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Kei hea au e tū ana? Reflections on a journey

Kelly Ratana (Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāti Rangiwewehi)

Ko wai au?

*Ko Tongariro me Tiheia ōku maunga,
Ko Taupō-nui-a-Tia me Te Rotorua-nui-a-Kahumatamomoe ōku roto moana,
Ko Waikato me Te Awahou ōku awa
Ko Te Heuheu me Tawakeheimoa ōku tūpuna
Ko Te Arawa te waka
Ko Ngāti Tūwharetoa me Ngāti Rangiwewehi ōku iwi
Ko Kelly Ratana ahau
Ko au tēnei e mihi ana*

I have chosen to introduce myself through my pepehā,¹ which links me back to the ancestors and places of my origin in the central North Island of Aotearoa, New Zealand. While I am most connected to my taha Māori (Māori ancestry), I also want to acknowledge my taha Pākehā (English and Scottish ancestry), and the knowledge, practice and beliefs they have both contributed to who I am. In doing so, I acknowledge that I am more than the sum of these disparate parts: I descend from the unique places, contexts, practices and beliefs of my ancestors, of those who came before me and will be part of the legacy of those who come after. This is a great responsibility, but one that keeps me grounded, accountable and moving forward. By acknowledging these dual beginnings, I hope to highlight a central theme of this essay – “bridges”. I am a bridge between the two cultures from which I descend.

¹ A tribal saying that outlines the mountains, waterways, important ancestors and tribal affiliations of a person. This saying locates me and my place in the world.

In my very existence, I am a bridge.

As we progress through this essay I use Professor Smith's book *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999), in which she interrogates the role of research and researchers in Indigenous Peoples' lives, as a touchstone to reflect on my own journey. Professor Smith (1999, p. 5) wrote:

A growing number of . . . researchers define themselves as Indigenous, although their training has been primarily within the western academy and specific disciplinary methodologies.

I am one of these researchers. I began my training in the Western academy at the University of Auckland in 2005, where I completed a conjoint Bachelor of Science majoring in Biology, specializing in Marine Science and Bachelor of Arts majoring in Māori studies. After a brief working break, I continued on to complete a Post-Graduate Diploma in Marine Studies at the (then) Bay of Plenty Polytechnic, in Tauranga during 2011. Progressing naturally through the Western academic system, I was offered the opportunity to spend time in Hawai'i and complete a Master of Science in Marine Science at Hawai'i Pacific University from 2012–2014. My academic career, while successful in many ways, was always fraught with tensions, both seen and unseen, as I struggled to find my place between Te Ao Māori and the Western scientific academy. It now strikes me that throughout my entire academic career there was no sign of *Decolonizing Methodologies* or notions of Kaupapa Māori methodologies in any of my lectures, tutorials or even discussions amongst my peers. In seven-and-a-half years, at three tertiary institutions, across two continents, these important ideas were entirely absent.

Perhaps this was a sign of the times; an indicator that although Professor Smith had asked questions of Indigenous Peoples, research and the colonizing frameworks of Western academies that prompted the academy to question itself, her work was still situated outside of the mainstream in fields such as marine science. Regardless of the reason, these two parts of my world seemed to be at odds. I continually wrestled with the ideas and concepts at the interface of my Indigeneity and Western scientific training. In fact, I continue to wrestle with these same ideas in my professional career but have, perhaps, become more accustomed to this particular wrestle. In pursuing a career that places me at this interface, I embody a bridge between both Māori and Western scientific knowledge systems.

In my work, I am a bridge.

Not only did Hawai'i provide me with an opportunity to advance in the Western academy but, looking back, it was a significant turning point of my life and academic career. Although I did not come across *Decolonizing Methodologies* and its theories, my experiences exposed me to the strong desire to decolonize my practice, which I had never before recognized or acknowledged within myself. I have written about my time in Hawai'i as a pivotal part of my journey later in this essay, but this brings me to another bridge. A bridge that perhaps pinpoints my apprehension to write this essay at all. When beginning my career in earnest as a science researcher, I was introduced to *Decolonizing Methodologies* as a text and the concept of Kaupapa Māori research in various forms. I saw the immense impacts that Professor Smith's work had made on so many, impacts that rippled through space and time. Yet, when I thought about writing this essay, I felt unqualified to reflect or comment on the thought leadership *Decolonizing Methodologies* represents, especially given my lack of interaction with it. I felt disconnected from the theories, with the view that my research was applied science and yet I had been challenged by fellow researchers about whether my work (using science knowledge systems to support and create outcomes for Indigenous communities) was actually Kaupapa Māori research. Despite these feelings of unease, I contemplated what I might have to say, spoke with mentors and friends, and decided to do it anyway (obviously). In agreeing to write this essay, facing my own insecurities head on, I hope to highlight the way in which we as Indigenous researchers in science do not have to re-articulate, or re-theorize what Professor Smith so masterfully articulates, but we are instead a bridge between these theories and their practice.

