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Reflections on Relationality and Positionality from Pacific Scholarship

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The palms stand tall and proud
A source of sustenance and shade
Underneath, their roots touch and correspond
Despite turbulent tempests

Photograph and text: Judy Putt.

Introduction

This paper had its genesis in a panel convened by the Department of Pacific Affairs, The Australian National University (ANU), in 2023.

The panel emerged from debates and musings among our colleagues, as we sought to increasingly acknowledge the significance and implications of Pacific research methodologies. Reflecting upon positionality and relationality is not a new process, but it takes on specific characteristics depending on the context in which research is being undertaken. For doctoral students, this issue can be particularly acute.

The aim of this collection is to share with a wider audience the multiple standpoints and critical gazes that reverberate within and about Pacific scholarship. While each person brings their own lived experience to bear, and is engaged in their own research endeavours, several strands run throughout the papers:

- The contributions critically examine how knowledge is produced and valued in Pacific academic and research settings. Contributors question traditional epistemologies and advocate for recognising diverse forms of knowledge, challenge academic hierarchies, and argue that different knowledges should be privileged in narratives and discourses about the Pacific.
- The importance of cultural sensitivity and relationality in research is a recurring theme. Contributors stress the need for meaningful engagement with research participants and communities, respecting their worldviews and cultural norms — for example, Gemma's discussion of Pacific methodologies and Akka's emphasis on relationality in Kiribati.
- There is a common emphasis on the importance of reflexivity in research practices. All contributions discuss the need for researchers to critically reflect on their positionality and its influence on the research process, from formulating research questions to data interpretation and dissemination.

Our thinking and writing are informed by the ever-expanding body of literature that has deep roots in fundamental questions about knowledge and the purpose of research. Our intent is not to delve into the complex and often profoundly philosophical literature, but we acknowledge the antecedents in the literature — most notably the early deconstructionivist drive by feminist and postcolonial scholars — that act as foundations for what we discuss here. Within the discipline of anthropology, with its interest in cultural differences and ethnographic practices, the particularly problematic past relationship between the author/researcher/outsider and the other/subject/insider has been condemned and reframed (Marcus and Fischer 1986; Nakata 2007; Todd 2016). In our Pacific region, several Indigenous scholars seek to destabilise and re-orient the privileges of academia while still employing its language and its implicit assumptions about scholarship. They include Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2013, 2015), who references Sandra Harding's feminist standpoint theorising and Michel

Foucault, and Brendan Hokowhitu et al. (2022), who decolonise subject matter and methodology through a critical theory framing. As we grapple to understand the structuring nature of power, and how the act of interpretation is inflected by our worldviews, we focus our attention on our research activities by reflecting on personal and collective positionalities. In doing so, as multiple Indigenous-Pacific scholars emphasise (Anae 2020; Taylor et al. 2023; Tynan 2020; Vaai and Nabobo-Baba 2017), we are reminded of our social identities and the significance of relationality, and the centrality of embedded immutable kinship ties and other forms of new and emerging sociocultural interconnections to place, people, and identities that are integral to social, political, and spiritual life. Thus, we are shifting the unit of analysis away from the individual to more communal ontologies (Naepi 2015). As Henrietta Moore noted back in 1994, 'positionality is too often reduced to individual experience and/or to representation: "I know because I've been there" and "'I know because I am one". These slippages are particularly troublesome when linked to grounds for authority.' (Moore 1994:2).

Our intentions are modest, our outlook humble. In this rapidly changing world of globalisation, where hybrid and multiple identities are ever present and mutating, we may aspire to decolonised research approaches and practices (see Smith 2021; Tuck and McKenzie 2015; Guttenbeil-Likiliki 2020; McDonnell and Regenvanu 2023), but we are conscious that this requires ongoing vigilance and review. Positionality and relatedness shift and adapt, which is why we favour a focus on intersectionality to bridge the dichotomy of outsider/insider, due to its ability as a concept and a framework to generate and support continued interrogation of socio-economic and cultural change (Carbado et al. 2013). Having said that, the politics of knowledge production is clearly linked to identity, as we reflect on the similarities and differences in our positionalities, as demonstrated by Gemma's Tongan and Samoan heritage, and Akka's I-Kiribati/Banaban heritage. To illustrate and illuminate, we draw on our lived experience — of teaching, of being involved in research and of being a doctoral student, and of our backgrounds and upbringings. Romitesh discusses the challenges of being an Indo-Fijian male researcher studying Fijian politics employing feminist methodologies. At the same time, Philippa (Pip) reflects on her experiences of being perceived as both an insider and an outsider in various communities. Judy discusses how the insider/outsider status can shift across the different domains of a research process.

The contributions in this paper, while distinct in their approaches, can be likened to the interplay of waves and troughs in the ocean. Just as waves represent the peaks of energy and motion, some contributions are characterised by their high degree of reflexivity, delving deep into the personal and cultural dimensions of research. For example, Gemma's, Akka's, and Pip's papers are reflective in nature, exploring the intricacies of identity and positionality with introspective depth.

Figure 1: Elise Howard, when she worked at the Department of Pacific Affairs (DPA)
Source: DPA.

