



The audacity of the ocean: Gendered politics of positionality in the Pacific

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Throughout the contemporary Pacific, relationships that indigeneity makes possible are emerging as celebrated resistance to post-colonial development anxieties. In the process, lived experience heightens the commitment to decolonize thinking, language and practice in teaching and research. Not only because these imperatives are highly personalized but also because they are gendered and heavy with generational trauma. These gendered dynamics circulate around popular culture and imaginaries of Pacific paradise but also problematically around the challenges of long-standing intolerances especially around gender and race. The paper asks how a gendered politics of positionality engages with emerging positionalities that uncritically allow for such intolerances. I touch on two ways in which colonial continuities of belittlement are often reinforced, but are also offering hopeful and careful decolonial scholarly futures. The first is the naming of the Pacific and the second is supervising women doctoral candidates from the Pacific. In this paper, the audacity of the ocean offers a metaphorical opportunity to carefully reconcile these tensions and provide trajectories for decolonial knowledge-making. However, it also offers a material way of understanding the ongoing work with 'tensions' and disruptions in their ever present but changeable forms. Oceanic tropes and a feminist Oceanic audacity of embodied engagement in the Pacific offer dynamic and gendered intellectual agility which runs counter to the tropical imageries of languid indifference.

black/is a state of mind
like the colour of an island

Teaiwa (2017)

we sweat and cry salt water,
so we know that the ocean
is really in our blood

Teaiwa (2008)

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Introduction

Kia ora orana tatou katoatoa; fakaalofa lahi atu; tena kotou, tena kotou, tena kotou katoa.

The words above are greetings in the languages of the Cook Islands and Niue, the places from which my Pacific ancestors came, and Aotearoa/New Zealand the country where I

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currently live and work. More specifically, I acknowledge my ancestors from Alofi North (Niue), Puakeri and Ngati Akatauirā, (Nga Pu Toru, Cook Islands), as well as those from Hamburg (Germany) and Birmingham (England). Within Aotearoa/New Zealand I acknowledge Ngati Whatua iwi (tribe). I identify as a Cook Island, Niuean New Zealander with close family ties to Papua New Guinea. At the turn of the 20th century, my maternal grandfather was born to Niuean-Cook Islands missionaries in Papua New Guinea. About fifty years later, the father of my children was born into the Yeyeu clan in Wanigela, Oro Province, Papua New Guinea.

These temporal and spatial co-ordinates provide an important initial Oceanic positioning of the insights that form the basis of this paper. While this positioning may have minimal meaning to those readers less familiar with the Pacific region or with the Pacific countries I mention, it is offered to signal the existence of intellectual trajectories that emerge from worldviews constituted from places erroneously considered 'out-of-the-way'. Following Anna Tsing's (1993) revivalist understanding of 'out-of-the-way', I argue that relational positioning made possible by indigeneity invites other ways of framing the links between centres and peripheries and everything in between. All the places I mentioned are central to my life, the lives of my family, and many others. It is where we take our original compass bearings, where our gendered and racialized bodies are shaped, where our gendered knowledge practices began, where we learn to think critically. It is the nature of indigeneity in the praxis of my development geography—the configurations of relationships that systematically animate the diverse conceptual and material characteristics of my scholarship and teaching in development geography.

The intersections of gender and indigeneity are especially palpable for those who position themselves as feminist indigenous decolonial development scholars of the Global South. This mouthful of positionalities means that as development scholars we are also keenly aware of enduring inequalities, pressing poverty, urgent environmental issues and tragic human rights abuses. Not only do we read about them, but they constantly and directly touch our lives and those of our families and communities. Further, tragedies of domestic violence, the lack of reproductive and sexual rights and health care, and constant sexual harassment in public spaces and in workplaces are ongoing and regular worries requiring our compassion and often advocacy. These are the tangible effects of practices of racism, sexism and economic inequality that dominate the academy and the cities, towns and villages that we live in. Mostly, we respond with a generosity that emerges from a respect for relationships between people, between people and places, and between people and other beings. But this lived experience compels us to heighten our commitment to decolonize thinking, language and practice in our teaching and research. Overall, the imperatives around these issues are not just highly personalized but they are also gendered and heavy with generational trauma.

