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# TE IRATANGATA

WOMEN, EQUITY AND ACTIVISM IN AOTEAROA



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# I WEAR MY PRIDE UPON MY SKIN: BECOMING MORE OF WHO I AM

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*I wear my pride upon my skin*

*My pride has always been within*

*I wear my strength upon my face*

*Comes from another time and place*

*Bet you didn't know that every line has a message for me.*

*(Lyrics from the single 'Moko' by Moana and The Moa Hunters, released in 1998)*

## Introduction

Tua - beyond. Kiri - skin. Combined, tuakiri is a Māori (Indigenous Peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand) term for identity or that which lies beyond the skin. So, what if your skin does not match the phenotype of your tuakiri Māori - Māori identity? An identity which you have always known is you, one which you have actively and proudly fostered for yourself as a wahine Māori and mother. An identity that you teach in / about, research and write. What if your white skin offers all of the profound privilege that the society you live in affords your phenotype, but when you reveal your Māori identity - who I am beyond my skin - there is discomfort, confusion, distrust, and sometimes anger as the 'other' reconciles what their eyes see with what their ears hear, bound tightly by the limitations of their own storied definitions of what being Māori means. Now take that

white skin and engrave upon its face the markings of Māori ancestry, a moko kauae (traditional Māori chin tattoo) as a powerful symbol of tuakiri Māori, displayed permanently and visibly on the skin, and more radically, upon the face. Kia ora (hello) meet me.

On my mother's side I am a wahine Māori of the Te Rarawa and Ngāpuhi tribal collectives in the Far North of Aotearoa New Zealand. On my father's side I am English from South Hampton, England. I was born and raised in Auckland (the largest metropolitan centre in Aotearoa New Zealand), which is approximately a four-and-a-half hour drive from my tribal lands. I describe myself as tribally connected and urban located.

I do not possess a traditional Māori phenotype. My hair is red. My eyes are green, and my skin is white and freckled. As a teenager, I determined to learn my language as one internal (but invisible) cultural marker of my Māori identity and in doing so returned to my whānau the Indigenous tongue that was silenced through the assimilation of my grandfather's generation. Now as a mature wahine Māori and mother, I declare my Māori ancestry in an external and visible way through the moko kauae I carry on my face.

The turn of this century, saw a rapid and powerful return among wahine Māori to carry moko kauae as a mark of pride upon our skin, a resistance and renewal of wahine Māori identity (Te Awekotuku, 2007). While colonial oppressions of the twentieth century saw a massive decline in wahine Māori receiving moko kauae, the practice never disappeared completely. The last decade has seen a huge revival amongst wahine Māori of all ages taking up moko kauae throughout the country.

Māori scholar and moko kauae wearer Dr Ngahua Te Awekotuku and her team documented this phenomenon in their critically acclaimed book *Mau Moko* (2007) prompting a resurgence, not only in the receiving and wearing of moko kauae, but also scholarly writing about moko kauae (see Higgins, 2004; Te Awekotuku, et al., 2007; Penehira, 2011). Concurrently, community-based wānanga (conversations), online writing, and photographic exhibitions led by wahine Māori, for wahine Māori, have created spaces for wahine Māori to discuss moko kauae on our terms.

I like to tell stories. One of my favourite bedtime questions from my daughters when they were young was, "Māmā, tell us a story from when you were growing up". So, while autoethnography is a new theoretical field for me, storytelling envelops my wahine Māori shoulders like a comfortable, well-worn, and familiar smelling blanket. I understand autoethnography as yet another 'space between', another borderland encounter of storytelling, research, and academia (Russell, 1999) and that the autobiographical moves to the auto-ethnographical "at the point where the author understands their personal history to be implicated in larger social formations and historical processes" (Russell, 1999, p. 47). More specifically, I lean into Indigenous autoethnography, "the cultural interface where

Indigenous knowledge meets Western academia” (Houston, 2007, p. 45) to illuminate my complex dual identities as a way to navigate the borderlands of living as a white skinned wahine Māori wearing moko kauae.

Roaming these borderlands, these ‘spaces between’ (Webber, 2008), is sometimes a place of belonging and comfort and at other times is fraught with conflict and displacement. Telling my stories of ‘once upon a time’ is one way this wahine Māori makes sense of her world and who I am today. In this article I share stories of being and ‘becoming more me’ as I sought ways to bring my tuakiri – that which lies beyond my skin – to the surface. I do this for myself, but more importantly for my daughters and (future) grandchildren as I theorise the intersection of identity ascribed to my skin colour, the Māori identity of my whakapapa (ancestry), and now, through the inscribing of identity upon my face as an uncompromising expression of myself as a wahine Māori.

