union in the 1820s of Wharerimu—quaintly annotated on the family tree as "a Māori woman of high rank"—and Robert Brown, a whaler from Australia. We found later that Wharerimu appears in the 1848 Blue Book (Ngai Tahu Maori Trust Board, 1967) which was used as a definitive census of the Ngāi Tahu population at the time of colonisation.

As well as the Māori side of my ancestry, I learned from my mother of her Danish side, of ancestors who settled in the North Island in the 1870s; of an English side, including a publican in the Central Otago goldfields; and of a German connection from settlers to Moutere in the 1850s. In time, some of the more colourful details of the wider family history were revealed: of bigamy and desertion, of step-parents with favourite—and less favoured—children, of a fatal firearm accident, of men going to war, but also of love and fun and connection.

## Becoming an academic

My upbringing in Nelson was completely Pākehā. In the New Zealand of the 1950s and 1960s, memories of the Great Depression and "the War" were still fresh. I was born to the baby boomer generation. We were taught how lucky we were, how well we treated "our Māoris", and how, if we worked hard, we could get a good job and live a comfortable life. Education was free, there were home visits from the family GP, and the welfare state functioned. When my father, a schoolteacher, died in his fifties, my mother could get by on thrift and his government superannuation. We knew neither wealth nor hardship. Looking back, there was a complacency and veiled hubris about our country in the 1960s. We believed ourselves to live in a just and egalitarian idyll of a country, even though it continued to mask deep injustices and enduring inequalities. It was a country apparently liberal and progressive yet stultifyingly conservative and reactionary.

There was privilege—privilege that we did not acknowledge at the time. I was able to go to school and be enthused by a curriculum that reinforced rather than questioned my embryonic views of the world. Our history classes, which I loved, covered New Zealand as well as the inevitable monarchs of England. I read of a history of New Zealand that I recognised later as being influenced by Keith Sinclair (1959) and the Auckland school of history. It spoke of the progress and triumph of liberalism: of votes for women, of the break-up of the large estates in the South Island by the Liberal Government in the 1890s, of enlightened Māori leaders such as Sir Āpirana Ngata, of egalitarianism, of old age pensions, of Michael Joseph Savage and of the labour movement. I also loved geography: learning about our landscapes, glacial valleys and mountains, longshore drift and occluded fronts, our regions, and the different worlds over the oceans. It all reinforced the view that were indeed fortunate. This was God's Own Country: blessed, comfortable, safe and just.

Through familiarity, enthusiasm and luck, I did well at school. I went to university—studying and living in relative comfort with the help of a teacher's studentship—and left with a master's degree, no debt and a scholarship to pursue a doctorate in the United Kingdom. The scholarship, provided by the then University Grants Committee, provided me with full fees and a living allowance overseas. A series of short-term academic positions in Fiji and Australia eventually paved the way for an academic career in New Zealand universities. The academic environment I entered in the 1980s was overwhelmingly male, white and middle-class. Many of my new colleagues were from Britain or North America or, like me, had travelled there to gain a doctorate. I joined that club easily, and I have to admit that that very club—loose and informal, yet unconsciously exclusionary and privileged—helped me along the way with its networks and familiar ways of working so that appointments and promotions have come my way. I have stayed long enough to gain professorial rank, and I am now approaching retirement.

## A changing world

Throughout all this time, of course, this country changed. The Vietnam War, the Springbok Tour, Bastion Point, the proposed raising of Lake Manapouri, schemes to fell West Coast beech forests and Dame Whina Cooper's hikoi all punctured the complacency and hubris of the postwar

bubble. When David Lange's Labour Government finally rolled out the Waitangi Treaty Claims process in the 1980s, it unleashed a long overdue recognition that the deep injustices of colonisation had remained and had not been addressed and remedied by our supposedly egalitarian and benevolent welfare state.