So, how do feminist indigenous decolonial scholars contribute to knowledge-making, cognisant of the processes that establish knowledge and practices of knowledge-making as powerful in the academy? How do we deal with the tensions of indigeneity, feminism and coloniality in their relational forms? How do we maintain a position that is cognisant but de-linked from dominant frames of knowledge? How do we practice re-thinking from other worldviews, themselves not innocent of tensions? How do we do this when our everyday lives are punctuated by the realities and impacts of unjust and racialized economic, political, cultural, environmental and social systems. In this paper, the audacity of the ocean offers a metaphorical opportunity to carefully reconcile these tensions and provide trajectories for decolonial knowledge-making. But it

also offers a material way of understanding the on-going work with ‘tensions’ and disruptions in their ever present but changeable forms. The ocean is ever present, but also ever changeable: it can sometimes present as glassy, flat and navigable, but it can also be turbulent, rough and treacherous. In the increasingly interconnected world, its changeable character is also felt far from its coastlines.

Underlying the varying and diverse ways in which we work is the concept of **relationality**. This concept is central to both the lives of feminist indigenous decolonial scholars of the global south as well as to scholarly debates, even often for the latter, in their silence (but see for example Mahtani, 2014). Members of our extended kin and social networks are regularly among those unable to pay fees for education or health care; burdened with crippling loan repayments; confronted by poor environmental conditions and physically and emotionally violated by the more powerful. Yet these same people continue to provide comfort to the intellectual soul of scholars who work in the academy but who are often unable to actively engage in the daily lives of their geographically distant kin. Attending to such care responsibilities in material ways which are transformative to the relationships involved can be tragically urgent but, more often, require a slow and careful pace.

Of pace, power and poetry

While a slow pace is one recognizable feature of an explicit feminist ethics of care, this is more than just a time issue—it is about ‘how’ we think from our ‘issues of concern’ (Dombroski, 2018). There are particular, gendered geographies and politics of knowledge which requires shifting between various worlds of knowing—that is from our marked and racialized bodies located in marginalized places (Underhill-Sem, 2003) to the radical work of academic practice (Underhill-Sem, 2017). The disciplinary authority to work with gendered geographies that are fluid, embodied, unplanned and metaphorical still need to be claimed as knowledge making (Basnet *et al.*, 2020; Ingersoll, 2016; Longhurst & Johnston, 2014). In contrast, are those studies that find little need to mention such positionalities, thereby reinscribing unspoken disembodied hegemonic positions of mostly white and well-meaning, and mostly cis gendered scholarship. This paper begins to examine these gendered geographies and politics of knowledge by introducing a conceptual framework that accommodates the particularities of gendered knowledge-making from contemporary oceanic worldviews in the Pacific (Peter, 2000; Teaiwa, 2006; Diaz, 2015) but also in the Caribbean (Mullings, 2012; Skelton, 2016). This is a view that takes account of the deep ocean currents, regardless of one’s proximity to the sea,¹ that constitute the matrices of power and knowledge that underpins research. Decolonial philosopher Lugones (2010: 742) takes a critical feminist perspective in referring to this matrix as the ‘modern, colonial, gender system’, while Mignolo and Walsh (2018) speak of the colonial matrix of power and knowledge. From a Pacific perspective, Hau’ofa (1993) refers to the Pacific region as ‘our sea of islands’ which invites reference to a more fluid image of a matrix—one that includes currents (surface and deep) and tides (with the increase of ‘king tides’²) that are discernible by their felt presence (Newport, 2019) but can also be imperceptible to the untrained eye. Teaiwa (2017) also poetically notes,

in melanesia/the islands/are not/black/
but/the people are/unlike polynesians/
they believe/in/democracy/from ancient/ancestors

These persuasive Oceanic narratives invoke notions of relationality that indigeneity makes possible in the Pacific and allows for both fluidity and mobility, rootedness and grounding in (is)lands (Gegeo, 2001; Clifford, 2001). So, while our analysis can be informed by fluid metaphors, such as that of deep oceanic currents surfacing amongst the messiness of oceanic swells, tides and surges, our positioning can be grounded, in many multiple and/or variable ways (see Kauvaka, 2016). In this paper, I ground myself as a feminist indigenous decolonial scholar of development geography. The deep currents that I begin to examine in this paper are particular forms of sexism and racism. However, other forms of intolerance—especially homophobia—exist in contemporary Pacific worldviews, in some cases dominating them.

