

# COMMENTARY: “OUR REFLECTIONS ON IDENTITY, GENDER AND TRANSFORMING ACTION”

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## A lesson from place

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## Abstract

This paper explores the cultural interplay between Indigenous women from one geographic locality being on and within the locality of the women of another locality—in this case, Whakatāne, Aotearoa. The authors consider identity, gender and place within the processes of transformation and decolonisation. They argue that women need to be involved in ways that restore their power as women and ensure their rightful place. The authors draw on the female ancestor Wairaka and her courage to argue that Indigenous women need to respond, change and adapt to the places in which they live. They argue that decolonisation needs to include action and possibilities for Māori and Indigenous Australian women.

## Keywords

Indigenous, Australia, Māori, Aotearoa, women, place Whakatāne

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## Introduction

We offer honour and acknowledgement to Ngāti Awa, the people of the land and waters of the Whakatāne area of the Eastern Bay of Plenty, Aotearoa New Zealand, where this paper was conceived, conceptualised and developed. This is a place we have all visited and where we have dwelled for varying periods of time. Our times together have inspired, motivated and nourished us in both our individual and collective works. Our relationships have been maintained and strengthened through meetings and at the Māori and Indigenous (MAI) Doctoral Conference, 4–6 November 2011 at Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi, Whakatāne.

We begin this paper with the story of Wairaka, one of Ngāti Awa's female ancestors who is embedded within the Whakatāne landscape and history (*The Lady on the Rock*, n.d.). There is a statue of Wairaka on a large rock within the Whakatāne River. A full-sized replica of the Mataatua Waka and the Mataatua Waka Memorial are on the banks of the Whakatāne River. We use Wairaka's story as a backdrop for our sharing as Indigenous women from other lands, who came to dwell within the homelands of Ngāti Awa.

Wairaka was one of the women who travelled to Aotearoa from Hawaiiki, on the Mataatua Waka (canoe) captained by Toroa. Wairaka was Toroa's daughter. The Mataatua Waka came to shore in the mouth of the Whakatāne River, where the township of Whakatāne stands today. Once on shore, the men went up the cliffs just above the shore line where they could see all the surrounding land. The women and children stayed on the shore.

The Whakatāne River is a tidal inlet and, as time went by, the water level started to rise—something that the people of the Mataatua Waka would not have known. As the water level rose, the Mataatua Waka, which was filled with all of their possessions, began to drift, heading down the river towards the ocean on

the outgoing tide. When Wairaka saw their Waka adrift, it was well on its way down river. She realised that there were no men around as they had gone to scout out their new land base. There were only children and women on the shore. She dived into the water and swam out to the Mataatua Waka. This was not easy, given the currents of the Whakatāne River.

Once Wairaka reached the Mataatua, she climbed in. At that point she faced a cultural dilemma: “Māori tradition forbade the right of women to paddle the great canoes” (*The Lady on the Rock*, n.d.). As the only person on the Mataatua Waka, she either needed to follow the custom of her people and not paddle—which would mean that the Waka and Wairaka herself would be lost to the ocean—or she could, in this instance, in this new place, driven by circumstance, do something about it. It is said that Wairaka stood in the bows of the Waka, raised her head and cried “Kia Whakatāne au I ahau!” which means “I will become man!” This allowed her to take on the role of a man in the Mataatua Waka. In doing so, she could pick up a paddle and bring the Mataatua Waka back to the shore. Wairaka battled against the elements to save the canoe; she also adjusted her cultural framing as a woman to save herself and the possessions of her people. This is how the town of Whakatāne got its name.

We share the story of Wairaka, not to encourage women to become like men, but to highlight how we as women can take back our power and assert ourselves as women within our communities. We can draw on the actions of Wairaka and the women ancestors in our histories, to show ourselves how to use the power of our Indigenous knowledge. We can learn about ways to respond and adapt to change in the period in which we live. We can use their courage to confront the negative legacy of colonialism that still affects Indigenous communities today (Fredericks, 2010a; Jenkins & Pihama, 2001; Sunseri, 2011). We can draw on their courage to become empowered and centred within our communities and not just

sit back and allow men (or institutions, governments or other entities) to decide for us. This includes Māori and Indigenous Australian men. We can think about how we, as women, can be involved in our people's movements and in the transforming processes that are taking place to be once again the self-determining peoples that we were. We can reclaim the powerful places and spaces we enjoyed before colonisation in a contemporary way (Fredericks, 2010a).