In academia too, we were being challenged. In their different ways, Ranginui Walker, Linda Tuhiwai-Smith and Mason Durie all called out, questioned and offered alternatives to the way Māori history, language, culture, wellbeing and aspirations have been researched and portrayed by others. Tuhiwai-Smith's (2013) work, in particular, has jolted the consciousness of those who would seek to continue to appropriate, distort and exploit Māori knowledge. Similarly, in the discipline of geography we have been mindful of the late Evelyn Stokes's (1987) warning:

> Be careful Pakeha. Tread warily. This is not your history or geography. Do not expect all to be revealed to you. You must be prepared to serve a long apprenticeship of learning on the marae. You must know the language and the culture. You must acquire he ngakau Maori. You must show respect for the tapu of knowledge. (p. 121)

## Personal reactions

My reaction to these challenges has been to adopt what Martin Tolich (2002) has called "Pākehā paralysis" (p. 164). Although proud of my whakapapa and happy to teach my children about their rich, if distant, Māori heritage, I have not felt competent or safe to be anything other than an observer of Māori scholarship. In the lecture rooms, I have not felt able to talk about tikanga, to embrace te ao Māori or much less to represent Māori views and knowledge. Furthermore, the prospect of conducting research on subjects that impinge on Māori lives could not be entertained.

My unwillingness to engage in Māori-related research and teaching has not come out of shame for my whakapapa, nor a strong recognition of the need to promote Māori scholarship and scholars—quite the reverse. Rather, the deep reluctance has emerged from a lack of competence—the very things that Evelyn Stokes identified. I have also not wanted to be a fraudster, passing myself off as Māori, when I patently lack any legitimacy as such, beyond a genealogy to a remarkable woman living on Whenua Hou. Playing the Māori card is a dangerous thing: one can easily, and justifiably, be accused of gaining reputation by virtue signalling and accessing other benefits such as funding and preferential treatment by claiming the rights of Māori, whilst simultaneously knowing very little of he ngākau Māori or serving a marae apprenticeship but living in, and gaining advantages from, a world of Pākehā privilege. Perhaps in this uncomfortable space, for a person both Māori and Pākehā, being an academic identifying as Māori is a scary proposition. There are many dangers, there is very little confidence, and there are potential accusations from all sides. Many of us prefer to be quiet, to look at our feet, to just be Pākehā.

## Middle ground

In this sense, we might gain insight from the work of Richard White (1998, 2010). His work on the *middle ground* between Indigenous peoples and early Europeans in the Great Lakes region of North America has done much to help us understand how cultural identity is shaped through interaction in the spaces between peoples. Yet we might suggest that middle ground is conceptually not just geographical space or a series of events where interaction takes place between cultures. Middle ground can also be seen in history and identities, where resistance, confrontation, negotiation and collaboration take place in the way families and individuals shape concepts of themselves between the cultures that they may have genealogical claims to. Identities are shaped—sometimes unconsciously, sometimes actively and deliberately—in the spaces between cultures.

The silence and discomfort of the space that many of us occupy between Māori and Pākehā mean that it is common to stay in the Pākehā domain—to applaud Māori assertiveness and success from the sidelines but keep our identities largely to ourselves and let "proper Māori", those with te reo and those immersed and confident in te ao Māori, take the lead (Gillon et al., 2019). However, fortunately, some of us have been helped by our iwi.

## Iwi leadership

The Ngāi Tahu Treaty Settlement in 1996 marked a turning point for members of the iwi. Much has been made of the economic aspects to the settlement and the commercial success that has followed, with accumulation of a substantial iwi asset base. Yet, less noticed but of great importance has been the social investment by the tribal council of Kāi Tahu, Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu. Funding has allowed marae to be renovated and enlarged; there is a strong whakapapa unit; and, following the leadership of kaumātua such as Trevor Howse, there is a cultural mapping project in place—

Kā Huru Manu. Researcher Helen Brown is prominent in this project, gathering and restoring the place names and stories attached to the land. We also see some Ngāi Tahu-specific scholarship emerging in the literature (e.g., O'Regan, 2001; Wanhalla, 2009; Williams, 2012).

