NAVIGATING IDENTITY THROUGH TEXTILES: A JOURNEY OF WHAKAPAPA

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Abstract

This paper discusses the journey of my Bachelor of Design (Honours), where I used fashion and textile design to navigate my cultural identity. Having struggled with cultural disconnection, I learnt the traditional weaving practices from both my Māori and Pākehā whakapapa to navigate and strengthen my identity. Rooted in reconnection to *te ao Māori* through an auto-ethnographic approach, this paper shares my personal journey of Indigenising my design practice, connecting to whakapapa through weaving. Informed by *Kaupapa Māori*, auto-ethnography and case studies, alongside critical making and reflective practice, this project presented a series of textiles using a combination of *raranga* and loom weaving. The proposed future development of this paper will contribute to my current research project focused on indigenising and decolonising my design practice.

> *Nāu te rourou, nāku te rourou, ka ora ai te iwi*
>
> With your food basket and my food basket the people will thrive

Introduction

In the 2021 census, 17.1 per cent of New Zealanders identified as Māori, and in the 2018 census, 45 per cent of Māori identified with two ethnicities (Statistics New Zealand, 2021). For people of dual ethnicities, lack of knowledge surrounding *whakapapa* or genealogy can cause feelings of being 'in-between' resulting in cultural disconnection (Collins, 2012). As Aotearoa New Zealand is dominated by a Pākehā society, postcolonial cultural tensions can cause people of mixed Māori and Pākehā descent to struggle to find a sense of belonging in both ethnic groups. This paper discusses my own journey as a Māori and Pākehā *wāhine*, and how I used textile design to navigate my hybrid identity. Using an auto-ethnographic approach, I placed myself in this research project, analysing my experience of reconnecting to whakapapa through weaving. I dedicated the first semester of the project to understanding what it means to be a Māori and Pākehā wāhine in contemporary society, with Indigenous theory including kaupapa Māori and Indigenous autoethnography laying the foundation to the project. Alongside research and theory, I completed a Level 3 *Tikanga* Māori and *Toi Maruata* course at Te Wananga O Aotearoa which put my learning and understanding into practice.

This paper highlights the key areas of research, integrated with auto-ethnographic analysis, followed by a summary of the project.

The research question that guided this project was: How can I express the journey of my cultural identity through a series of textiles and fashion installation?

Background

As a Māori and Pākehā woman, I was raised through a predominantly Western lens. I grew up in Brisbane, Australia and felt culturally dislocated. I did not identify as Australian or Māori and when asked I would label myself as 'quarter Māori'. At my grandfather's *tangihanga* in 2017, I reconnected with my Māori whakapapa. Surrounded by rich cultural traditions and having roles as younger *mokopuna*, I felt a deep sense of inclusivity and *whanaungatanga*. I had a sense of belonging and gained a connection to my *marae* and the *whenua* it stands on. However, after attending my grandad's tangihanga I experienced further cultural disconnection due to my lack of education around my own whakapapa, whānau tikanga and the physical distance from my whenua. I felt ashamed that I did not know my own marae's tikanga. In 2019, I moved back to Aotearoa to complete a fashion degree and reconnect with my whānau. As I completed my Bachelor of Design (fashion) I questioned my positionality in the creative industry. In undertaking my Bachelor of Design (Honours), I was dedicated to reconnecting to my Māori whakapapa in both my personal and academic life. This paper discusses this journey of reconnection and identity navigation, with a focus in decolonising and indigenising my design practice.

Kaupapa Māori Theory and the Rise of Indigenous Practice

As this project was centred around reconnecting to my Māori identity, Indigenous theory including Kaupapa Māori and indigenous auto-ethnography laid the foundation to the project. Kaupapa Māori theory, led by key principles of Te Ao Māori, is research done by Māori, for Māori and with Māori (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999). Kaupapa Māori theory is:

> A theoretical framework that ensures a cultural integrity is maintained when analysing Māori issues. It provides both tools of analysis and ways of understanding the cultural, political and historical context of Aotearoa (Pihama, p. 11).

Kaupapa Māori is centred around reclaiming Indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate. As our education system in New Zealand is dominated by a western colonial ontology, we are limited in how we view and understand the world. Kaupapa Māori theory introduces the idea of other systems of knowing and indigenous ontologies which have their own theory, ways of research and methodologies. As the acknowledgement of *Te Tiriti O Waitangi* has progressed in New Zealand society, there has been an increase in the self-determination and representation of Māori (Murphy, 2008).