Conversely, akin to the troughs that provide depth and balance to the ocean's surface, other contributions are more methodological in nature, offering structured frameworks and approaches to navigate the complexities of research. Akka's and Romitesh's papers, for instance, serve as methodological troughs, grounding the discussion in practical considerations of power dynamics and ethical research practices. Judy's focuses on the complexities and challenges of collaborative research and adds a layer of nuance to the discussion, moving beyond the focus on an individual's positionality and relationality to bridge the waves and troughs of power imbalances and ethical considerations in research collaborations with teams and communities.

As a final word, we would like to dedicate the collection to our colleague Elise Howard, who for many of us modelled giving attention to these very issues. She was always humble, always curious, always consciously seeking to promote collegiality and relatedness, while respecting the autonomy and knowledge of others.

After a trip to Tonga with Gemma, she wrote movingly of the need, while focusing on the task to hand, to engage in the holistic and encompassing aspects of positionality — to relate and connect to others and oneself (mind, body, and soul) and position ourselves in relation to others, our loved ones. As was her way, she was full of ideas and gratitude for the experience and for the sharing and generosity she had encountered. We try our best to emulate her example.

The authors

Author notes

The authors are all members of the Department of Pacific Affairs, ANU. Judy Putt is a Senior Research Fellow, Gemma Malungahu is a Pacific Research Fellow, and Pip Louey, Akka Rimon, and Romitesh Kant are PhD candidates.

Gemma Melvena Malungahu: Relating and Connecting to Others — The Importance of Continual Reflexivity

A rhetorical question I often ask when teaching is about the importance of positionality, reflexivity, and relationality in research: who are you? 'If you don't know who you are, and you don't know where you come from, then you don't know where you're going.'

I am a daughter to Kelepi Malungahu — who is from Kolonga, a village on the northeast coast of Tongatapu in the Hahake District, Kingdom of Tonga, the only remaining monarchy in the Pacific. My mother, Silina Malungahu, is from a village called Tungua, in one of the four outer islands of Tonga's Ha'apai islands. My maternal great grandmother, Sina Lauli'i, is Samoan. I was born and raised in Māngere and Ōtara in South Auckland, New Zealand, and I moved to Australia in 2019, following my parents and family, who migrated across the ditch to Sydney in 2011.

It wasn't until undertaking higher degree research that I truly valued the importance of my positionality. Now, you might know who you are, where you come from, or your identity as an individual or a collective, but it is not until you actually sit down to write about it, then you're forced to really reflect on your journey and how that has informed the way you view the world. Positionality and reflexivity are all encompassing ideas that influence one's worldview in life, and in research. Martin Heidegger (1962) describes positionality as the influence of one's experiences accumulated over time encompassing social class, gender, ethnicity, and so on. Dvora Yanow (2007) describes this as 'background thinking' that is often drawn upon without acknowledgement, uncritically, and is intuitively based. Here the researcher must reflect on how their position in society is shaping and is being shaped by the people, settings, and/or events that they have encountered or encounter (Yanow 2007:111).

As a researcher, your positionality and worldview can shape and inform:

- your motives and intentions of why you're undertaking research;
- what you view as important topics for enquiry and study;
- how and where the research is conducted;
- the priority of using a Pacific methodology;
- thoughts, assumptions, discussions, and mannerisms during data collection or any interaction with stakeholders and knowledge holders;
- how you interpret data;
- what findings you choose to publish or disseminate.

For many higher degree research students and researchers, reflecting on positionality can be a big undertaking. It forces us to really dig deep, looking inward to the self, and outward at the same time. Inward because you reflect on your upbringing, your journey from childhood to date and how that influences your identity. And outward because of the important

Figure 2: Dr Malungahu and her beautiful family outside her family home in Sydney, taken after her PhD celebration in 2021
Source: Gemma Malungahu.

people and relationships that have influenced your life, your accumulated experiences over time and space, and your views of the world around you and your place in that world. You reflect on your worldview and the influence of your experiences, which can be related to an array of intersecting factors that you identify with (in addition to Heidegger's list above): ancestry; lineage; nationality; values you have grown up with or have learnt to uphold through family, culture, and religious affiliation; and other values related to universal societal values such as human rights, equality and equity, social justice, and so forth.

Transparency (self-representation) and critical reflexivity

Sometimes this process can be challenging because of the need to decide on the level of transparency required. How much do I share? How much is too much? And what is enough to warrant meeting the task of sharing my positionality in my thesis? Essentially, it is up to each researcher what you choose to share and with whom. Either way, reflexivity provides us with a sense of accountability in recognising and addressing the worldview that we enter the research process with, and being aware of how that might inform or influence how the research is framed, how our positionality may change during the course of the research, the questions we might ask or omit, and of course, the interpretation of literature and findings, what you think is important to present and document, and what ought to be left out.

Beverley Mullings (1999) examines how intercultural perceptions during interactions of data collection can be challenging due to the politics of self-representation. For example, how an individual represents themselves can dictate whether the

individual is granted an interview or not. This includes being able to build impartiality, which is the creation of space during the interviews that allows the sharing of information freely. Imprinted on all information that is received and provided are maps of consciousness that reflect one's gender, race, class or sexuality. Trying to navigate and occupy these cultural, social, spiritual, and political spaces while holding interactions that minimise excessive distortion is desirable and allows for a more open discussion that is perhaps more meaningful and understandable. This process can be one of interrogation, where we are unpacking/uncovering implicit biases we may have, or subconscious perceptions we may have towards people or groups. At times, this can be uncomfortable but is necessary to grow as an individual in society and as a researcher as well. Our conscious and subconscious biases can influence the way we interact with others and the way we interact with data and interpret it, and this is not limited to the research space, but includes life more broadly as well.