In our reflection on Wairaka, we are not saying that we want to restore the former order and have the same roles of our ancestors. Instead, we are saying that we need to renew some of the gender roles and restore gender balance within our communities while we undertake the transforming and self-determining work. In order for this to happen, we need to confront some of the gender imbalances that have been introduced amongst our peoples as a result of colonisation. We understand that decolonisation needs to also include action and possibilities for women.

### Honouring ourselves as women

As Indigenous women, we bring our Indigeneity to where we are, and to where we live, dwell and work. Our Indigeneity is not “left at the gate” or “the edge of town” when we go somewhere. As Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000) wrote when referring to her work representing an Indigenous standpoint within Australian feminism, “My role as an academic analyst is inextricable from my embodiment as an Indigenous woman” (p. 16). Moreton-Robinson argues that she cannot separate her Aboriginal self from her academic-analyst self. Indigeneity implies certain assumptions about how one sees the world—in the same way that all cultures have assumptions related to how they see the world. We thus acknowledge our own Indigeneity in the same way that Aileen Moreton-Robinson acknowledges her Aboriginality as integral to her work. We work within the same institution as Aileen Moreton-Robinson and are

bound together within Indigenous relationality (Martin, 2006; Wilson, 2008). We acknowledge her for her support, encouragement and leadership. We therefore name ourselves as Indigenous women within our contexts and the work which brought us to Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi, Whakatāne, for the MAI Conference.

In naming who we are, we demonstrate that our identities are not frozen in the European/British “pre-contact romanticized state” (Sunseri, 2011, p. 157). We are mindful that some people try to site us all within a constructed notion of “authentic” Indigenous womanhood—whether Māori (McIntosh, 2001; Pihama, 2001; Smith, 1999; Sutton Beets 2000) or Indigenous Australian (Fredericks, 2003; Huggins, 1994; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). In doing this, they ignore the contemporary reality that who we are now as women is shaped by the colonial, political and socio-historical contexts of us and our peoples. Restricted understandings of Indigenous women do not assist us or our nations, and do not embrace the fluidity needed for the situations we find ourselves in today (Sunseri, 2011). Our situation can be linked to the situation that faced Wairaka: she required a cultural transformation in a new place. We understand that culture is not monolithic; culture is constantly transforming and dynamic. There is no single Māori experience or Indigenous Australian experience. As McIntosh (2001) notes, in discussing Māori identity, to “be Māori is to be part of a collective but heterogeneous identity, one that is enduring but ever in a state of flux” (p. 5). We and our communities are transforming and dynamic. From our lived experiences, we know about the “state of flux”. We assert that we can be vibrantly traditional within the contemporary world. We are:

- Bronwyn Fredericks is a Murri (Aboriginal) woman from south-east Queensland. Her family have always lived on the south side of the Brisbane River and in Ipswich. Her partner

is a Kuku Yalanji man from north Queensland. She has lived in Brisbane, Ipswich, Rockhampton, Melbourne and other places. Bronwyn's current research interests focus on the socio-psychological aspects of chronic disease, Indigenous women's health issues and qualitative and mixed-methods research that privileges Indigenous knowledges, methodologies and worldviews. She holds several distinguished roles in Indigenous research and has worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations for nearly 30 years. Most recently Bronwyn has been Principal Research Fellow with the Faculty of Health, Queensland University of Technology (QUT). In 2012 she will commence as the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Indigenous Engagement) at CQUniversity and will be based in Rockhampton. Bronwyn was hosted by Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi, Whakatāne, in 2011 as a Visiting Scholar under the Australian Endeavour Award scheme and for the MAI Conference.