In my approach to my work, I am a bridge.

Throughout the rest of this essay, I have provided *whakatauki* or traditional proverbs. They are, where possible, credited to the source, or area of origin, but in some cases it remains unknown who was first to utter them. These words of wisdom handed down from my ancestors and those of my Hawaiian family serve as a reminder that we are part of a legacy. These proverbs have at various times guided and shaped me, propelled me forward, connected me to those who came before me and those who will come after me.

A bridge through time.

Ahakoā he iti, he pounamu
*(Although it is small, it is precious)*²

As an Indigenous science researcher I want to highlight some of the challenges and opportunities being “a bridge” presents. While to some my essay may be a small contribution to the discussion about where we are 20 years on from the first publication of *Decolonizing Methodologies*, I hope it will also be a precious contribution to another Indigenous person navigating a career in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM). I hope that in some small way it inspires more Indigenous science researchers to occupy this space with confidence, because our contributions are invaluable.

On writing this essay

Tū whitia te hopo, mairangatia te angitū
*(Feel the fear and do it anyway)*³

This whakataukī encourages bravery. It implores you to forge ahead in spite of fear. I draw inspiration from this because, in order to write this essay, I am required to open myself up: to share my story, my journey with any and everyone who might take the time to read it, so that you may see where I stand today. To do so, I must be comfortable with being uncomfortable, with being vulnerable.

Part of this uncomfortableness comes from the very process of creating literature and ensuring that *how* it is written conforms to what is expected. I wanted to reflect on this process of creating literature, and in particular the requirements upon us as Indigenous writers to reference other written literature. Given the often oral nature of knowledge transfer, teaching and learning embedded in Indigenous cultures, this simple act can sometimes be uncomfortable, alienating and compromising. For example, how do we as Indigenous researchers acknowledge and reconcile non-written sources, such as the multitude of songs, stories, visual arts, people, places and experiences that have influenced and shaped our practice and thinking? How do we conform to (in my case) scientific writing conventions that do not allow us to accommodate our training and teachings from both within and outside of the Western

² For a further description see Mead and Grove (2004).

³ For a further description, see Pihama et al (2019), pp. 47–48.

academy? How do we build on available published academic discourse in written form when it so rarely reflects us or our Indigeneity? It is perhaps these same questions that pinpoint why Professor Smith's work has been so important to so many.

In order to think critically about how *Decolonizing Methodologies* has impacted on my personal journey, I must bring forward and reflect on a collection of experiences, conversations, interactions and learnings that span people, place and time, that for the most part are situated outside of my academic training. These have no published records from which I can reference to adhere to the requirements of writing convention. In an attempt to overcome this limitation, throughout this essay I will attribute teachings to those experiences, individuals and communities that have shaped my perspectives, the times and events that provided me with growth and learning, and the places that challenged and molded my outlook on my work and practice. I do this in an attempt to acknowledge the legitimacy of this collection of experiences, people and places and how they have contributed to the position I write from, and in an attempt to further decolonize this process.

Hawai'i

In 2011, I applied to Fulbright New Zealand for a Fulbright Science and Innovation Graduate Award. The Fulbright award provides New Zealand graduates the opportunity to study in the United States of America. Passing up the opportunity to study at Scripps Institute of Oceanography (which I was told was quite a prestigious center for marine sciences), I chose to complete my master's degree at a lesser known, private university in Hawai'i. The reasons for this decision were both practical (resourcing) and personal. I wanted to experience another culture not unlike my own, within its unique context, practice and beliefs (Woodley 2002) and knew that I would grow more as a person in doing so. At this point, I had no idea how much this decision would shape my life or my work – how much this experience would be life-changing and perspective-altering for me. While my academic journey continued along much the same vein as my previous academic wanderings, what was remarkably different from what I had experienced up to that point in time were the people, places and practices that I was exposed to. It is impossible to summarize this time in my life in this essay alone, but I have attempted here to share some of the key moments and how they have influenced my career and practice.