One example in relation to being held up about and confronted with my worldview was during a writing *wānanga* (writing retreat) when I was asked, 'Gemma, whenever we have *wānanga*, you always ask are there any other Tongans attending?' This question taught me about myself, in that I have a very Tongan-centric worldview. It makes sense because of my positionality and how I was raised. But it also means that my worldview can be limiting in what I see as important and therefore choose to prioritise, for example, when learning and researching about the Pacific in general. I was depriving myself of an opportunity to learn more about people outside of my worldview. Therefore, continual reflexivity is critical, particularly about what we choose to believe to be true of ourselves and hence influence how we view ourselves in this world and our place in it. Some reflecting questions that might be helpful to think about during research include:

- How is my positionality informed in different spaces?
- As a researcher, how do I relate to my research topic and people around me?
- What role does my positionality play in this research?
- How can I use my positionality as a researcher in my community to be of benefit to the individuals and families who take part in the research?
- Have I reflected on how my positionality might influence the interactions I have with the families that took part in the research project?
- What are some practical things I can do to help address my own implicit biases — such as assuming all *palangi* (white people) are racist — that might influence my interactions with people I undertake research with.

It takes vulnerability and courage to be transparent and share your upbringing, what informs and influences your worldview in academia. Memo writing or journalling is a practical activity one could undertake during the entire research process. Reflecting by writing thoughts down during or after an encounter or interview helps us to identify why we felt that way, or why we were quick to assume something. Undertaking a PhD is a journey within itself, and for academics in general, it is a continual journey of self-discovery, of learning, of reconnecting with our true selves. Getting 'lost' in the research can mean being out of touch with our purpose and values. We lose sight of what really matters, which for many is to benefit our families and communities. Reflectivity is such an important part of our everyday lives whether you're a researcher or not; reflecting on our positionality and relationality with others around us is important.

Power, positionality and knowledge

Insider versus outsider dichotomy can be un-useful as we continually move across the spectrum in space and time. It is about navigating space, because a person's positionality relative to another is also tied to power. Challenges include the limited amount of time to create space that foster trust and rapport. Because, at the end of the day, who is asking the question? And who has the authority to ask such questions? Here, the researcher has the upper hand (as granted permission via ethical approval), and it is important for researchers to dispel and balance such power imbalances (Merriam et al. 2001). Privilege and power held by researchers lies in the fact that researchers have the final power of interpretation, which actually starts as early as planning the research process interpretation (McLafferty 1995, as cited in Rose 1997). Such power interplay is very complex and should be addressed from the beginning of any research project. Linda Tuhiwai-Smith (Smith 1999; Intellectual Property Issues in Cultural Heritage [IPCH] 24/4/2015) raises some important reflective questions that we ought to ask ourselves when we start thinking about research. As researchers:

- Why do we do what we do?
- How do we understand our roles, relationships, and responsibilities? What are our obligations?
- What are the paradigms that we use to help our understanding of the communities we describe?
- What are the forms of knowledge that we are using that inform the language, terms, and definitions we use in our research to describe what we see and hear?

As Linda Tuhiwai-Smith says:

> Often the language we use is inadequate to describe the dynamic and deep relational ties Indigenous peoples have to place and space. And part of our journey as researchers is finding the language that we can use to describe what we see, what we experience and feel. (IPCH 24/4/2015)

In my research, when writing out quotes from Tongan families and individuals who take part in the research, I purposely provide the Tongan version of the quote, followed by the translated version in the English language. The Tongan language speaks to deep and meaningful nuances that cannot be fully expressed in the English language.

There are two further important questions I ask myself as a researcher.

1. How are we building Indigenous capability, knowledge holders and researchers?

   Linda Tuhiwai-Smith also reflects on this:

   > If you listen well to how elderly talk about knowledge, you will understand there are ontological elements to it. Knowledge relates as much to being, identity and relationships — as opposed to just knowing! Knowledge is not something that we all might have equal access to and that each of us might have a right to know, however, some forms of Indigenous knowledge cannot be known until whoever is going to know has been on some journeys. Knowledge is intimately connected to people and that we need the people to be revitalized; knowledge cannot be revitalized if the people are not revitalized! (IPCH 24/4/2015)

2. How are we revitalising Indigenous communities?

Annually, the ANU Department of Pacific Affairs convenes the Pacific Research Colloquium (PRC), which is a flagship activity of the Pacific Research Program with funding from the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. I have co-convened the PRC program over the past three years: 2022, 2023, and 2024. Scholarships are awarded to early career researchers from the Pacific to participate in a two-week intensive research workshop. The program supports the revitalisation of Indigenous knowledge systems in research approaches through the delivery of a course titled Critical Approaches to Pacific and Inclusive Research Methodologies (previously Pacific Research Methodologies). Improving research capacity in the Pacific region is a key purpose of the program, involving emerging researchers, regardless of educational attainment, current employment or affiliation; locally engaged researchers with little or no formal training; development practitioners; higher degree research students; recent graduates; and those working with community-based organisations. They are supported to develop the skills required to undertake applied research that is evidence based and grounded in the views of Indigenous communities.