While contemporary oceanic worldviews have been acknowledged in many disciplines (see Hau'ofa, 2008 as an exemplar, and more recently Ingersoll, 2016), they are still to be fully articulated in geography. Often this is because of the pressure of time mentioned above, but also because of enduring processes of dismissal consistent with the colonial matrix of power and knowledge. As Liki (2015: 159) notes 'paddling through canonized approaches and frames of thinking that pay scant attention to what matters to us can be an extremely lonely experience'. This paper articulates a decolonial process and analysis shared by geographers who focus on indigeneity and post-colonialism (Howitt, 2020; Coombes *et al.*, 2014; Simmonds, 2011, 2016; Radcliffe, 2017, 2018, 2019). In this paper, I ask how the gendered politics of positionality work in Pacific geographies. That is, once women make the political choice to position ourselves as *of* the Pacific, as distinct from *of* a specific place or places in the Pacific, to what extent does our knowledge enhance our position *vis a vis* others who are operating in the same spheres, such as Pacific men or people who do not have Pacific heritage. This allows me to consider how this is instructive for wider knowledge making projects in geography not just to identify another set of 'differences that make a difference' (Dombroski, 2018) but also because increasingly, deep and worrying, ocean currents in the Pacific are being surfaced. In addition to the surface currents stirred up by increasingly intense winds as a result of unsustainable human activities, these deep ocean currents have a different capacity to swamp contemporary debates because they bring with them much disquiet around race and gender and the return of myths of biological difference as destiny (Tomlinson, 2018). The scholarly discussions that follow will require careful analysis to ensure their capacity to swamp debates is matched by the scholarly ability to ride the metaphorical waves taking account of the metaphorical currents that surface, and always cognisant of the need to also find somewhere to safely anchor from time to time (Kauvaka, 2016). This requires intellectual agility (Underhill-Sem, 2016) but also courage, patience and reflectivity.

Following other scholars of decoloniality, I work to decentre the coloniality of knowledge production in the Pacific, by drawing on the concepts of indigeneity. In this paper, I introduce my reading of this concept and then I touch on two particular ways in which the surfacing of deep ocean currents is revealed and entangled in colonial continuities of belittlement, yet also offers hopeful and careful decolonial scholarly futures. The first is the naming of the Pacific and the second is supervising doctoral women candidates from the Pacific. I provide an analysis of the knowledge practices which surface deep ocean currents, complete with their powerful and problematic elements, to demonstrate the convergence of theories and practices which take seriously indigeneity and feminism.

Indigeneity in the tropics: Pacific scholars in places

Long-standing scholarship around indigenous geographies (Coombes *et al.*, 2014; Radcliffe, 2017, 2018, 2019) has recently expanded to include the interventions of feminist indigenous scholars, albeit not explicitly as geography scholars (Simmonds, 2011; Ingersoll, 2016). What is really notable is that feminist indigenous scholars begin with the hued and sexed body—that often-disavowed territory that messes with ideas of tidy, timely, and solid geographies. Contributions to geography from indigenous Pacific scholars comes in multidisciplinary ways which engage relationality via the intertwined gendered and racialized ways that Pacific people moved across space over historical time. Liki (2015) provides a nuanced understanding of how the *Teina uli* of Samoa—the women descendants of plantation workers bought from Solomon Islands to Samoa in the 1940’s—understand their place in a different Pacific island nation. In comparison with Polynesian Samoans, the bodies of *Teina uli* are marked by their darker shade of brown/black colour and their heightened physicality due to daily plantation work. A key feature of relationships about *Teina uli* is their understanding of kin and women’s relationship to nurture knowledge of kin situated in many and various geographic locations. Yet *Teina uli* stand in stark contrast to the archetypical Samoan women who are proudly light-skinned and less likely to be muscular because their routine lives do not usually involve physical plantation work.

Liki’s (2015) analysis coheres with distinctions made in development geography between indigenous peoples and understandings of indigeneity. Radcliffe (2017) argues that indigenous peoples ‘embody non-western culture-natures’ and indigeneity refers to ‘the quality of being indigenous’ (Radcliffe, 2017: 220). Not with-standing the use of binary thinking of western/non-western, there is value in recognizing the shortcomings of relatively straightforward, objective categories of ‘indigenous peoples’ and instead, to think about the production of indigeneity through:

processual, multi-actor, multi-scalar networks and within specific grounded contexts, each with particular configurations of colonial histories, post-colonial modernities, epistemological-ontological commitments and formulations of difference (Radcliffe, 2017: 221).