“Cuppa tea time” and “talking story”

Professor Smith (1999, p. 5) writes that:

Many indigenous researchers have struggled individually with the disconnections that are apparent between the demands of research, on the one side, and the realities they encounter amongst their own and other indigenous communities, with whom they share lifelong relationships with, on the other side.

This “outsider within” dynamic (Collins 1991) was something that I had never encountered in my work before, made even more complex by the fact that I was an Indigenous foreigner in another Indigenous Peoples’ land. The added complexity of navigating not only the American Western academy, as well as a cross-cultural research divide, was incredibly difficult and I made mistakes.

Initially, responding to the demands of my research, papers and proposal defense, I tried repeatedly to engage with Kanaka Maoli (native Hawaiian people) for the purposes of my research. I would send emails and make phone calls to no avail. I was in contact with a group of Kanaka Maoli within the He‘eia watershed, and in particular those restoring Pihi (also known as He‘eia) Loko I‘a (Fishpond⁴) through the non-profit organization Paepae o He‘eia. As my research began to fall behind my supposed timeline, I contemplated why I had not made much progress with this community in regards to my research, especially given I was an “Indigenous researcher” with genuine intentions for my research to be relevant. A comment from a good friend while flying to New York together abruptly delivered an answer to this question and the first important lesson that this experience gave me:

Kelly, if you were going to do work with our kaumātua (male and female elders) at home [in New Zealand] would you send emails and call them?

Painting, I., Flight to New York, 2013

Without even realizing it, I had given in to the colonial structures of research and its communication and somehow forgotten a key research principle implicit in Professor Smith’s writing: the principle of *kanohi ki te kanohi* (face to face). The essential act of repeatedly showing up, in person (which in retrospect seems painfully obvious) and being accountable within the teachings of my own Indigeneity, was missing from my approach. As this realization dawned, my response to my friend was simple: “No, I would take some biscuits and have a cup

⁴ The Hawaiian “loko i‘a” is translated as “fishpond”, which is an English term for the ancient aquaculture ponds constructed by native Hawaiian people. He‘eia Fishpond is run by a non-profit organization Paepae o He‘eia, and is a rock wall fishpond set on a reef-platform at the mouth of the He‘eia Stream.

of tea.” This same concept is described in Hawai‘i as talking story. Alongside the fact that my research had not been grounded or grown from a place of mutual benefit with the He‘eia community, my subsequent approach to engaging them into my research in the first place was flawed. This is something that Professor Smith talks about where, as beginning Indigenous researchers, we often experience these failures, flaws or lessons organically and in process as we try to navigate the insider/outsider dynamic (Smith 1999, p. 10), in my case without knowing it. While having a “cup of tea” on the surface seems arbitrary, what this methodology represents is far from arbitrary, including: repeated face to face interactions, listening genuinely, thinking slowly and understanding the needs of the communities you wish to work with and for. The multitude of these “cups of tea” form the basis of the lifelong relationships that bind me as an Indigenous researcher to all communities that I work alongside. They help us navigate being the “outsider within” *alongside* and mentored by our Indigenous research relationships.

When I returned to my research, my approach to working with the He‘eia community changed substantially. With this realization, and the coincident arrival of another Māori scholar and her partner interested in working alongside the He‘eia community, I began to spend my time volunteering at He‘eia Fishpond and wetland workdays, working alongside the people with whom I would form that lifelong relationship. Without having encountered *Decolonizing Methodologies* at the time, I was practicing what Professor Smith was talking about. My relationship to He‘eia Fishpond, the staff and extended community of Paepae o He‘eia grew into a feeling of deep connectedness that transcended time and place and persists today. The many experiences that resulted from this relationship transformed my approach to research, causing me to question deeper my work as a scientist and the role of institutional science, and created an unyielding willingness to seek outcomes with and for the communities we are privileged to work alongside, and to go about it in the way that resonates both with the communities I work with and myself as an Indigenous person first and foremost.