Philippa Louey: Grappling with Positionality as a Non-Pasifika, Mixed-Race Scholar — Lessons Learnt and Questions to Be Accountable To

As someone all too familiar with the (seemingly always double-barrelled) question, 'Where are you from? No, where are you really from?', the complexities of positionality have long coloured my engagements with the world. From a personal perspective, I've grappled with the fluidity and contestability of identity, learning that my position in relation to others is equally informed by my own assertions as well as the ways in which others 'read' me. I've seen how misreadings of my positionality have positioned me in communities that are not my own, marginalised me in those that are, and at times, granted access me to spaces that would be otherwise be unwelcoming of 'people like me'. Put plainly, my experiences have taught me how positionality is a deeply co-produced phenomenon that is navigated not on one's own, but always in and with relation to others.

Across my journey in academia, I've been challenged to further unpack how I move through the world and reflect on how this shapes my scholarship. This has been an incredibly rich but challenging process that is far from conclusion. In the spirit of collaborative learning, my contribution to this working paper is a brief reflection on some lessons I've gained along this journey. Namely, (a) questions I've found useful to ask myself and be accountable to, (b) strategies that have helped me to work through these questions, (c) mistakes to avoid, and (d) a few final musings. But before I turn to these reflections, let me first position myself in relation to my scholarship, as this is the foundation from which my following discussion builds.

Positioning me and my research

Born on the coastal lands of Birpai country (Port Macquarie), I am the granddaughter of Cantonese immigrants (paternal) and white settler descendants (maternal), each of whom raised their families in Australia and came to call this continent home. As a child, I spent endless hours playing among the eucalypt scrub and along the serpentine beaches that hug the Pacific Ocean.

At the age of 10, my parents and I moved to Sydney to be closer to my Cantonese grandparents, Por Por and Gong Gong. It was in this city, vibrant with cultures from all over the world, that I started to seriously grapple with my positionality in society — first through the lens of ethnicity, but then also through class, gender, and the many other axes of identity that inform our relations with our world.

Over the course of my undergraduate studies, I became increasingly aware of the little knowledge or relationship I had with the countries and communities that share in this region of the Pacific Ocean. Primarily guided by art, I came to recognise the deep ties that Australia holds with Oceanic communities (Indigenous, colonial, and contemporary) and sought to better understand how the nation that I call home engages with its neighbours. This pursuit of understanding, supported by the incredible generosity and grace of mentors of, and committed to, Oceania, ultimately led me to the doctoral program at the ANU Department of Pacific Affairs where I am currently studying as a doctoral candidate.

Figure 3: Louey family in Brisbane, Australia, Christmas 1998
Source: Photo courtesy of Kam Louie.

As a non–Pacific Islander undertaking research centred on Oceania, continual reflection on my own positionality and relationality has been critical for my commitment to ethical scholarship, prompting me to examine the questions outlined below.

Questions to be accountable to

It was the year before I commenced my doctoral studies, and I was sitting with one of the luminaries in Pacific studies, tossing up whether to apply for a PhD program or not. Around halfway through our conversation, they asked me a simple yet critical question, which I continue to challenge myself with to this day: 'Why are *you* doing this research?' For the majority of us, personal interest in the chosen topic is usually a key motivation. Scholarly research, after all, requires a significant investment of one's resources (time, energy, money) that would be hard to justify were we not enthusiastic about the endeavour. But if we think on this question keeping in mind the many communities that have been (and continue to be) harmed by western research practices, we come to see the gravity of this question (Smith 1999; Arvin 2019).

As researchers (particularly those of us trained and based in centres of empire or sites of settler colonialism), we must actively guard against extractive,

harmful or even indulgent research that exploits communities as little other than datasets. We must be aware of the troubled legacies associated with research and recognise that 'research for research's sake' is not a sufficient reason to expose communities to projects where they may experience harm. Instead, we researchers must be able to identify a meaningful reason for communities to engage with us in our research, ideally in collaboration and honest conversation. The question 'Why are you doing this research?' should hold us accountable not only to the academy, but more importantly, to those communities who centrally inform it.

Rethinking the emphasis of this first question, I've also found it productive and humbling to wrestle with the provocation: Why are *you* doing this research? Here, issues around positionality, access to knowledge, and skills proficiency come to the fore, challenging us to consider if we are well suited to be undertaking the research we seek to pursue.

As many Indigenous and Pacific Islander scholars remind us (Koya Vaka'uta 2018; Wilson 2008), knowledge is sacred, and as a result, not all knowledge is available or open to all people. For researchers who sit outside the entrusted circle of knowledge bearers in these communities, it is high time we respect that some topics and wisdoms may be closed to us — regardless of their seeming importance or intrigue. Equally, we should humbly recognise when others may be better placed than us to undertake certain research. In all cases, approaching research as a negotiation of knowledge (Koya Vaka'uta 2018) is critical for identifying and (re) addressing relations of power inherent in the scholarly project and establishing more ethical grounds for research engagement. This necessitates early and ongoing conversations between researcher(s) and the relevant communities who may benefit or be impacted by one's research.