It was in this context that I attended with my whānau a reunion of the descendants of Wharerimu Brown in February 2019 at Te Rau Aroha Marae at Motupōhue. There were many familiar faces, including the cousins we knew growing, but many new faces from branches originating four generations ago about whom we knew little. Histories were shared, whakapapa were uncovered, memories revived, stories told, waiata practised and kai consumed. The iwi had made it possible. The welcome was warm and the embrace of our tūpuna palpable. At Te Rau Aroha, the mark of artist Cliff Whiting is clear. His beautiful designs adorn the marae and in the wharenui named after Tahu Pōtiki, the founder of Kāi Tahu, there are carvings of the founding women of Whenua Hou, including my tupuna, Wharerimu. To add to the poignancy of this physical manifestation of our link to the iwi and the rohe, we learned of the whakapapa. Until then, my connection had been as far back as Wharerimu in the early 19th century but there, before us, was a line of descent that linked her back 17 generations to Tahu Pōtiki himself. There was for us a direct link to Takitimu waka; there was a network of links through whakapapa to so many others: to Kāi Tahu and Kāti Mamoe, through Tahu Pōtiki to Ngāti Porou, and even back across Te-Moana-Nui-a-Kiwa to Tahiti and Samoa.

In one weekend, the welcome at Te Rau Aroha —and all the knowledge and aroha—did more to define my identity than a generation of travelling and reading. I now know I have a Māori bloodline that tangibly stretches far further back in time than any connection I have to Europe. I have a history that can thank an oral culture for its survival far longer than the written records of that continent. And I have a sense of belonging to a culture and a place far out of proportion to the one-thirty-second fraction of my blood. Furthermore, the generosity of welcome at Awarua stood in stark contrast to the impossibility of me obtaining a passport from Germany or Denmark or the United Kingdom, despite the arithmetically stronger blood ties there.

What this experience has done for me is help provide some routes through the troubled intercultural space of academia. I have realised that I can contribute to the teaching of Māori geography, for example. This is not through presenting a singular Māori view, nor trying to represent others. Rather, I have realised that telling the stories of Kāi Tahu—about that which I am connected to and am becoming increasingly aware of—reveals much about wider processes of colonisation.

## Relearning history

There is mana in that history. There is the way the different strands of the iwi—Waitaha, Kāti Mamoe and Ngāi Tahu—travelled to, explored, fought over and settled Te Waipounamu. There are records of how our ancestors learned to live in strange environments where the kumara struggled, where living off the land meant seasonal movement and careful management of resources such as the tītī, where the land was criss-crossed with routes through the mountains and dotted with mahinga kai and whenua tapu. Thanks to Kā Huru Manu, the Ngāi Tahu cultural mapping project, we can now revive those place names and begin to understand from them the ways of life and resources that sustained generations of people. Then, when European contact came, we can see a period of remarkable assertiveness by Māori leaders: whalers and sealers were carefully managed, and there was a system of spatial management that saw them confined to offshore islands such as Ruapuke and Whenua Hou. Then there was flourishing trade, including shipbuilding by Māori, supplying from Awarua the new arrivals and the Australian colonies with wheat and pigs and potatoes. Angela Wanhalla's (2009) wonderful work *(In)visible Sight* reinterprets Kāi Tahu history to show the active and strategic agency displayed by our tūpuna in managing, interacting with, and seeking benefits from Pākehā.

But then came dispossession and decline. Crown purchases of Ngāi Tahu territory—the Kemp purchase of 1848, the Murihiku purchase of 1853 and the Rakiura purchase of 1864 following the Otago purchase of 1844—resulted in well over half the area of Te Wai Pounamu going to Crown ownership in return for a total of £13,000 and a few small reserves. For Wharerimu and the whānau of her five children, and others, there was an area set aside at Taieri: 935 hectares of largely south-facing land that was either steep and hilly or flood-prone. Over subsequent generations, thanks to poverty and the Māori land laws which allowed for sale of reserve land, it was largely lost. Now the descendants of Wharerimu have a claim to a virtually unknown small plot of land somewhere in the Catlins—shared by many hundred *de jure* owners and unable to be managed properly—and fading stories of life at the kaika in Maitāpapa near

Henley on the Taieri River where a family urupā is being threatened by erosion. This is our story of colonisation that has stripped away the land, the ways of life and our cultural hearth. It is a story that is repeated all over Aotearoa in many different ways, and which our students need to learn about. They also need to learn about survival and revival, how our geographies are being reclaimed and our histories given life.