“Not a museum piece”

When talking with my friend and kumu (teacher) about traditional fishing techniques, he told me of a remote historic fishing village not far from his hometown and how their ancestors used to live before they were removed by the American government. He talked about how his generation would travel there in season to gather resources and restore different parts of the village. He said it

had been unoccupied for many generations, and that he had been asked to help lead the restoration of the hale va'a stone wall (the wall of a thatched house used to store canoes) in the village. Before accepting this, he asked why it was being restored, and what it would be used for. When prompted, he explained that:

If it is only to look at for the tourists, then we should leave it as is, because I don't wanna build a museum piece and just be half done. If we're gonna do it, we should follow through. With the rock wall comes the hale (thatched house), with the hale comes the va'a (canoe), with the va'a comes the keiki (children) and then everything becomes alive and starts living again.

Flores, P., Waimea Valley, Kaua'i, 2014

This intrigued me, and as I reflected on all of the experiences that my kumu had shared with me, I began to understand the significance of this particular comment. In his everyday work, he drew on the teachings of his ancestors. He *practiced* his culture, traditions, ceremonies, language and spirituality, irrespective of whether he had thought deeply about it, written about it, researched it or even obtained a degree from the Western academy. I thought about my encounters and experience with my own culture and how different it was from his. Most of my teachings about my culture had come from literature.

In my work, research as an endeavor is often filled with spaces to theorize, test and write about what we think and see. However, oftentimes research can lack practical and tangible outcomes, particularly for Indigenous communities. In his practice, my kumu was drawing on ancestral knowledge, thinking through issues, observing change, and adapting as his ancestors did, a different kind of "research" with immense value. This experience taught me many things, but most of all it taught me that as "a bridge" between cultures, both personally (because of my whakapapa (genealogy)) and professionally (because of my work), means that I need to create space for ways of being, knowing *and doing* that come from both Māori and Western academic beginnings. It highlighted for me that, in my own journey, I had unknowingly nurtured and sought out not only theory and knowledge (as opposed to practice), but also Western academic theory and knowledge. The words of my kumu hung heavy with me, and to this day guide the way I think of my own culture.

"You will know"

I was raised by parents who were not allowed to nurture or grow the part of themselves that was Māori. They were of the generation subject to the colonizing

and oppressive laws that punished children for speaking te reo Māori (the Māori language) in school. My parents were denied the knowledge and tools required to immerse their children in our culture and language at home. Despite this, they always ensured we knew we were Māori, made sure to take us to events at the marae (complex of buildings including the traditional meeting house used for gatherings of importance), and used what te reo Māori they could each day. I was lucky my parents saw the value in our culture, language and practices even though they had not had many opportunities to pursue it themselves. Understanding the importance of sharing our language and culture, but knowing they could not provide it, they chose to set me on a pathway into Te Ao Māori, for which I am forever grateful. My secondary school education, and in some ways first concerted step into Te Ao Māori, ironically began at a Catholic Māori girls' college. Although it was a special character Māori girls' college, the school curriculum was mainstream, taught in English, and only occasionally reflected the substantial knowledge system of my ancestors. As a result, I began to seek this knowledge outside of the classroom. Those lessons came in many forms including my peers, elders and even experiences (e.g. attending gatherings and in many cases funerals on the marae). Seeking to deepen my understanding of Te Ao Māori and my own Indigeneity continued into my tertiary studies and throughout my Bachelor of Arts (Māori Studies) in particular. To this day I remain a student on this journey. As it should be.

Beginning my research career in Hawai'i and realizing how much of my work was to bridge gaps in understanding, in methods, in communication – and with much less knowledge and understanding of Te Ao Māori/Indigenous teachings than I would have liked, I was often left feeling inadequate. On one occasion, as I sat with a friend and mentor at Huilua Fishpond in Kahana Valley, O'ahu, looking at the fishpond rock wall needing some repair, we talked about how overwhelming things can seem not only in research or fishpond restoration, but in life. She reminded me of a Hawaiian proverb that I had heard many times working alongside her and others:

Ma ka hana ka 'ike
(*In doing you will know/learn*)⁵

When I talked to her about my feelings of inadequacy especially when it came to practice of culture and creating space for what I did not know deeply into my work, she told me:

⁵ For a further description, see Pukui and Varez (1983).