Finally, the third question that has informed much of my thinking around positionality as part of the scholarly process is the matter of 'Who is this research for?' As I touched upon earlier, crafting research to ensure it provides meaningful outcomes for the communities with whom it engages is critical for ethical research. This requires open, iterative, and respectful conversations with communities over the duration of the research project. For research that includes elements of critique or constructive criticism, this question also raises the challenge of navigating relationships with those whom you may identify shortcomings. On the one hand, if managed without respect and care, critical research can put strain on research relationships, greatly undermining values of relationality. On the other hand, however, reluctance to call out areas of weakness does a disservice to all involved by allowing poor practices to continue without question. I have been challenged in recent years to tread a path that respectfully navigates this conundrum. Asking of myself whom my research is for and whom I need to be accountable to has been a useful guide in my journey.

Helpful strategies

The individual and often lonely nature of doctoral research in the social sciences and humanities provides a particularly deleterious environment for grappling with one's positionality. Fundamentally, reflections on positionality require you to consider how you relate to the world around you your position is always relative. Seeking community is perhaps the most valuable strategy that I have found for thinking through my own positionality and coming to understand my position *in relation to* others and to my own research.

I am greatly indebted to friends, mentors, and colleagues who have held space for vulnerable, at times challenging, conversations about the ethics, power, and politics of research (and it is my hope that I too have provided them the same). Building trusting relationships that allow for this messiness, learning, and insecurity has been critical for alleviating some of the fear associated with 'getting it wrong' and moving towards constructive improvement. To these friends, I say thank you. It should be noted that not every space is appropriate for this sharing of positionality reflections. We must take care not to be indulgent or tokenistic, let alone to seek absolution through personal divulgence. Here the concept of 'white tears' (Hamad 2019) springs to mind. But with trusted people with whom there is reciprocity, I've found it incredibly fruitful to share my evolving reflections on positionality and learn from theirs in return.

The wisdom that action needs to start in your own backyard holds true for positionality. Working through my scholarly positionality has also involved deep reflection on my everyday positionality — my relationships beyond academic life. This has involved thinking about how I engage with the world not simply as a PhD scholar, but also when I'm walking through the shops on a Saturday afternoon, am stuck (endlessly) on hold with government services wanting to update my details, or when I jostle onto the bus and seek a safe space to stand for my journey home. These interactions and my life outside academia profoundly inform my work inside it, and are indivisible from my positionality.

Mistakes to avoid

The suggestion that I have made only one misstep in my grappling with positionality would be grossly disingenuous. However, I would like to dedicate particular focus to one mistake that I seem to be witnessing with growing frequency and have myself been guilty of: cultural performativity. As a non–Pacific Island scholar, there is often an instinct to demonstrate cultural competencies as a way of respectfully engaging with Oceanian communities, strengthening relationships, and decentring western ontologies. In principle, this is an appropriate practice and often a necessary part of decolonising research. The problem, however, arises when these cultural competencies become performative and appropriated by scholars as decolonial/ethical/grounded/localised window-dressing for what are otherwise orthodox research projects and

processes. This performativity not only fails to meet demands for political transformation that are central to decolonial and self-determination movements (Tuck and Yang 2012), but also risks hollowing out the meaning of these important cultural customs and concepts (Tarai 2022, as cited in Carter and Fry 2022). Drawing the line between cooption and respectful engagement with Indigenous concepts and customs is highly fraught and not a debate that I have scope to examine here. If I can extend one request, it is for scholars to be alert to the dangers of appropriation, and honest in scrutinising our own motivations and actions with respect to cultural performativity.

Final musings

Far from an objective practice of observation and analysis, research is heavily shaped by the positionality of the researcher. This contribution has outlined some key learnings that I continue to reflect upon when grappling with my own positionality. I conclude with three final musings. Firstly, reflecting on one's positionality is hard but important work. It not only leads to better research but also contributes to personal growth. Secondly, the idea of positionality is relevant to everyone. Nobody occupies a neutral, central standpoint in the world; we are all located in relation to others. And finally, unpacking one's positionality is a journey potted with obstacles. We will not always make the right call on how to act given our positionality, but surrounding oneself with a trusted and supportive community will make this journey far less isolating.

Akka Rimon: Navigating *Te Waa* of Positionality and Relationality

As an I-Kiribati person, I have frequently faced probing questions: 'Where do you come from?' and 'Where is that?' The ensuing exchanges often drag to more belittling investigations: 'Is it a country?' 'Why is it not on the map?' Subtle yet intense inquiries that sometimes diminish my sense of existence. My PhD journey, which began over two years ago, is motivated by a similar paradox: the lack of knowledge about Kiribati's existence despite its growing visibility due to climate change. The dichotomy challenged my worldview and resonated with Epeli Hau'ofa's framing of Micronesia, 'when they see a Micronesian island they naturally pronounce it small or tiny … but if we look at the … cosmologies of the peoples of Oceania, it becomes evident that they did not conceive of their world in such microscopic proportions' (Hau'ofa 2008:7). This emphasises the significance of Oceania's myths, legends, and oral traditions in shaping our understanding of the world.