This is evident in the art and fashion industries, which have been used as a form of political resistance, decolonial activism and indigenisation. Defined by Dominelli (2012):

> Indigenisation strongly resists injustice, denial of human rights, and disparagement of local cultures, customs, languages and communities by reclaiming past traditions and affirming the dynamic creation of new forms under the control of indigenous peoples. (p. 46).

This project prioritised an indigenous Kaupapa Māori approach as part of the ongoing movement to create a more equal and indigenised society. Eurocentric design methodology such as the UK Design Council Double Diamond (2005) and Human Centred Design (HCD) "emphasise problem-solving, replicable methods and outcomes, pursue simplicity and efficiency, and detach knowledge, people and relationality from sites of design's embodiment" (Akama et al., 2019). Understanding that I had only developed Eurocentric constructs of design enhanced the importance of learning design from a Māori ontology. This process was difficult to achieve on my own, as my design education had never presented the idea of ontology or other ways of knowing and viewing the design world. However, the key principles of Kaupapa Māori Research including Tino Rangatiratanga (self-determination), Taonga Tukukino Iho (cultural aspiration) and Kaupapa as a collective philosophy, showed me the importance of sustaining Māori knowledge and the significance of Kaupapa Māori research to sustain Māori communities (Smith, 1999). I was driven to understand what Kaupapa Māori theory would look like in regards to fashion and textile design methodology. With the under-representation of Māori in the New Zealand fashion industry, I felt a duty as an indigenous Māori designer to indigenise and decolonise my own design process.

Applying a Kaupapa Māori perspective into my design practice involved considering how I would implement traditional Māori values and practice into a contemporary design environment. At Te Wānanga O Aotearoa, I learnt about traditional Māori values and practice in the whare *wānanga* and at *noho marae*. For this project, I took on the aspect of *tikanga* practices such as *karakia* and *waiata*, alongside correct tikanga for processes such as *harakeke* harvesting and raranga. When completing my mahi raranga, I was surrounded by a community in the whare wānanga and marae environment. Actively engaging and learning in a kaupapa Māori centred environment provided a new outlook on designing that was a contrast to the western industry standard. Connecting to whakapapa through karakia, waiata, weaving and painting, I was presented with a new way of connecting with the world.

Storytelling and Narrative – Indigenous Auto-ethnography

Traditional mahi toi practices are used as a visual communication, a way to tell stories and share whakapapa connections. Storytelling is embedded in Māori and Indigenous culture, as Iseke (2013) explains:

Story is a practice in Indigenous cultures that sustains communities, validates experiences and epistemologies, expresses experiences of indigenous peoples, and nurtured relationships and the sharing of knowledge. Storytelling is also a central focus of Indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies, and research approaches (p. 559).

Pre-colonisation, te reo Māori (Māori language) was a spoken, not written language (Higgins and Keane, 2015). Storytelling otherwise known as pūrākau was shared through conversation and mahi toi practices such as raranga, *whakairo, tukutuku* panels and *kowhaiwhai*. Storytelling worked adjacent with auto-ethnography in this project through self-analysis of my cultural identity, alongside the expression of storytelling through textile design. Autoethnography has also been utilised by people who have experienced marginalisation, including Queer, Black and Indigenous theorists. As Paul Whitinui (2014) describes:

Grounded within a resistance-based discourse, indigenous auto-ethnography aims to address issues of social justice and to develop social change by engaging Indigenous researchers in rediscovering their own voices as 'culturally liberating human-beings. (Whitinui, 2014, p. 456).

Using auto-ethnography and storytelling, I shared my experience of dual ethnicity and identity navigation through mahi raranga and loom weaving. I created a series of textiles that told a visual narrative of my cultural identity and history. In the 1800s, loom weaving became a booming industry in Ireland, and weaving and lace making was a profitable industry for woman (Wills, 2019). As I had whakapapa in Ireland, I wove wool and lace into a small scale loom as a way to connect and communicate my Irish whakapapa (refer to Appendix).

Alongside loom weaving, I learnt the art of raranga and how to create a *kākahu* using *muka* and the *whatu* stitch. My kaiako taught me how to weave in *taonga* which were significant to my whakapapa such as feathers and paua shell. Weaving a kākahu I connected to my tīpuna through karakia and waiata. Raranga presented a methodology rooted in te ao Māori, inviting me into a process that is collective and interconnected with natural landscapes. As I learnt raranga at the marae, I undertook loom weaving at home, engaging with my whakapapa through textiles. I wove a kākahu as a centre piece for this project, implementing taonga from my Māori and Irish whakapapa, including muka, feathers, paua shell, wool and lace. The kākahu is worn as a symbol of whakapapa, as well as a representation of my journey (refer to Appendix).