- Melissa Walker is a Palawa (Tasmanian Aboriginal) woman who now resides in Gubbi Gubbi Country (north Brisbane) and studies and works on Turrbal Country (north Brisbane). Melissa has over 21 years' experience of nursing and Indigenous health practice. She has a BA Nursing (RN) QUT and is also a credentialed mental health nurse (CMHN) with a Master of Mental Health Nursing (MMHN, University of Southern Queensland). Melissa is the first Indigenous nursing student to undertake PhD studies at QUT. She has an impressive record of advisory and consultative engagements and was invited to speak at the National Health and Medical Research Council's Indigenous Scientific Forum in 2010. She is a member of the Urban Participation Advisory Health Group that underpins and advocates for Indigenous health outcomes directly to the Minister for Indigenous Affairs.
- Odette Best is a south-western Gurreng Gurreng and Boonthamurra woman who has adoption ties to Koomumberri people. Odette undertook her general nurse training at the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Brisbane, commencing her training in the late 1980s. Over the last 20 or so years, Odette has worked primarily within the area of Aboriginal health. For 7 years, she worked at the Brisbane Aboriginal and Islander Community Health Service (BAICHS) as sexual health coordinator for young, at risk, Indigenous women and worked in the prison systems with both youth and women. Odette worked at the University of Southern Queensland from 2000–2006. From 2006–2011, she was the Inaugural Indigenous Nurse Advisor for the Office of the Chief Nursing Officer, Queensland Health. In 2011, Odette accepted a position as Senior Lecturer with the School of Nursing and Midwifery at QUT. Odette is an RN, and holds a Bachelor of Health Science (University of Sydney) and a Master of Philosophy (Griffith University). Her PhD, titled *Yatdjuligin: The Stories of Aboriginal Nurses in Queensland From 1950–2005* (USQ), was recently passed.
- Deb Duthie is a descendant of the Wakka Wakka and Waramungu peoples of Cherbourg and Tennant Creek respectively. Since 2002, Deb has lectured in the social work and human services programme at QUT in both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. She has particular interest in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work and human service practice and the recruitment and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

social work and human services students within the university system. She has been involved in the domestic and family violence and homelessness sectors for the past 12 years in various capacities and practice contexts, including as a founding member of the Bayside Domestic Violence Initiative Inc. Deb's PhD, *Reinvigorating the Domestic Violence Sector: Systemically Addressing Conflict, Power and Practitioner Turnover* is currently under examination (QUT).

- Christine Peacock is a descendent of Erub in the eastern Torres Strait Islands, born in far-north Queensland and schooled in south-east Queensland. She studied theatre in Sydney in the 1960s, performing in local productions before working in community theatres across the UK as both performer and director. Christine trained as a television producer with ABC Sydney, and set up the media arts organisations Murriimage (1986) and Uniikup Productions Ltd. (1994) in the Brisbane Indigenous community. She completed a Master of Arts (practice-led research) in 2009 (QUT), and is a PhD candidate in QUT's Creative Industries Faculty.

We are diverse in our Indigenous Australian identities and demonstrate that there is no single Indigenous Australian woman's experience. We represent the diversity and dynamic nature of Indigenous Australia within the collective. We came together in Whakatāne to attend the Māori and Indigenous (MAI) Doctoral Conference at Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi. We offer recognition to Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi for the invitation they extended to us and for their generosity in hosting us. Our attendance, participation and being within the MAI environment led to many learnings. It also led to some deeper understandings for us about ourselves—as Indigenous women on other Indigenous people's land,

outside of Australia. In being within the area of Whakatāne together, we could sense the strong womanly presence within the area.

### Understanding that we are guests

In Aotearoa, within the discourses of feminism, history, and New Zealand identity, women who are Māori or Pasifika or of other minority cultures are said to be within the “margin” or “marginal”. The dominant view, the Pākehā view, is “centred” in that it is in the position of dominance (McIntosh, 2001; Smith, 1999). Similarly, within the Australian discourses of feminism and Australian identity, Aboriginal women are said to be within the “margin” (Fredericks, 2003; Huggins, 1994; Moreton-Robinson, 2000). In some of the feminist discourses, Indigenous women are an appendage to the main body of work, like an afterthought that is not separated, but is lost within the text of the dominant voice. But if we look from a Māori or Indigenous Australian worldview, we are in the centre with all the other aspects and entities of our cultures: the rest of the world is at or in the margin (Fredericks, 2003; Huggins, 1994; McIntosh, 2001; Mikaere, 1995). Thus we as Māori and Indigenous Australian women are simultaneously at the margin and at the centre, within and without, inside and outside. For us, it is not one or the other. We prefer not to participate in a discussion of binaries with each other or within this paper. Yet, while saying this, we understand that our theorising comes from our experiences of multiple, inter-related oppressions which include class, racism, sexism and homophobia. Epistemologically, experience is crucial to our ways of knowing and being within our Indigenous communities, whether in Aotearoa, Australia or elsewhere (Fredericks, 2009; James & Busia, 1993; Smith, 1999). It is the lives we live within our communities as Māori and Indigenous Australian women that strengthens our ability to theorise about our lives and take action (Fredericks,

2009; James & Busia, 1993; McIntosh, 2001; Moreton-Robinson, 2000).