Hau'ofa's assertion of Oceania as a thriving force of life and not an empty space underscores the significance of positionality and relationality in research, resonating with my purpose and driving my intended contribution to scholarship. By acknowledging Kiribati's importance, I assert its relevance, as a big ocean sovereign state (BOSS), an expansive blue continent whose location at the centre of the earth makes it a strategic focal point in global affairs today (Fujii-Takamoto 2022; Medina 17/7/2022; Morgan 2022). This realisation sets the stage for unpacking positionality, a crucial starting point for my inquiry.

Unpacking positionality, a personal reflection

As I delve into my PhD journey, I recognise the importance of acknowledging my positionality — who I am, where I come from, and what drives me in my work and aspirations. As an I-Kiribati woman, mother, and scholar, my identity is woven from the threads of my parents' origins: from Nikunau and Arorae in the south of Kiribati, to Marakei and Tarawa in the north, including Banaba, and Rabi Island in Fiji. Born and raised in Suva, Fiji, I navigated frequent moves between Kiribati and Fiji, forging a complex but established sense of belonging. My upbringing in a Christian family, my education, and lived experiences in both countries shape my worldview. Professionally, I have grappled with balancing national interests and competing development agendas in Kiribati, a nation marked by 45 years of aid, research, and development partnership, which has built to a certain degree the country's self-sufficiency, and, ironically, its dependency. Which begs the question: Despite efforts to decolonise from the constructs of colonialism, why is Kiribati seemingly more dependent and entangled in the web of geopolitical relations today? (Connell 2002; Meki and Tarai 2023; Tawake et al. 2021; Taylor and Middleby 2023; Teaero 2001; Tong 2015).

Figure 4: *Te waa*, Kiribati's most valued piece of architecture
Source: Raimon Kataotao.

As Beretitenti Sir Ieremia Tabai, Kiribati's first president, cautioned on the attainment of self-rule from the British administration in 1979, the true meaning of independence for Kiribati is to be self-reliant, 'It is better to subsist on your own than to rely on someone' (Scott 21/5/1989: para 3). Though tailored for the occasion of independence over four decades ago, this message rings as true and relevant today as modern-day Kiribati charts its path forward. This self-sufficiency versus dependency conundrum fuels my inquiry: How can research break cycles of external reliance? — which in the context of my research translates to: How can migration build economic and climate resilience? My positionality is rooted in two things: first, being I-Kiribati with firsthand lived experiences of climate change, which motivates my research in the field of climate mobility; and second, being Banaban with a resilient displacement history and a colonial legacy in Fiji, which informs my pursuit of climate options beyond borders. Acknowledging these dynamics is crucial for nuanced research. I recognise both privileges and unique experiences, and embrace the complexities of positionality in research conduct.

Te waa of positionality

Te waa (the canoe) holds profound significance in I-Kiribati and Pacific cultures, symbolising identity, history, and the resilience of Oceania's people. Crafted from ancestral knowledge, passed down through generations via song, myth, dance, and ritual (Grimble 1924; Mwemwenikarawa 1/2/2022 Whincup 2007), *te waa* embodies exceptional Kiribati workmanship and engineering of the highest standard in *te kaba* (canoe

building) and *borau* (the navigational process). Defined synonymously with life (Mwemwenikarawa 1/2/2022 *te waa* is more than just a piece of wood, 'it is a significant piece of architecture with a remarkable history' (Davies 12/3/2017: para 7). This powerful metaphor also inspires pedagogy, as Teresia Teaiwa envisions the canoe as a classroom (Teaiwa 2005, 2017) where the ocean itself becomes a library, from which knowledge and strength emanate and are navigated relationally, reflecting the spirituality of the interconnected Oceanian people with their *aba* (land) and *marawa* (ocean). The same ocean that Hau'ofa alerts us should unite and sustain the Pacific, not divide it as the hegemonic view of vast empty space implies (Hau'ofa 2008). In a similar lens, *te waa* profoundly represents Pacific value and indigeneity today, inspiring methodologies, studies, and policies to amplify Pacific people's voices and stories (Newport 2019), but also to link roots to routes as the impact of environmental deterioration increases prominently the potential of internal mobility (Yates et al. 2023).

Utilising *te waa* as a theoretical framework, I employ its intrinsic positional nature to navigate research investigations. *Te waa*'s purpose is to position the inquirer in relation to a suite of encompassing multifaceted factors including identity (ancestry, heritage), demography, and culture (age, gender, race, education, experience), and socio-economic dynamics (family size, employment). This positioning acknowledges fixed elements (race, identity, gender) and non-fixed elements (evolving beliefs, experiences), which intersect reflexively and subjectively, and which crucially recognise the inquirer's presence and their ability to gauge positionality in research (Olmos-Vega et al. 2022; Rabionet 2011; Scheyvens 2014). *Te waa*'s navigational essence enables researchers to do three vital tasks: first, identify biases and values; second, manage relationships and power dynamics; and third, engage reflexively as expected in qualitative research. The application of *te waa* centres an I-Kiribati Indigenous epistemology that highlights the significance of positionality and provides a nuanced framework for researching complex social contexts. As a navigating tool, *te waa* directs the way on the water towards a destination, be it a new fishing ground or a voyage of discovery to a new place altogether. Likewise, in research, a destination points to findings, decisions, policies, and knowing where the researcher or navigator stands on a subject of investigation, the direction or goal desired, and the dynamics that shape that journey.