### Māori identity IS Whakapapa – full stop.

Whakapapa, or Māori ancestry, is widely accepted as the key determinant in a Māori identity claim. Whakapapa connects people and places through time, provides a conceptual framework with which to view the world and, in Ani Mikaere’s, words, “shapes the way we think about ourselves and about the issues that confront us from one day to the next” (2011, p. 286). Māori determine the issue of identity in our own way and on our own terms. Narrower definitions based on cultural competency such as language proficiency are generally rejected, acknowledging that colonising forces rendered generations of Māori unable, and then sometimes unwilling, to express a positive Māori identity. As Arohia Durie points out, whakapapa is “a governing factor in a Māori identity claim and in the establishment of rights and obligations which accrue in respect of that identity” (1997, p. 152). My responsibility to my whakapapa is to actively express a positive Māori identity and to pass that on to my children. Our language was the first identity marker to be reclaimed and revitalised and now I seek to normalise moko kauae in my whānau.

My mother and I received our moko kauae at the same time and are the only moko kauae wearers in our extended whānau. My earliest encounter with moko kauae was as a teenager when we would draw marks on our chins for cultural performances. These felt-tip squiggles were what we ‘girls in the kapa haka’ loved wearing the most. It made us ‘feel’ Māori and ‘look’ Māori. One rule was that you were not allowed to eat whilst wearing your drawn on moko kauae – not for any deeply spiritual reasons but in case you smudged it before performing – so we would not eat for as long as we could after a performance, until hunger got the better of us and we would reluctantly wipe it off.

Growing up I knew I was Māori because I had Māori ancestry despite constant challenges that questioned my identity because of my appearance. For as long as I can remember, my ‘non-Māori’ phenotype has presented challenges to claiming and asserting a Māori identity. I can recall being six or seven years old and playing with my Māori cousins at my grandparents’ house when I realised for the first time that I looked different to them.

*Mum comes outside and puts sunscreen on me. That thick, sticky old type of sunscreen. I squirm and wonder to myself, “Why she is not putting it on anyone else?” I look at my skin. I look at their skin and realise that I am different; I am white and have freckles. I think to myself, “I am the only one with freckles*

*and I look different.” In that moment I wish that I am brown like my cousins. Mum reassures me that my Māori whakapapa means I am ‘Māori on the inside’ – beyond my skin. But I want to be Māori like my cousins are Māori – Māori on the outside too. I wait, thinking. She finishes slathering on the sunscreen. I sneak around the back of the shed and wash it off. Maybe I can make my skin brown like theirs. Several hours later in the baking New Zealand sun I learn the hard way that that was not a good idea.*

My white freckled skin, red hair, and green eyes meant that I desired a more discernible set of identity markers to support my growing sense of my Māori identity.



Front row of the ‘multicultural group’ 1981



The whitest girl in kapa haka (Māori cultural group 1991)

I was born in 1976, a critical historical turning point for Māori identity (Rostenberg, 2010), known as the Māori renaissance (Harris, 2004; Walker, 1990) when Māori activism fought to resist acculturating social and governmental pressures. The Māori renaissance and concurrent feminist movements provided my mother with an ‘identity crisis’, a key turning point in her own identity development to ‘reclaim’ a Māori identity for herself and for her children. In a 2017 study I lead on wahine Māori as critical reclaimers of Māori identity, she said:

*It was about me being prepared to stand up and say if I want my children to live strong and positive as Māori then I have to do something about it (Smith, 2017, p.156).*

The 1980s in Aotearoa New Zealand continued as a time of change, protest, and reclamation. Ironically, it was within the education system – the very institution that served to assimilate my grandfather’s generation – that I began to learn Māori language and culture, awakening within me a desire to proudly claim my Māori identity.

A key cultural activity at our secondary school was kapa haka where myself and my predominantly Māori friends further developed our growing Māori identity as part of a whānau where we supported and learnt alongside each other. We knew we were Māori yet still I looked different to those who did not know me beyond my skin. After leading our kapa haka at a regional competition, my 16-year-old self was interviewed on national radio by a Māori radio announcer:

*Alright, kia ora, we are back. We have just seen Taiohi Tātaki from Massey High School take the stage and I have here in front of me [finds his notes] Lisa Smith. Kia ora Lisa.*

*Kia ora, kei te pēhea koe? [how are you?]*

*Wow! Okay? Yes, kei te pai [I am good]. I have to say Lisa you are the whitest and red headed Māori I have seen? Are you really Māori?*

*[I responded in Māori although I was not yet a confident speaker] heck yes I am! I am not a potato, brown on the outside and white on the inside ... instead I am a jaffa!*

When I look back now, I am embarrassed that I used this disparaging description of assimilated Māori as potatoes who are deemed brown skinned but white thinking. Instead, I referenced an iconic Aotearoa New Zealand confectionery that is red on the outside and chocolate brown on the inside. This encounter reminded me that, while I might have Māori whakapapa, I needed to develop other outward markers of Māori identity such as my language.

When I started secondary school, I was placed in the ‘top’ academic class. After one week I was miserable. While I ‘looked’ like the other kids, I felt I didn’t belong. Following some robust discussions with the school, my mother made the decision to move me to the whānau class – a class established on Māori values and beliefs – effectively taking me from the top stream academic class to one of the lowest. My mother shared this story with me:

*When we moved you to the whānau class some of the teachers said you were ‘too bright’ for that class. Being in the whānau class was seen as a negative move. I think you had to work harder because many of those kids came from whānau who could not support them like we could support you. It was important to me that you learnt that you have a responsibility to yourself to succeed but you also have a responsibility to help others. It is not a ‘success at all costs’ scenario. (Smith, 2017, p. 9)*

My mother faced an appalling, yet still common dilemma for many Māori parents: a choice between academic achievement or developing a positive Māori identity and access to the Māori world. Being a young wahine Māori in a large mainstream secondary school in the 1990s was not easy.