Indigeneity, understood in this manner, thus describes a kind of relationship rather than an objective fact, like those rightfully pertaining to concerns addressed in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. In contrast, indigeneity is understood as a concept that focuses on the ‘social, cultural, economic, political, institutional, and epistemic processes through which the meaning of being Indigenous in a particular time and place is constructed’ (Radcliffe, 2017: 21). This segues into the Samoan notion of *teu le va* (Anae, 2010), *vā* (Lilomaiva-Doktor, 2009) or *va fealoaloa’i* (Liki, 2015: 150) commonly referred to as ‘respect that defines the social space between people’. This Samoan relational ethics provides a negotiated space for indigenous theorizing (Mila, 2016) which offers one specific way by which Pacific researchers, research participants and policy-makers are constantly deepening relationships, engaging in knowledge making, but also dealing with development. For many this means, a lot of travel into and around the tropical Pacific. Over the 24 months prior to drafting this paper, I travelled to Fiji (three times), Tonga, Papua New Guinea (three times), Hawaii, Solomon Islands, Cook Islands and Vanuatu. The reasons for travelling to these places, ranging in time from 1 week to a month, varied from attending to family responsibilities, participating in conferences, undertaking research and sharing research knowledge. Each time, the relationships that indigeneity makes

possible were crucial to the processes that allow for new forms of knowledge to surface—although rarely was this explicit. The activities that I was involved with included the personal process of relocating a burial place, professional practices of participating in a new research agency, and scholarly practices of interviewing key informants. In the process of enacting these kinds of practices, prior relationships are invoked—some that began over 50 years ago, others that were more recent. But by invoking these relationships, another form of knowledge-making occurred. Some of this will find its way in to scholarly papers, teaching or discussions, but many of the insights that the practices of indigeneity provide will remain knowable only to a few. In this way, gendered social relations of power that come from diverse worldviews are carefully but selectively sustained.

This notion of indigeneity recognizes the critical importance of relationships of power (Kirsch, 2017) which encourages radically different kinds of field work—such as that which involves being constantly mobile. In the process, this mobility recalibrates decolonial practices of engagement. However, it can also lead to alienation, stranger making, and desirable diversity (Naepi, 2019) which in turn requires a generous embodied feminist politics of practice, with an edge—and this is the feminist oceanic audacity of embodied engagement. Often when I return to Aotearoa/New Zealand from the Pacific, my body is marked in new and other ways. The gradual browning of my skin in combination with the gradual greying of my hair related to temporal processes of aging has had the effect of my ‘looking more Pacific’, as more than one colleague has remarked. It is hard to disentangle the easily observable—skin colour, hairstyle, bodily shape but these are precisely the everyday racialized comments that gesture towards one of the deepest ocean currents in the Pacific—that which speaks to race, gender, class and status. These are some of the deep ocean currents that current politics of indigeneity often fail to engage with. Yet, Pacific feminists have been far bolder and called out injustices based on race, class, sexual orientation in the inaugural Pacific Feminist Forum in 2016 (Underhill-Sem, 2019). The affective and intellectual engagements of different parts of the Pacific cohere in particular places and times but require assembling of a particular kind.

Surfacing deep ocean currents: naming the Pacific

The Pacific has long been considered of minor importance to global interests although it has recently been recognized as an area of significant geopolitical strategic importance given its relative proximity to Asia in its new configurations (Capie, 2017; Bedford, 2011). It has also been seen as a litmus test for the earliest comprehensive impacts of climate change resulting in climate migrants (e.g. Barnett, 2017). The Pacific has been used as the most suitable backyard for French nuclear testing (MacLellan, 2017) but also as the ‘Blue Pacific’ with a significant place in production of global protein (Keen *et al.*, 2018). Positioning the Pacific globally and regionally, invites a discussion of the ways in which various naming practices reflect diverse ways of recognizing and understanding the Pacific beyond any deficit perspective.

The Pacific Ocean³ is a vast fluid expanse of our planet with features that are important geo-physically and geopolitically. The people who call the wider Pacific, or the parts of it that lap their shores, ‘home’ know it by many names. The Maori of Aotearoa/New Zealand call the Pacific Ocean *te Moana Nui a Kiwa* in reference to Eastern Pacific ancestral stories which recognize *Kiwa* as one of the main divine guardians of the ocean: *moana* means the sea or ocean and *nui* means great or big—hence the

‘Great sea or ocean of Kiwa’. This is also the name used by Mangaian who live on the southern-most island in the Cook Islands, although unlike in Aotearoa/New Zealand where there are no clear boundaries, they use it in a limited way to refer to the ocean between Mangaia and Aotearoa/New Zealand, not the entire Pacific Ocean. This kind of naming reflects a tradition that is both descriptive and ancestral. The descriptive component can be poetic, ancestral or obvious. There is much that can be said about these traditions but I focus here on the ancestral connection. Its main importance is that it allows for the possibility of claiming particular rights to land, or to the sea, by virtue of being able to trace one’s lineage back to ancestors who are widely accepted as belonging to that land or those seas. This tracing can be via direct lines of named people and their off-spring. They may also include historical punctuations in the form of stories that allow for longer undefined passages of time which connect the present and the ancestral past. In this way, the naming of places is a political act of recognition with an expansive geographical and historical imaginary.