You do not need to know everything, as long as your intentions are genuine, your kupuna (ancestors) will guide you and it will come. Just start . . . one step at a time . . . you will know.

Wallace, K., Huilua Loko I'a, Kahana, O'ahu 2014

This was a timely reminder for me, that as a researcher I often get caught up in intellectualizing and rationalizing my work, my culture and my place in the world. She reminded me that nurturing our knowledge is important, but that we must not forget to practice it. As I continued my research, I endeavored to apply this approach, spending time with the community, being present and “doing”. I talked with the community (outside of my research), built trust and respect on a personal level, and found that from this organic relationship, my research was invited to be shared.

When I reflect on this approach, despite my perceived inadequacies in Indigenous knowledge and teachings, and without having read Professor Smith's work, I realize that the people, places and experiences I shared in Hawai'i had shown me decolonizing methodologies in action. Hawai'i was where I first encountered the concept of Kaupapa Māori, or (in this case) Indigenous Hawaiian methodologies without having ever come across it in a textbook.

In doing, I had learned.

Hawai'i was a turning point in my life in many ways, some of which I have shared above. I would like to now move away specifically from my time in Hawai'i, although you will see it continues to permeate into how I have perceived and received many other experiences as a science researcher. In many ways, my experiences have become a benchmark for how I want not just my work, but my life to unfold. However, this also means that I sometimes struggle to attune my professional work reality with a space that enables practical and tangible outcomes, accommodates and promotes diverse knowledges and where our communities are leading science research.

Diverse knowledge

One of the challenges for Māori researchers . . . has been to retrieve some space – first, some space to convince Māori people of the value of research for Māori; second, to convince the various, fragmented but powerful research

communities of the need of greater Māori involvement in research; and third, to develop approaches and ways of carrying out research which take into account, without being limited by, the legacies of previous research.

Smith 1999, p. 183

Retrieving space is a large part of my work.

As Māori “scientists” among our communities, we are often looked to as experts by those communities, as people who know *more* than the communities we work alongside. I am always trying to reiterate to our communities that their knowledge and understanding of their place is far superior to mine, that they are in fact the experts in their place and critical in achieving their research aspirations. Too often I hear “I don’t know much” before a two-hour long interview that examines the rich history of use and practice embedded in the places and spaces our communities instinctively and naturally occupy. In this way we are not just retrieving space to convince our communities that research has value, but that *their* knowledge, Māori ways of knowing, being and doing, have value. As Professor Smith highlights, research is often implicated in “denying the validity for Māori of Māori knowledge, language and culture” (Smith 1999, p. 183). The legacy of science research (and research in general) with our communities includes practices of knowledge extraction and the systematic reliance on institutionalized scientific data. This legacy has meant that among some of our Indigenous communities, there is a disbelief that what they know matters. This is when the approach that we as Indigenous researchers take to working with our communities is crucial. In my work, with and for our communities, I aim to share the journey completely, from engagement, to co-creating and co-identifying the question/s, to gathering the data, to analyzing, interpreting and articulating the findings in multiple ways.

Pursuing the journey together can be uncomfortable, challenging and yet immensely rewarding. In some recent work with Ngāti Maniapoto, we have developed a project to map and collate their mātauranga of repo (swamps) and puna (springs) to support a hapū-driven and strategic prioritization of restoration efforts for their wetlands. During the introductory circle of our first wānanga (workshop), one of the participants began to ask questions about the project’s relevance and how it would tangibly benefit him. He spoke at length of the issues that he was facing in his rural community and how this project (while of interest) was not going to be helpful. As I stood in front of him, all I could do was agree with his assessment of the multi-faceted challenges that him and his whānau

faced, and in that moment I felt helpless. One small question has stayed with me and continues to reinforce the importance of research that has relevance:

What's the point?

Workshop Participant, Kāwhia 2017

This small question carried a heavy burden. This was probably the second time I had been confronted with directed cynicism towards research (not just my own research), and the first time that the multiple realities that many of our communities are dealing with really hit home. Our people are busy, really busy, dealing with multiple responsibilities, multiple jobs (paid and unpaid) and just trying to live in today's society. Add to that the responsibility of carrying our rich knowledge system into the future, the many research projects and researchers asking for their time, and you begin to see just how resilient our people are. During the break of our workshop, I was in tears as the weight of his comments sunk in and I began to realize that I had failed to consider these perspectives.