Curation and Installation

Having created a range of textiles through weaving kete, *pākē*, and small scale loom pieces, I curated a range of pieces into a fashion and textile installation. Fashion installation practice, is defined by Geczy and Karaminas (2017) as:

Concerned with the primacy of ideas rather than the finished product or the work of art…installation artists are more concerned about the presentation of the

message, rather than the materials or the artwork itself. However, unlike conceptual fashion, which is experienced in the minds of the audience, fashion installation, like installation art remains grounded in a physical space (p. 118).

The relationship between garment and space was an important value for this project due to the concept of pūrākau. As each textile piece is designed to be read and understood as visual narrative, installing them in a physical space was appropriate. I considered the curation of each textile piece and the exhibit within a physical space. As part of indigenising my practice, I researched into curation from a Māori perspective. However, in understanding curation, it is important to recognise the colonial history of art and the influence it has had on toi Māori.

Moana Jackson speaks about the colonial history of art and curation mentioning:

> … colonisation sought to destroy the Māori intellectual tradition as much as it fought to suppress the institutions of political and legal power, which it enshrined. It dismissed and marginalised the Māori way of seeing as much as it took away the land...Its art therefore produced the 'landscape' as a thing to be framed and set aside, viewed for its beauty as an object rather than a part of one's whakapapa to be nurtured and loved (p. 3).

The concept of narrative and whakapapa was central to the curation of this project. Rather than focusing on western standards of visual aesthetics I focused on the portrayal of whakapapa and visual communication. Each piece is designed to be read, observed, and understood, rather than be seen as merely a commercial object. The installation consisted of four small scale pieces representing key stages to my identity, such as representation of my hometown, my experience of living in Brisbane, and the representation of my Māori identity and dual ethnicity. My kākahu was then used as the centre piece to this installation (refer to Appendix). I exhibited my installation at a public exhibition that was part of my Toi Maruata course, alongside a photography studio where it was professionally photographed for online exhibit.

Summary

This research project provides an insight into my use of textile design as a form of navigating and reconnecting to my cultural identity. Completing two courses at Te Wānanga O Aotearoa enabled me to actively learn in a kaupapa Māori centred environment, putting research and theory into practice. Learning that there are other ways of viewing and understanding the world has opened a new perspective to my design process. Rather than prioritising commercial appeal or visual aesthetic, I used weaving as a way to communicate and connect with my whakapapa. I expressed a visual narrative through my hands that connected me to my tīpuna. From sharing my experience as a Māori and Pākehā wāhine I encourage others to find their outlet of identity navigation outside the western paradigm. As the fashion system is in need of immediate system change, restoration of Indigenous ontology and other ways of knowing is a wise solution. By connecting to Indigenous intellectual traditions, I argue, we are met with deeper ways of viewing and understanding the world, working with our natural environment rather than

against it. For the future development of this study, I wish to continue the journey of indigenising and decolonising my design practice, to contribute to the self-determination and further representation of Māori in the New Zealand creative industry. This project will continue to evolve throughout my research journey as I gain further knowledge and understanding around my whakapapa, sharing my experience with others who are on a similar journey of cultural discovery.

Mā te kimi ka kite, Mā te kite ka mōhio, Mā te mōhio ka mārama

Seek and discover, discover and know, know and become enlightened.

Appendix

Images of textiles

Photographer: Yuki Wada

Glossary Māori – English

Kākahu – Garment

Karakia – prayer, chant

Kaupapa – work, plan

Kawakawa – type of tree

Kete – Woven basket

Kotahitanga – collective unity

Kowhaiwhai – Ornamental pattern

Mahi – work

Marae – building and land that belongs to particular iwi (tribe), hapū (sub-tribe) or whanau (family)

Maramātanga – insight, understanding

Mātauranga – knowledge, wisdom

Mohiotanga – knowing, comprehension

Mokopuna – grandchild

Muka – Flax fibre

Noho marae – overnight marae stay

Oriori – lullaby

Pāke – decorative cape

Pākehā – European decent

Pūrākau – story

Raranga – Māori flax weaving

Tangihanga – funeral

Taonga Tukukino Iho – cultural aspiration, heritage

Te Ao Māori – Māori worldview

Te Tiriti O Waitangi – 1840 agreement signed by Māori and The Crown

Tikanga – protocols, customs, Māori ways of doing things

Tino Rangatiratanga – Self-determination, autonomy

Tīpuna – ancestor

Tukutuku – woven lattice-work

Toi – Art

Wāhine – woman

Waiata – song

Wananga – educational meeting, tertiary institution

Whānau – family

Whakapapa – genealogy

Whakatauki – proverb

Whanaungatanga – family like connection

Whenua – land

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