The gendered politics of these acts of ancestral tracing is varied with names that are sometimes ungendered and at other times with gender being of huge importance. Recognizing these gendered acts of naming allows for more diverse ways of understanding kin. For instance, men and women who may not have actually biologically fathered or mothered a child are acknowledged as a father or mother if they feed and care for a child. The imaginaries about the Pacific region that emerge from within are many and varied and gendered. The deeds and dispositions of named ancestors as well as their gender were knowable although from diverse of perspectives. The many languages spoken in the Pacific provide a useful gauge for understanding the diversity of imaginaries which are further multiplied and complicated through the lens of gender, time and place. This is a core part of oceanic indigeneity.

However, Pacific imaginaries also find their way into popular culture, along with particularly limited gendered interpretations of them. The Hollywood blockbuster movie *Moana* revives the debates around essentializing colonized gender imaginaries of men and women (*e-Tangata*, 2016) and reminds us of the enduring and deep currents that entered the Pacific region with empire building and colonization (Diaz, 2010). These currents mingle with other flows that constitute the Pacific Ocean some benevolent but some equally problematic—processes of racism and homophobia which damage many contemporary Pacific people and communities. In mainstream scholarship, the naming of the Pacific is deeply connected to practices of empire building and colonization which contributes first, to the small number of names of the Pacific that entered wider circulation and second to the enduring use of these names with little reference to their introduced origins. Increasingly, growing numbers of Pacific diaspora scholars are unproblematically referring to regions in the Pacific as Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia instead of retrieving indigenous names.

Sixteenth century Portuguese and Spanish ‘explorers’ referred to the Pacific Ocean region as the ‘South Seas’ or the peaceful ‘Pacific’ (Douglas, 2015; Somerville, 2010, 2017). Early colonists and scholars of geography and anthropology preferred the racist divisions which unproblematically remain in currency, although with a revisionist strand (see Kabutaulaka, 2015) of Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia. Pacific humanist scholar Hau’ofa (1993) spoke of the vast unbounded contemporary ‘Oceania’ (Hau’ofa, 2008) which has provided fertile comfort for many scholars and artists. Since 2015, Pacific heads of governments began to speak of ‘Large Ocean States’, in their attempt to subvert the minimalizing international discourse of Small Island Developing States (SIDS). These are useful efforts from those whose lived experience involves

often daily relationships with the ocean—traversing it, eating from it, retreating from it—and recognizes the audacity of the ocean—the bold and diverse ways in which it invites attention through ancestral naming practices. This oceanic perspective enlivens the disembodied articulations in geographic scholarship of ‘wet ontologies’ (Steinberg & Peter, 2015) and ‘blue economies’ (Winder & Le Heron, 2017).

The last 25 years have seen a tragic number of extreme weather events in the Pacific region with lives lost, land rendered uninhabitable, livelihoods smashed and with this, new ways of understanding the Pacific are emerging. Theological rationales (e.g. Vaka’uta, 2015; Rubow & Bird, 2016; Cox *et al.*, 2018), vulnerability discourses (e.g. Barnett & Waters, 2016) and moral expositions (e.g. Weir *et al.*, 2017) intermingle. They also point to the audacity of the Pacific Ocean—the wealth of the resources it contains and yet the disdain that it also delivers to humankind, even those who call it home. But when research and relationships are embedded in the Pacific oceanic realm, we constantly recall the different practices of naming the Pacific and develop an astute understanding of how these different naming traditions reveal different relationships to the Pacific. Added to this bold and fluid spatial imaginary are the many and various temporal dimensions of change. For instance, truncated genealogies connect present day generations to ancestors and provide a temporal framework to understand both relatively slow onset weather events and rapid climatic events that transform lands into seas, as well as the uptake of new economic and social practices.