I took a moment, pulled myself together, and our workshop resumed. To my surprise, as we continued, and despite his conviction that the work was less than useful to him, this participant worked seemingly enthusiastically to map wetlands known to him, sharing knowledge we were privileged to receive. I cannot pinpoint when the shift happened, or why he stayed, but something about the process managed to break down those barriers. Perhaps it was because we were inside the *whare tupuna* (the carved meeting house, the realm of Rongo – the deity of peace) or perhaps it was his way of testing me and, somehow, I had passed. Regardless, throughout the whole project this participant remained engaged from start to finish. Sharing our journey, multiple cups of tea, thinking slowly through the process and ensuring that we could be both respectful and honest about the benefit of spending his time with us, we saw a shift in his perspective that was so rewarding. Watching the delight when he and the other participants saw their knowledge represented on maps and in a tool to support decision-making (for and by the *whānau*) was hugely satisfying and humbling. I share this experience because there are three key things that story highlights:

1. Research priorities are one subset of a much larger set of priorities (e.g. treaty settlement⁶) that each of our *whānau*, *hapū* and *iwi* is striving to achieve – and we must be patient with that.

⁶ The Treaty of Waitangi is an agreement, written in both Māori and English, that was made between Māori rangatira (chiefs) and the British Crown in 1840. This document is the basis through which *iwi* are undertaking treaty settlement that seeks redress for historical breaches of the treaty.

2. When we as Indigenous researchers enter a community, we are often expected to shoulder the criticisms and injustices of a legacy of research that has not prioritized our communities' questions, knowledge or culture.
3. We are all on a journey together and it is shared experience that builds trust, accountability and life-long relationships.

To put it in the words of Professor Smith (1999, p. 5):

Indigenous research is a humble and humbling activity.

Working alongside Māori communities, there are two key messages that I reiterate; that science from the Western academy is one source of information and one set of tools available to us (and the source I am most qualified to talk to); and, that mātauranga Māori (and all Indigenous knowledge systems for that matter) remain another powerful and valid source of knowing, understanding, describing and experiencing the world. Something that I have come to realize in my journey is that, as Indigenous Peoples, we have our own knowledge systems, intimate understanding of the land and waterscapes – ways of seeing the world. As such, we are uniquely able to draw on, interpret, discuss and utilize that ancestral, traditional and contemporary understanding in our search for answers. It is for this reason that we have such a valuable contribution to make, especially in environmental science and research. While I may not know or understand the depth and breadth of Te Ao Māori, it is not my job to. Rather, my role has been creating the opportunity and space for our communities to access all available knowledge and tools to achieve their research aspirations.

The tension that exists at the interface of these two knowledge systems is highlighted in *Decolonizing Methodologies*; the idea that the Western academic institutions cannot and should not monopolize the power and economy of knowledge. I believe, as Indigenous Peoples, only we have the power to realize the potential of our unique knowledge systems. There is some discourse in the literature that debates whether Indigenous ways of knowing and being are, or should be, called science or “Indigenous science” (Catton 2009; Hikuroa 2017). When discussing this idea with a good friend, mentor and a tertiary educator from Hawai‘i, she spoke specifically about the act of naming science:

When talking about science we need to be specific in our references especially when talking about institutional (Western) sciences. When we speak of “Science” (institutional) with an assumption that it is THE science we continue the belief that there is only one science AND that it is all powerful. Institutional science is one very valuable way to explain and define the world around us, BUT so is

Hawaiian Science [or] Māori Science. . . Referring to Institutional science as “the” science also leads “others” to assume and continue to believe the lie that other cultures and people do not have science AND we most definitely do.

Andrade, P., Whāingaroa 2018

This idea that we might inadvertently empower institutional Western science knowledge by the mere act of calling it “science” is important for us to consider. It is especially important when considering the policy context which is most often driven by “science or evidence-based” decision-making. The question of what is, or rather whose “science” and “evidence” decisions are being made, becomes a key driver of much of the work that we as Indigenous science researchers do.