If we as Indigenous women visit or live in the tribal areas of other people, we do not lose our own connections to land, and the significance of our land is still present. For Indigenous Australian women, our Country is the land we belong to; it is our place of origin in spiritual, cultural and literal terms. Our Country refers to a specific clan, tribal group or nation of Aboriginal people, and encompasses all of the knowledge, cultural norms, values, stories and resources within that particular Indigenous place (Fredericks, 2008, 2010b; Graham, 2006; Moreton-Robinson, 2003). Kwaymullina (2008), in speaking of the Country Aboriginal people are from, states “for each of us, our country is not just where we live, but who we are” (p. 7). Morgan explains that:

Country is more than issues of land and geography; it is about spirituality and identity, knowing who we are and who we are connected to; and it helps us understand how all living things are connected. The symbiotic relationship Indigenous people have with country and how it defines our identity are as old and profound as the land itself. (p. 202)

The notion of Country is central to Australian Aboriginal identity and history, and contributes to overall health and wellbeing. The land is an entity in itself (Graham 2006; Moreton-Robinson, 2003). Within Country, women and men both have a central role in terms of ownership, care and rights. Kwaymullina explains that “we are [a] living, breathing, thinking physical manifestation of our land—a thread in the pattern of creation” (Kwaymullina, 2008, p. 9). Indigenous Australian women have no history of migratory travel from somewhere else. Our history is that we became human in our Country. However, today, many of us travel and do not live in our own Country. If Indigenous people are living in the Country of other people, it does not mean that one’s

connections to Country are lost, or that the significance of Country is no longer present (Fredericks, 2010b). Watson (2008) declares “I still belong to country. It is bred into me and it is an old idea and one that still lives” (p. 99). While Bob Morgan (2008) states that “my culture and worldview are centred in Gumilaroi land and its people. This is who I am and will always be. I am my country” (p. 204). Sally Morgan (2008) describes how “our country is alive, and no matter where we go, our country never leaves us” (p. 263). This is irrespective of whether Bob Morgan, Irene Watson, Sally Morgan or we are living in our Country or not.

Many Indigenous women—Māori and Indigenous Australian—now live in urban, peri-urban and regional centres. We pass through, dwell and live within tribal areas belonging to others. We recognise that we are always in Indigenous places (Fredericks, 2008, 2010b; Graham, 2006; Moreton-Robinson, 2003). We recognise that, while within Aotearoa, we are always on Māori land. Pākehā in Aotearoa are always on Māori land and always within Māori places, regardless of where that is within Aotearoa. As Indigenous Australian women from other places, we understand that when in Whakatāne, Aotearoa, we are within and on the tribal land base that is Ngāti Awa regardless of whether it is now privately owned by Pākehā, other Māori, or other entities.

We recognise that, in localities such as Whakatāne, Māori still have belonging and ownership of place, regardless of whether buildings, shops, houses and services have been built there and regardless of whether farmers or graziers and their families claim ownership. We also understand that non-Māori territorialisation of land holdings is only possible through the dispossession and de-territorialising of Māori people from that land (Fredericks, 2010b; Moreton-Robinson, 2003). While the processes of colonisation in Aotearoa have dispossessed and displaced many Māori and may have altered Māori connection, access and control of place, the reality of Māori place and

Māori ownership of place from an Indigenous perspective is not altered. Māori land, connections and the continuum of history are still embedded within Māori and within place.