For those with a ‘life-long embeddedness in the places and with people with whom we conduct research’ (MacPherson, 2016: 11) we can be audacious in our oceanic thinking. This means that rather than be destabilized or rendered paralysed by the rain and winds that come from many directions, that are variously deflected or intensified, deep ocean currents can keep us on track. Yet when we surface these deep ocean currents, we need to also consider what else emerges. In particular, we need to recognize the ways in which our region is increasingly divided by exclusionary processes of capital appropriation and distribution, and intolerance of particular groups marked by their race, gender or religious ideology. Throughout the contemporary Pacific, notions of indigeneity are emerging as evidence of celebrated resistance to post-colonial development anxieties. These relationships circulate around popular culture, and imaginaries of Pacific paradise (Tamaira & Fonoti, 2018), but also and equally problematically around the challenges of entangled ideologies of gender, race and religion (Alexeyeff & Kihara, 2018; Schoeffel *et al.*, 2018; Hattori, 2018). And it is here that long-standing intolerances especially around gender and race also surface. How then can a gendered politics of positionality engage with the emerging positionalities that uncritically allow for such intolerances which are drivers behind many of the challenges facing scholars and practitioners of development geographies. Oceanic tropes in the Pacific, and elsewhere, have the analytic bite to deal with such big issues while still being on the move. Such dynamic intellectual agility runs counter to the tropical imageries of languid indifference, even more so with gendered inflections.

Surfacing deep ocean currents: knowledge-making and doctoral supervision

In the British tradition, there was a close connection between powerful religious interests and the establishment of scholarly studies. Overtime, the academy has become an important secular institution of higher learning but knowledge-making in the academy retained the hierarchical and masculinist imprints of its establishment. One area where these imprints are still evident is the way in which doctoral students are trained and, in

particular, the knowledge building relationship between doctoral students and their supervisors. This is a particularly important relationship and supervisors are variously seen as fonts of knowledge, gatekeepers to research sites, holders of research funds and architects of future careers. But students are also imagined as being highly valued if, for instance, their grades are stellar, they have research funding, their topic fits into the research areas of the supervisor, and/or their geographical area of research complements the interests of the supervisor. Increasingly, the process of doctoral supervision has been subjected to the audit culture of most modern universities with criteria for academic promotions including the number of completed doctoral students, often weighted by equity considerations. These audit shifts create perverse incentives for becoming a supervisor of doctoral students with adverse impacts on knowledge making that needs further scrutiny. Interrogating the knowledge-making relationships between supervisors and students surfaces many deep ocean currents.

It is widely acknowledged that the supervision of doctoral students is a multi-faceted process of knowledge making, but there is little formal training in being a supervisor despite the critical importance of this relationship to knowledge-making. Instead, supervisors revert to their own experience of their doctoral supervision. I argue that doctoral supervision should be treated like fieldwork with all the preparation needed for success in fieldwork—that is with the ‘field’ being more than just distant geographical places. I want to claim PhD supervision as ‘field work’ following the recent paper of Cuomo and Massaro (2016) that builds on a tradition of feminist geographers troubling the notion of fieldwork and its location in geography. Cuomo and Massaro (2016) describe practices whereby as ‘intimate insiders’, they engage in boundary marking to manage pre-existing relationships. I argue that by considering PhD supervision as field-work, particular forms of ethical engagement, and following Cindi Katz (1994: 67), ‘multiple positionings of intellectuals and the means by which knowledge is produced’ are made apparent.

In a six-month period in 2018–19, three doctoral students from the Pacific, and one from Peru, writing about the Pacific, completed their doctorates.⁴ All were women. Christina (Tina) Newport is from the Cook Islands and her thesis is in Development Studies entitled ‘Vaka Moana as policy space: navigating the Cook Islands’ case of climate change mobility’. Tina writes ‘as an indigenous Cook Island woman’ and builds from her lived experience as a Cook Island development consultant to interrogate the making of critical policies relating to climate change and climate mobility. She draws on a framework of relationality to show how Cook Island policy spaces and sovereignty are fluid and dynamic concepts that allow indigenous narratives to disrupt conventional approaches to oceanic island state politics. Ema Tagicakibau is from Fiji and her thesis is in Political Science entitled ‘Gender and militarization in Fiji’. She was a democratically elected politician in Fiji, who, in 2000, was held at gunpoint by soldiers and other ‘boys’ during the civilian coup led by George Speight. Ema uses a feminist intersectionality approach to examine the diversity of women’s standpoints in response to militarization, highlighting multiple sites of social identities and relations including gender, race and ethnicity, class and status, age, religion, and sexuality. Karamia Muller is from Samoa and her thesis was in Architecture entitled ‘Siapo online: a gendered analysis of digital space’. Kara writes as an indigenous Samoan woman who challenges ontological priorities that contradict her own lived experience. Maine Astonitas is from Peru and her thesis is in Development Studies entitled ‘Seasons of Change: Ni-Vanuatu and the Recognized Seasonal Employer Scheme (RSE)’. She drew on her own

migration experiences and used a governmentality approach to show the transformations of subjectivities of the workers in often disempowering ways.