Almost 15 years ago, the government of Aotearoa New Zealand released the “Vision Mātauranga Policy” (VM Policy), which was to be applied to all science, research and technology funding (New Zealand Government 2007). This document talks about “unlocking the potential of Māori people, resources and knowledge for the benefit of New Zealand”, and has forced the prevailing science system to look deeper at the relationships between itself, research and Māori in Aotearoa. While the intent of the policy is attempting to embed space for Māori knowledge systems and people in the science funding system, almost 15 years on the application of the policy continues to evolve, driven largely by Indigenous researchers who are working to untangle what “unlocking the potential” looks like in practice. The VM Policy has been successful in creating a shift in science research funding, but it is still reliant on the genuine intentions and open-mindedness of researchers (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) to create the required space and explore new horizons driven by and together with Māori communities. This is an ongoing challenge that we as Indigenous researchers must continue to work on.

Direct and indirect impact

Professor Smith’s work is arguably one of the most heavily referenced texts by Indigenous researchers world-wide because of the articulate, relevant, thought-provoking and familiar narratives that it lays out. Although I did not encounter this narrative until beginning my professional career, I am fortunate. I am fortunate because my personal journey has developed my approach to my work through ongoing experiential learning, a multi-cultural amalgamation of

teachings, and a deep desire to *be* Māori in the work that I do. I think this story will be familiar to many walking this path in STEM, and in many ways is exactly what Professor Smith wrote about. From where I stand, one of the key outcomes of *Decolonizing Methodologies* was the emergence of academic literature, theory and methodologies specific to Indigenous Peoples. The formalization of Kaupapa Māori research in this text was a landmark for many Indigenous researchers, in that this articulation of research methodology finally reflected the way in which we *already* operate instinctively. This created space for Indigenous researchers such as me, to do the work we do, *how* we do it, with just a little less justification required. It enabled the ability for me to “stand on the shoulders of giants” and reference literature (in a system so focused on referencing literature) that placed an emphasis on an Indigenous methodology, and centered our experiences operating as Māori researchers in its critique of the research process. In this way the impacts of *Decolonizing Methodologies* have been direct.

However, *Decolonizing Methodologies* has also impacted me indirectly and in some instances challenged my perspectives on myself and the work I do. When I first started my career in research, I was still getting comfortable with the, at times, uncomfortable nature of working at the interface of knowledge systems. I was still learning to navigate how to be a bridge between Western notions of science and ensure I made space for mātauranga Māori. As that bridge, my work was often to find the tools and approaches that would best achieve the outcome sought by the community I was working with. Sometimes those tools and approaches were derived from Western science and sometimes they were derived from Te Ao Māori. At the time, the question about what exactly Kaupapa Māori research meant was raised many times. Most often, the response I heard was that it was research with Māori, by Māori and for Māori. As a researcher (who is Māori), working alongside Māori communities to create positive outcomes for Māori, I identified as a Kaupapa Māori researcher – until I was challenged on this belief. I was questioned by another Māori colleague about whether the use of Western science methodologies alongside Te Ao Māori methodologies was still Kaupapa Māori research. At the time I was quite confronted by this, mainly because (as is hopefully evident) I was (and still am) advocating for our Indigenous knowledge systems to be *enough*, to be legitimate and valid, and yet much of my work drew on Western scientific tools and approaches. I was also confronted because it felt as though my integrity as a Māori (researcher) was being challenged. How could I claim to be a Kaupapa Māori researcher, when what I do is Western science? I rationalized that my work was still “with Māori, by Māori and for Māori” as described by so many as the definition of Kaupapa

Māori and found peace in that, but this challenge always weighed heavy on my mind. In discussion with mentors who have spent much longer working in the space in which I found myself, I also gained strength in the notion that utilizing Western scientific methodologies was not so much a cop-out, but actually strategic. As I was once told:

You refer to yourself as a bridge builder, but you still need someone to decide that a bridge is needed.