*As a teenager I was heavily involved in kapa haka, learning my language at the school marae and in the whānau class. Like many of my Māori friends we wore taonga (carved bone or greenstone adornments) around our necks as an outward expression of our Māori identity. My mother had gifted my taonga to me and I wore it proudly as a sign of my ‘Māoriness’. One day just before a physical education (PE) class the teacher told me “that Mow-ree thing” would have to come off as it was jewellery and therefore, according to the rules, was dangerous. I informed her, in my assertive yet undoubtedly immature teenage language, that it was not jewellery and was of great cultural significance to me. She dismissed my comment saying that if she let me wear it, she would have to let others wear their ‘jewellery’ and besides, it was still dangerous. I asked her whom it might endanger and continued to explain that it had been placed on me using karakia [Māori blessing] and could not be removed. Before I knew what was happening, she produced a pair of scissors and cut the taonga off by its cord. It fell to the ground and a small piece broke off. When I told my mother she was enraged and stormed up to the school principal. The teacher was made to apologise to me – which as a teenager is in itself quite satisfying – but we were still not allowed to wear taonga in PE class. Instead, we enjoyed coming up with new and ingenious ways to hide our taonga and keep them safe, delighting in our ability to deceive the PE teachers. I still have that taonga. It reminds me that the struggle is not old, and it is not over. What was once cut from my neck – an outward symbol of my identity – can symbolically be taken and damaged in other ways. (Smith, 2017, p. 165)*

Encountering decolonising Indigenous theory through a PhD, and so many stories and experiences of identity later, I was ready to receive a taonga that, unlike the bone carving above, could never be forcibly taken from me. As Netana Whakaari of Waimana is recorded as saying:

*You may lose your most valuable property... you may be robbed of all your most-prized possessions; but of your moko you cannot be deprived except by death; it will be your ornament and your companion until your last day (Cowan, 1921, p. 214).*

In my early forties I received my moko kauae.

*I lay on the tā moko table in the living room of my mother’s house surrounded by our whānau and friends. My young nieces and nephews run about, playing, laughing, tussling like puppies. They come over to the table peering, curious for a moment about what Nana and Aunty Hinekura are doing to their faces, before running off again. The older children sit there, interested – in between text messages. The room is filled with songs softly sung and laughter, some tears and some gentle teasing. Someone jokes “Bro it will be like tattooing dot to dot with her freckles eh?” Our kai tā moko (Māori skin carver), with gentle blessings murmured, and reassuring hands ready, brought to the surface that which lies beyond our skin, to rest upon our skin. It is our identity as Māori women – tihei mauri moko!*

Walking the world with moko kauae on white skin is complex. Sometimes I am met with stares, as eyes take longer than is polite to make sense of what they see – moko kauae on white skin. I can almost see the sense-making process, as they sift through files for something – anything – to help them understand what they are seeing. Sometimes I am met with smiles and a pleasant ‘kia ora!’ as eyes immediately recognise that my moko kauae identifies me as Māori. On occasion, Māori eyes will look at my moko kauae and white skin with suspicion – why does that white woman wear our ancestral markings? It is the older, white male demographic, however, that appear most offended by my appearance and feel most entitled to tell me, a complete stranger, that I am ugly or a disgrace (read: race traitor) and ‘why on earth would you do that to your face?’

As such, I have developed a set of coping strategies each ready to be used depending entirely on my mood in the moment. Sometimes I will respond with kindness and patience, sometimes with hostility. Mostly I am indifferent to the stares and side glances. Pre-moko kauae, I would make eye contact with strangers as they passed, now I am more likely to employ a middle-distance stare as I walk down the street – it saves me the energy of trying to interpret looks. I am not sure that my moko kauae on my white skin will ever appease all ‘others’, but it sure does please me.

### Summary

A good story should lead to more stories, and there are many many more stories about moko kauae to be shared. As wāhine Māori, we each have our own reasons and stories for reclaiming and revitalising the treasures of our ancestors. Before receiving my moko kauae I questioned myself, buying into a set of colonially constructed criteria of what Māori should look like, sound like, be like, which only serve to limit our own self-determination of beauty and identity.

I have many reasons to wear moko kauae. I want my daughters to see moko kauae as normal and beautiful, to see a reflection of our ancestors everyday, walking this world, not in old photos and colonial portraits. I want my grandchildren to only ever know their grandmother as carrying moko kauae and only hearing Māori language from her tattooed lips. I want to smash stereotypes regarding what Māori look like, and in doing so, encourage other wāhine Māori who are ‘waiting’ to be brown enough, fluent enough, worthy enough, to receive what is their birthright – that is to wear their moko kauae with pride and with power. I wear my pride upon my skin.

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