Together, these theses⁵ reveal a depth of thinking by Pacific women, and one from Latin America working in the Pacific, who situate themselves variously as indigenous women. In the Cook Islands and Samoa, this subjectivity is unproblematic, but the racial politics of Fiji means the notion of indigeneity is up for debate. All these Pacific scholars understand the toll that is routinely paid by scholars from the Pacific who occupy spaces typically as minorities even when they are speaking in research forums where their communities and homelands are the focal point. Further tolls are borne along the research journey.

For these students, over the course of the several years thinking through theoretical frameworks, managing empirical material, reading and writing, life and death continued—and with it a range of emotions. Grieving the loss of a beloved sister to a pancreatic cancer;⁶ anguishing over the tragedy of a niece who was a 34 year-old mother of four dying at the hands of her husband; welcoming the safe birth of a healthy grandchild; and dealing with one's own debilitating health issues. Grief, anguish, discomfort but also joy, unconnected to thesis writing, were never far away.

So, I ask, what is it about the western academy that we all wanted so much to be part of? We all recognized the academy as—at best—a place of historically white cis male privilege. At worst, we all experienced violations of our lived experience in the Pacific from the hierarchical, masculinist practices of knowledge-making in development studies, political science, architecture and geography. Yet there was a determination and an audacity to provide other ways of knowing the places we call home. Not places we return to, but places that are part of us. Places that we are embedded in.

But as Teaiwa (2006: 83) argued 'we must not stop our investigations, explorations, ruminations in Pacific studies simply because the world marketplace of knowledge does not value this region as we do. And neither must we give in to the tempting rhetoric of Pacific exceptionalism'. Rather, we need to trust our ability to discern the useful from the misleading, the insightful from the pedestrian, the empowering from the exploitative. When we do this if we can surface deep ocean currents in ways that are meaningful, insightful and empowering—even as they may also be deeply troubling.

Here I want to briefly pivot towards another place I do field work—the gender and development space in the Pacific. One particularly troubling reality in the Pacific that runs deep is the continued gender inequalities in political representation, economic empowerment, environmental justice and sexual and reproductive health and rights. While many may tire of this on-going challenge and argue we should just 'get on' with it, there is much that is troubling about the endurance of the tragedy of gender inequality that requires careful analysis of gendered social relations. Analytically the intersections of women's human rights and women's care economies provide ways to surface the deep ocean currents—currents that are critical to the larger swells that direct movement in the Pacific. And as these currents surface, they disrupt long standing gendered politics. More diverse women are moving into leadership positions in local communities, towns and cities, nations and regional organizations. The rights of diverse women to be in public and professional places are normalized, as are their rights to speak and lead. The challenge to established masculinities and femininities is unmistakable.

Conclusions

I came to the discussions presented here as a feminist scholar of working-class Pacific island descent. This means two things—first, is that in my teaching and research I constantly come across reference to either people like ‘me’ or like my family in Papua New Guinea or the Cook Islands or in Aotearoa/NZ. It always takes me aback a little to read research proposals or papers that focus on my home village or town or island, or on people like me or like my -in-laws (see Underhill-Sem, 2016) my niece (Underhill-Sem, 2018, 2003), or cousin-sister⁷ (Underhill-Sem, 2004). When I acknowledge my lived experience, there is a ‘charming wave’ of acknowledgment, but my views are considered polemic. Or when I take a less impassioned scholarly position, I get the look that it is still ‘a little biased’? But we need to be clear that in the future, there will be more and more people like me undertaking research and this means we all need to be intellectually agile, respectful and open (Underhill-Sem, 2017).

As with much postcolonial scholarship, identity journeys enacted by scholars play a critical role in situating the revisionist perspective and are therefore not easy to curtail. The challenge is that such scholarship also articulates a nuanced argument from which future analytical journeys can proceed—for the authors as well as readers. Hence the move to decolonial scholarship. My contribution offers a modest but hopefully constructive engagement into the gendered political positionalities in geography. First, to activate a notion of indigeneity in the Pacific so that we are also able to surface those deep ocean currents and so can speak about race, class and sexuality; second to cultivate a generous embodied feminist politics of practice which cares but which also calls out the privilege of masculine, mostly white, researchers; and third to illustrate how ‘fieldwork’ works for those with gendered positionalities on the Pacific.

