

Reflections on my path to academia

Michelle Erai

Abstract: Often I don't know what to say when people ask how I came to have a PhD. Like many stories, mine has multiple beginnings. It could be because of the love of books and sense of social justice that my mother instilled in me from an early age. It might be because of the women from Wellington Women's Refuge who encouraged me to consider going to University. Or, it may be the sheer pleasure I discovered in research, discussion, analysis and writing. It is from those restless beginnings that I trace my trajectory as a scholar.

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When a friend suggested I apply to graduate school in the same month that I won the opportunity to apply for residency in the United States, the time was right. I studied hard for the U.S. Graduate Record Examinations, wrote a submission for a research project on violence against Māori women, and was very fortunate to be accepted to the History of Consciousness, University of California, Santa Cruz programme to work with Prof. Angela Davis.

This direction was very different from the life I had imagined growing up in Whangarei. My mother, a Pākehā, had taken the extraordinary departure from the class and race expectations of New Zealand society in the 1960s and married a Māori man. My father died when I was two and my mother was pregnant with my brother. Our small family survived on a widow's benefit until mum returned to part-time work once I was at Intermediate school. Although neither of my parents attended tertiary education, they demonstrated a work ethic that for me translated into a restlessness that took me to Wellington to train to become a Hotel Receptionist at the Central Institute of Technology. There I learnt to type and the administrative skills that have been invaluable in studying and teaching.

My personal life in my late teens and early twenties was a murky period of violence, drugs and alcohol that led to repeated visits to Women's Refuge. I emerged, not unscathed, from this time with another motivation to become an academic, namely, a hunger for the words, for the ideas of respected thinkers, to describe my experiences of growing up mixed-race, female and queer and with a history of sexual assault and domestic violence. I went to Victoria University and completed a BA in Sociology and Women's Studies, and an MA Applied in Social Science Research.

However, it is neither a love of hard work, nor an ability to understand and articulate the operations of power in my personal life that have kept me within the academy. There I have found a community of smart, committed scholars and activists, who are passionate about social issues, about transformative pedagogy, and about the political possibilities of accountable research and writing.

The cliché that if you do something you love, you'll never work a day in your life, is definitely turning out to be true for me, however the struggles I face of financial hardship and uncertainty, of shifts in class status, of fear of failure and self-doubt are very real. Doing a PhD has been a

burden shared by friends, family and mentors. I don't think anyone can do this kind of work alone.

Author Notes

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