There is much in what we can tell and rediscover about our whenua, and I believe what some of us can do in this regard is to help our students better understand contemporary Aotearoa, in aspects such as resource management and conservation, or identity and culture. I have been able to start on this path in a very small way with our first-year geography students, but it is still rather marginal to the curriculum. The teaching and learning of Māori geography has some good foundations (Gale, 1996; Kiddle et al., 2020; Mokaraka-Harris et al., 2018; Murton, 2012; Parsons et al., 2017; Stokes, 1987), but there is much more to be done. Finally, I feel that I have a basis on which I can engage in Māori geography, one which is grounded in my own incomplete, imperfect and specific connections to place and iwi.

## Acknowledging the dark corners of history

However, with opportunity and emerging confidence also comes a new set of doubts and uncertainties. In assuming the right to use our histories, we also have to accept the responsibility to do so honestly, even when that takes us to some dark corners. My family histories are patchy. They are dotted with stories of hardship and success, progress and setbacks. Uncomfortably, I find myself asking questions of my ancestors—and myself—that I know can never be answered satisfactorily. I know I feel whakamā for some of the things they and I did or might have done. Most obviously, I am descended from whalers and sealers who plundered to the point of the extinction. Others mined gold or cleared bush in ways that destroyed the environment. Much harder though to comprehend are the decisions made and actions taken with regard to identity. Why did my ancestors sell the land at Taieri? Why did they seemingly choose to bring their children up as Pākehā? Was there a chance my much-loved paternal grandfather—the great-grandson of Wharerimu and later a teacher and school inspector in the interwar years—was a participant in the practice of suppressing the speaking of te reo Māori in schools? How could my father say disparaging things about Māori when he was, as a child, a member of what was identified as a group of "Māori boys" swimming in the Taieri River at Henley? When and how in my family did Māori become *them* and not *us*? Why did I not make more of an effort to learn te reo in my adult life? Why did I engage in what could be seen as colonising research in Fiji as part of my academic career?

These bring questions back on ourselves. It is easy to blame universities—as they should be blamed—for not taking much more positive action to hire and promote Māori staff and recognise and support mātauranga Māori. It is much harder to shine the spotlight on ourselves and our histories, and it is natural to engage in self-preservation or protection of the mana of our tūpuna. We can revel in tales of resistance and heroism and we can appreciate the insidious and irresistible nature of social and cultural colonisation. But we must also recognise tales of conscious collaboration, assimilation and denial—and fluid identities (McIntosh, 2005). In that, we must also engage in emerging debates regarding being and becoming Pākehā (Amundsen, 2018; Bell, 2017; King, 1985; Newton, 2009). We in the middle have been colonised—but we have also been colonisers.

Furthermore, being Māori, and being a Māori professor, in a university environment is not always a straightforward *fact*, defined simply by whakapapa. We who choose to acknowledge our whakapapa have a duty to be identified, to do what we can—however imperfect and stuttering that might be—to promote mātauranga Māori, to persuade our institutions to change, and to support our Māori colleagues.

I contend that such steps are difficult but essential to take. There will be mistakes, suspicion, resistance and debate. These uncertainties and discomfort reflect a wider story of Aotearoa. Too often we construct our debates in terms of the Māori-Pākehā binary. Many in this country—and in academia—occupy a middle ground. Thankfully, there are some who can straddle both worlds and excel in both. They are our leaders. For many of us, though, the middle ground, the space between, is messy, scary and fraught with danger. Inevitably, many have retreated and will retreat to the safer Pākehā side. And, as the generations pass, there will be many more who look to their Māori whakapapa as an ever more distant connection, with ever diminishing ethnic arithmetic four, five or more generations back, and without easy reconnection and learning.