For *te waa* to continually serve as a safe medium for livelihood and transportation, it must reflexively and routinely check that all its components are in good working order. As such, researchers are encouraged to be self-aware and attentive to the dynamics that shape their perspective or work environments. This enhances the researcher's ability to critically examine their influence on the construction and interpretation of knowledge (Olmos-Vega et al. 2022). *Te waa* as a positionality tool guides one's work in relation to other encompassing factors and towards a desired common goal and destination where epistemic and cosmologic influences are factored in. This is imperative, because development (or research) cannot be discussed without fully comprehending how a person thinks and behaves (Vaai and Nabobo-Baba 2017).

Te waa of relationality

Relationality extends positionality by acknowledging interconnectedness and mutuality. It encompasses coexistence, belonging, and spirituality, binding individuals, communities, and the environment harmoniously. In Kiribati, relationality translates to a deep connection to *te aba* (the land), *maneaba* (a traditional meeting hall and governing structure), and *boti* (position in society as reflected in the *maneaba* seating) — where all live in peaceful coexistence (Talu et al. 1979; Uriam 1995; Whincup 2007). This whole of life philosophy (Vaai and Casimira 2024; Vaai and Nabobo-Baba 2017) in the Kiribati context is entrenched in the *maneaba* ideology, derived from two words: *mwanea* (to embrace) and *aba* (land). It signifies embracing the land and its inhabitants.

As a relational tool, *te waa* exemplifies sovereignty and communal wellbeing and its functionality relies on four core elements:

1. land and environmental resources that make up the substances that give it form;
2. collective expertise and contribution of elder and master builders, including women and youth;
3. ocean and the natural elements of wind and wave;
4. navigational skills through interpreting stars, birds, and clouds among others.

Similarly, relationality in research requires:

1. navigating dynamics and processes;
2. reading signs (contextual awareness);
3. developing situational awareness (knowing when to speak, act, or pause);
4. harmonious coordination between inquirer and participant.

Establishing relationality fosters mutual understanding, reciprocity, respect, and trust, and maximises research returns for all parties (Anae 2020; Tomlinson and Tengan 2016; Smith 1999).

Te waa provides a powerful metaphor for research relationality. On its own, it is ineffective; its purpose and functionality rely on the collective efforts of various actors. Each component — from the expertly woven *ie* (sail) to the carefully braided *kora* (coconut strings) that bind the structures — depends on environmental resources and skilled contributors. Even when fully constructed, *te waa* requires harmonious alignment with natural elements (wind, wave, clouds) and navigational expertise to set sail successfully. Similarly relational research demands careful navigation of complex dynamics. Researchers must:

- attune themselves to contextual signs (safety, validity);
- develop sensitivity to when to engage or pause;
- respect existing protocols and boundaries;
- foster reciprocal relationships, built on mutual understanding, respect, and trust.

Effective relational research mirrors the

synchronised movement of *te waa*'s components and the collaborative efforts of its builders. By embracing this approach, researchers can maximise meaningful outcomes by treading carefully with their own actions, in relation to those of the participants. As I navigate the research landscape, *te waa* inspires me to centre the voices and stories of frontline communities, often overshadowed by elite narratives. As a policymaker, development partner, or researcher — including myself — we can't fully grasp the economic and climate struggles of grassroots individuals. Acknowledging my role as an I-Kiribati insider, privileged researcher, and knowledge co-creator, I enter this space with humility, acknowledging that my education and experiences contrast with the lived experiences of the participants in my research. *Te waa* enables me to surrender my expertise, allowing participants to take the helm and guide me through their reality. By holding my hand and sharing their journey, they can help me build a deeper understanding of their resilience and navigational strategies for a climate-threatened future.

Te waa of mobility

In the climate security field, my research is deeply informed by *te waa*'s relationality and positionality principles, which help me understand climate-induced mobility from the perspective of the studied communities. Positionality and relationality serve as toolkits, guiding me to navigate biases, beliefs, and experiences throughout the research process. For example, *te waa*'s dual elements — *kaba* (the knowledge construction) and *borau* (the navigational process) — embody the resilience and adaptability of I-Kiribati people against the potential risk of climate displacement. Resilience, in whatever form it may be, is fundamental to my work, which argues that while rejecting apocalyptic climate vulnerability narratives is crucial to maintaining agency, the reality remains that certain aspects of Kiribati's geography render the country susceptible to climate change impacts (Rimon 2022, 29/9/2024). Thus, resilience begins from accepting a 'vulnerable–resilience' nexus as promulgated by Ballard et al. (2020) and McDonnell (2020). Building *te waa* symbolises constructing a future for these communities, which is an act of resilience. Each carefully crafted component of *te waa* represents the intricate relationships between culture, identity, and migration. Just as *te waa* sets sail with purpose to transport people between islands (migration) or to fish for the community (labour mobility), my research seeks to understand the complex journeys of I-Kiribati migrants, or decisions made by those who wish to remain in situ.