Tipa, G., 2019

Further to this, when I am humbled by the communities that I work alongside to be invited back, and receive positive feedback and gratitude, I know that if I wasn't there, if we as Indigenous researchers weren't there, then no one would be pushing these boundaries alongside our whānau, hapū and iwi. We are in the position to be able to take the best of what Western science has to offer to support delivery of Māori-focused outcomes. For many of our Indigenous communities, Western science approaches have been seen as a necessary tool to support the communication of what their Indigenous knowledge systems and assessments tell them to be true, to external audiences such as local councils and central government agencies. The difference (and perhaps imperative to seek out Western science) is that within the prevailing narrative of "evidence-based" policy and decision-making, Western science (as opposed to Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing) is still privileged and is the most common "language" that is listened to. Until this paradigm shifts and Māori understanding, ways of knowing, being and doing are recognized and listened to, I believe we are no less Māori by utilizing Western scientific tools to our advantage in order achieve the outcomes we seek. This concept is echoed in the following whakatauaiki (proverb) by Sir Āpirana Ngata:

*E tipu, e rea, mō ngā rā o tōu ao; ko tō ringa ki ngā rākau a te Pākehā hei ara mō te tinana. Ko tō ngākau ki ngā taonga a ō tīpuna Māori hei tikitiki mō tō mähunga, ā ko tō wairua ki te Atua, nāna nei ngā mea katoa (Ngata, 1949)*⁷

In this proverb, Ngata encourages us to grasp the tools and approaches of the British⁸ to support our aspirations, while also holding fast to the teachings of our ancestors that adorn and guide us. Embedded in this proverb is an affirmation

⁷ Grow up, tender plant, to fulfil the needs of your world; your hand grasping the tools of the Pākehā (non-Māori settlers) for your physical needs, your heart centered on the treasures of your Māori ancestors as a plume for your head, and your soul to God who made all things.

⁸ The British are referred to here as they were the dominant settler society established in New Zealand and represented the Crown as a treaty partner.

that we as Indigenous Peoples have the innate ability to be the bridge between these two knowledge systems, *and* to utilize both without compromising our Indigeneity.

Professor Smith (1999, p. 199) wrote:

As Indigenous peoples we have our own research needs and aspirations. Our questions are important. Research helps us answer them.

I think this statement highlights an important point: that it is Māori research needs, aspirations and questions that drive Kaupapa Māori research. It is more about *how* we conduct ourselves in the research process, and less about what tools we use to achieve the outcome. To me, Kaupapa Māori research is about having genuine intentions and a shared journey to navigate the research within the unique cultural context of our communities. I have come to realize one of the most important parts of my work within a science institution is to be the person who can be the bridge for our communities because, if we are not here to do so, no one else will be.

Reflections

When I first set out to write this essay I wondered – would my journey have been different if I had come across *Decolonizing Methodologies* while I was at university?

Maybe, maybe not.

So much of what Professor Smith wrote is familiar to me, given the experiences I have had to date. I am not sure that 20-year-old me would have found such resonance. This process has highlighted that, with or without *Decolonizing Methodologies*, the teachings of my ancestors (that I am still discovering), the places that I have lived, the people I am lucky to have shared space with, and the communities that I am privileged to work alongside, have taught me to decolonize my methodologies.

Upon completing the essay, a mentor posed two questions for me to reflect on: what advice I might give to other Indigenous Peoples currently studying science and if I would recommend reading *Decolonizing Methodologies*. First, I would say, whether Indigenous or not, that reading *Decolonizing Methodologies* can only better equip you for working within the current science and research system in Aotearoa New Zealand, that it would not hurt to have a more in-depth knowledge of what might be encountered on your journey. In the same breath

my advice to Indigenous students would be that ways to decolonize your methodologies cannot and should not only be found in a book, but in actively committing to research alongside your community. There will always be times when we stumble, maybe even fall, on the path but I can guarantee our communities will be there to set us straight. In doing, we learn the deepest, hardest and most meaningful lessons – so do not be afraid to try.

The second question posed was if I regretted my training to become a scientist. This one gave me pause. However, the short answer is no. I do not regret it at all. What I have come to realize is that I am a scientist with or without my training in the Western academy. Being curious, asking questions, observing changes and making life decisions were a common practice of our ancestors and it is also a part of mine. My training only provided me with another way to look at the world and be who I intuitively am. My career in science has created unique and beautiful opportunities that have changed my life and led me right where I need to be.

Each of us will walk a unique path – I only hope that in sharing this part of my journey, I can bridge space, time and culture to help another Indigenous scientist to navigate their own path.

I am a bridge.