In any locality, there can be multiple realities and connections to place. Within Whakatāne, we recognised Māori ownership of place and non-Māori connections to place that have occurred over time. Sommerville (2008) recognises the “complex political realities of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationships in place” (p. 5). Some places offer multiple and contested stories of experiences of that place. Sometimes, the experiences of place contain deeply held beliefs and emotions, and people may even display emotional behaviour in relation to place (for example, affection, nostalgia and dislike) (Memmott & Long, 2002). Furthermore, as emotions and behaviours develop, they may also then be “maintained by groups of people having collective experiences at those parts of the environment and reinforced through feedback from ongoing experiences at such places” (Memmott & Long, 2002, p. 40). Through this process over time, it is possible that places can enact the politics of inclusion and allow for multiple identities and marginalised groups (McDowell, 1993a, 1993b; Mills, 2006; Sibley, 1995) or enact “a place-based politics which is reactionary, exclusionary and blatantly supportive of dominant regimes” (Oakes, 1997, p. 526). That is, places can enact feelings of welcome, belonging and inclusion, or feelings of being unwelcome and excluded.

We understand that we are not “neutral” or “non-racialised” women when we visit and dwell within a place. We are active recognisers of places that acknowledge the Indigenous people of that place and us within that place (Fredericks, 2009, 2010b). It is important to us to know who the people of that place are. At the same time, we understand that Indigenous people don’t just make places. In fact, places also make us and shape us, and shape the people of that place. We know that the action of Wairaka is part of that shaping and making

of people in the past, present and future of the place we know as Whakatāne. Land and places are living entities (Graham, 2006). Thus, in the context of Whakatāne, the place has shaped and continues to shape and make the people. As Graham notes, “Place looms large, providing, sometimes dominating the backdrop and sometimes the foreground as well. The backdrop of place informs and influences judgement and imagination” (p. 5). The place of Whakatāne was both the backdrop and the foreground for our learning about Wairaka and for the MAI Doctoral Conference. Within the Aboriginal Australian logic of place “there is no division between the observing mind and anything else: there is no ‘external world’ to inhabit” (Graham, 2006, p. 5). Graham argues that “there are distinctions between the physical and the spiritual, but these aspects of existence continually inter-penetrate each other” (p. 5). Moreover, from an Aboriginal Australian perspective, this is how we understand the essence of Wairaka’s spirit and the physicality of place, and how they inter-penetrate each other now as they will in the future and as they did in the past.

As Indigenous Australian women, we honour Wairaka and the other ancestors of Ngāti Awa embedded within the landscape of their tribal area. We recognise them as the people of their place. This means coming to know the area that is Ngāti Awa as “their place”. This is what Graham (2006) calls “Law of Place” (p. 6). It is also about being consciously aware of the places we can go and not go, and the sites that are culturally significant and less significant. It means understanding that we might live and dwell within the Whakatāne area, the land of the Ngāti Awa, but we are forever guests. We are not the owners, even if we become land holders by land sale. It is important for us to understand the role of host and the role of guest. We need to allow Ngāti Awa to be the host within their own land and to define how they want their relationship with us to be. This is not up to us or other women. We are always guests in Country that is not our own.

## Conclusion

What would have taken place had Wairaka not swam out to the Mataatua Waka? Or if she had swam out and followed the custom of her people and not paddled the Waka? She and the Waka would have been lost to the ocean. She opted to step out of the role defined for her when she cried “Kia Whakatāne au I ahau!” We have not heard anyone question whether Wairaka was an “authentic” Māori woman. Wairaka responded to her circumstances in the contemporary times in which she was physically alive—the time of the “radical relocation of whole communities from Hawaiiki to Aotearoa” (Wikitera, 2011, p. 1). Wairaka’s spirit interplays with the physical and that which is place today. It is demonstrated in the “Law of Place” (Graham, 2006, p. 6).

We are alive today, and we need to respond, change and adapt in our contemporary times in the places in which we live. We need to participate, be involved and engage in the work of transforming and self-determining for our communities for the future. We need to be involved in ways that restore our power as women and

that ensure our rightful place within a gender-balanced approach to the processes at hand. As women, we need to be part of change and adaptation in these contemporary times—on our land, our Country and within the fabric of our communities. We need to be part of the restoration and revitalisation work in all that it entails. We believe that decolonisation cannot work for our peoples unless it also responds to the marginalisation, discrimination and identity politics that we, as women, are subjected to. This includes all that was introduced through the process of colonisation, including patriarchy. Decolonisation needs to include action and possibilities for women. In remembering Wairaka, we know that this is possible for all of us.

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