I wrote much of this paper from two different small islands—off the coast of Vanua Levu, and on the shores of Erakor lagoon in Vanuatu. The blues and greens of the sea, the sky and the flora took me back to my islands from growing up and living in the Cooks Islands, Papua New Guinea and Samoa. But there were differences. The steady cool wind—more than a breeze; the lack of reef fish for breakfast, the Turkish and American law students working on climate change in the Pacific and the colourful kayaks paddling amongst small fishing canoes. But like the flax bush my daughter trimmed recently in my garden in Aotearoa—we cannot just harvest the emerging leaves to weave *kete*—we also need to plant flax and care for it. Sometimes, this means discarding the older outer leaves after their productive and protective role has been completed. But consider also the making of the ubiquitous coconut leaf broom—known variably for instance as the *kikau* broom (Cook Islands), the *sala* (Samoa) the *sasa* (Fiji). The longest ribs come from the branches which stand upright on mature coconut trees and so the brooms crafted from them are softer and I have been told that that are particularly useful inside dwellings. However, brooms constructed with the shorter ribs come from older branches, some fallen, some especially harvested. They are harder and better for moving difficult rubbish. This is how the audacity of oceanic places in the Pacific, also delivers.

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developing states in all their relational complexities. Thanks also to the Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography which has allowed me to present and contribute to the on-going project of a discipline that should not just aspire to be creative, constructive and hopeful but is determined to also be inclusive, diverse and just.

I also pay tribute to my colleague and friend Teresia Teaiwa whose untimely passing as a result of pancreatic cancer in 2017 was sorely felt by scholars in the Pacific and beyond. However, her poetry and scholarship remind us of the existence of deep ocean currents. Tere often talked about the concept of fluidity in the Pacific (Teaiwa & Slatter, 2013) which underpinned the engagement of Pacific feminist scholars in various social justice movements like Dr Claire Slatter in the feminist movement DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for the New Era <http://dawnnet.org/>) in the global South, Dr Vanessa Griffen in the campaign to abolish nuclear weapons (<https://www.icanw.org/au/pacific/>) and Tere's own engagement in the on-going campaign to Free West Papua from the violent rule of Indonesia (<https://www.freewestpapua.org/?s=Teresia+Teaiwa>).

Endnotes

- 1 Not all Pacific peoples have the same relationship with the sea or ocean especially those who live far from the sight, smell and feel of the sea, for example those who live in the Highlands of PNG. However, in this article, I purposefully invoke an oceanic metaphor as a heuristic device related to other spatial imaginaries in the Pacific, such as Ingersoll (2016) 'seascape epistemologies', as a way to invite deeper critical thinking about indigeneity and relationality within Pacific scholarship. I fully expect my colleagues from Pacific places where oceanic metaphors have little purchase will contribute to this critical thinking.
- 2 King tides are high spring tides that occur a few times a year, also known as perigean spring tides. The 'king tide' term originated in Australia, Aotearoa/ New Zealand, and other Pacific nations.
- 3 The entire Pacific Ocean is tropical, temperate and arctic. This combination creates the 'blue' global protein which is of critical economic and political importance to the small island Pacific states.
- 4 I was equal supervisor for three theses and a minor supervisor for one—see note 5.
- 5 In this paper I am referring in particular to the work of students of Pacific heritage, as well as one with Peruvian heritage working on a Pacific topic. Christine A. Newport, 2019, *Vaka Moana as Policy Space: Navigating the Cook Island Case of Climate Change Mobility*, Phd Development Studies, equal co-supervision with John Hay; Ema Tagicakibau, 2019, *Gender and Militarization in Fiji*, Phd Politics, equal co-supervision with Steve Ratuva and Anita Lacey; Karamia Muller, 2019, *Siapo Online: A Gendered analysis of Digital Space*, Phd Architecture, major supervisor was Deidre Brown. Lya Maine Astonitas Villafuerte, 2018, *Ni-Vanuatu and the Recognized Seasonal Employer Scheme (RSE)*, Phd Development Studies, equal co-supervision with Christina Stringer. All are available on-line at the University of Auckland.
- 6 A disease that disproportionately afflicts women of Afro-American descent like Teresia Teaiwa, but also Pacific women.
- 7 A 'cousin-sister' is a cousin who is gendered female.

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