## Looking inward to look forward

This article was inspired by the call of McAllister et al. (2019) to decolonise academia in Aotearoa. Those authors pointed to the need for our universities to "commit to, but also initiate, significant actions to recruit, retain, support and promote Māori scholars within the academy" (McAllister et al., 2019, p. 236). Fundamental institutional reform is critical. However, I contend that there is also a challenge for many of us in academia to decolonise ourselves and our identities. Layers of history have moulded the identities of those of us in the middle ground in ways which have made dominant the Pākehā identities and narratives and submerged our Māori identities and histories. We appear, behave, are comfortable and have thrived as Pākehā. Yet, unless we acknowledge, learn about, and talk about what also makes us Māori, accepting and embracing the fear, the complexity and the potential shame of deeds in the past, and the discomfort that lack of cultural competence and confidence brings in the present, we cannot challenge our students and our institutions to recognise the range and complexity of what it is to be Māori. If we remain silent and deny our whakapapa and our histories, however uncomfortable and incomplete they may be, or listen to those who might tell us that we are not Māori, we become complicit in continuing processes of colonisation.

## Glossary

| | |
|---|---|
| Aotearoa | New Zealand; lit., "land of the long white cloud" |
| aroha | love |
| Awarua | region between the Mataura and Oreti Rivers, Southland, South Island |
| he ngākau Māori | a Māori heart; Māori attitudes and feelings |
| hikoi | march, protest march |
| iwi | tribe |
| kai | food |
| kaika | Kāi Tahu dialect for "kainga", i.e., settlement |
| Kāi Tahu/Ngāi Tahu | prominent iwi of the South Island |
| Kāti Mamoe | iwi absorbed within Kāi Tahu |
| kaumatua, kaumātua | an elder, elders |
| kumara | sweet potato |
| mahinga kai | food-gathering site |
| Maitāpapa | Māori settlement on the Taieri River near Henley, South Otago, South Island |
| mana | intrinsic and heritage value |
| Māori | Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa |
| marae | communal meeting place; usually consists of a wharenui, dining hall and other amenities |
| mātauranga Māori | Māori knowledge and understandings |
| Motupōhue | location near Bluff, Southland, South Island |
| Moutere | river and locality in Te Tai o Aorere, Tasman, South Island |
| Murihiku | originally the lands south of the Waitaki River, now Southland. South Island; lit. "tail of the land" |
| Ngāti Porou | iwi of Te Tai Rāwhiti, the East Coast region of the North Island |
| Pākehā | New Zealanders identifying as being of primarily European ancestry |
| Rakiura | Stewart Island |
| rohe | area, region |
| Ruapuke | island in Foveaux Strait, between the South Island and Stewart Island |
| Tahu Pōtiki | the tribal founder of Kāi Tahu; also the name of the wharenui at Te Rau Aroha Marae |
| Taieri | river and coastal plain in South Otago, South Island |
| Takitimu waka | ancestral migratory canoe of Tahu Pōtiki |
| tapu | sacredness |
| te ao Māori | the Māori world |
| Te-Moana-Nui-a-Kiwa | the Pacific Ocean |
| te reo Māori | the Māori language |
| Te Waipounamu | the South Island |
| tikanga Māori | Māori customs, values and practices |
| tītī | muttonbird/sooty shearwater, *Puffinus griseus* |
| tupuna, tūpuna | ancestor, ancestors |
| urupā | burial ground |
| waiata | songs |
| Waitaha | tribe absorbed within Kāi Tahu |
| whakamā | ashamed |

| | |
|---|---|
| whakapapa | genealogy, ancestral connections |
| whānau | nuclear and extended families |
| wharenui | ancestral meeting house |
| whenua | land |
| Whenua Hou | island to the west of Rakiura |
| whenua tapu | sacred land |

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