Te waa's spirituality and connection to land helps me appreciate the nuanced nature of migration — not merely in moving somewhere but notably in understanding its return element. Just as *te kaba* (canoe building) ensures the design of *te waa* allows it to always trace its path home or find land, so is the preparation for migration and informed futures. I-Kiribati may venture beyond their shores, but they always return home (circular migration/labour mobility) or find land where they can start life afresh (permanent migration). *Te borau* (the navigational process) guides me to explore the intersections of climate change, mobility, and cultural preservation, as human rights — to life, employment, migration, and culture, wherever I-Kiribati choose to go — and these rights should not be compromised, or confused with decolonisation, nationalism, and geopolitical elements. Through *te waa*, I recognise that migration is not a response to climate change but an assertion of I-Kiribati agency, resilience, and determination to chart their own course.

Broadly, as I-Kiribati meticulously craft canoes — carefully selecting and shaping each piece of wood to ensure seaworthiness and harmony with the ocean — researchers in academia build upon existing knowledge, carefully selecting and synthesising evidence to construct a sturdy framework for their findings. Both processes require patience, attention to detail, and a deep understanding of the materials and context. Just as a well-built *waa* can navigate the vast Pacific, a well-crafted research study can navigate the complexities of its field, providing a sturdy vessel for new discoveries and insights to emerge.

Conclusion

In today's complex research and development landscape, positionality and relationality serve as vital navigation tools, guiding researchers and practitioners in constructing knowledge while considering biases, values, and aspirations. By embracing these principles, researchers and policymakers uphold ethical standards, integrity, and reciprocity, effectively managing volatile power dynamics. As Kiribati, and the Pacific, navigate rising geopolitical tensions (Morgan 2022; Scott 2012; Wallis and Batley 2020), informed research and development play a crucial role in examining internal and external influences. Research and development empower Pacific Island countries to build their *waa* — assert their global presence and relevance — by adding value to academia, policy, development, and diplomacy in fostering Indigenous knowledge and agency. An endeavour where *te waa*'s principles of positionality and relationality are pivotal.

I conclude with a timeless proverb and song from Nonouti, my father's birthplace. It commemorates the triumphant completion of *te kaba* (canoe building) and the community's joyful celebration of this milestone as their *waa* sets sail. This wisdom from our I-Kiribati forebears echoes the research process and highlights the power of collective effort and shared achievement, resonating profoundly with us people of Oceania today, as we navigate the turbulent waters of national and cultural sovereignty, and socio-economic, geopolitical, and climate change challenges, charting our own course towards a resilient future.

E a tia te waa
E a tia te waa, E a bobonga raoi
A matoa nako bwaina ngkai
E kakaieie, ni biribiri
Inanon te nama i Nonouti

Tara aron butina ngkai
Tara aron birina ngkai
Tatanako iaon naona te naomoro
Ao ko a kan aki ooa mwina

Te waa is done, it is now complete
All parts are pieced and bolted
Elegantly, it glides, it runs
In the passage in Nonouti
Look, how it sails
Look, how it runs
Rapidly taking on the waves as they climb
So fast, you could lose its trail

Romitesh Kant: Negotiating Identities — Reflexivity, Relationality and Gender Dynamics in Fijian Politics

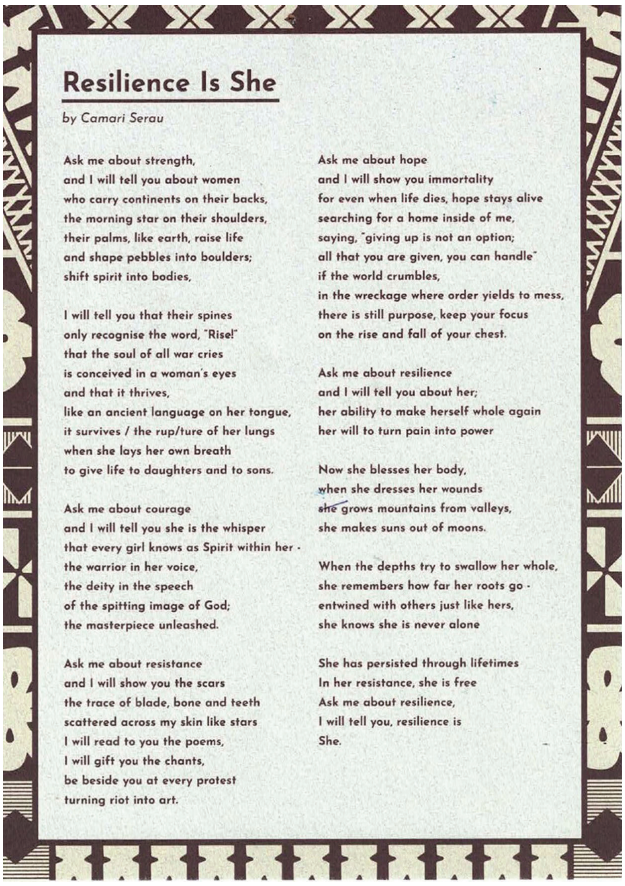
Framing the research

In the developing discourse on gender and politics within the Pacific Island nations, Fiji presents a particularly compelling case for inquiry. With a sociopolitical landscape marked by colonial legacies, ethnic diversities, and evolving democratic processes, the exploration of gender dynamics offers critical insights into the power structures that underpin political institutions. My research situates itself at the confluence of these dynamics, focusing on the role of masculinities within Fijian political institutions. By delving into the construction, performance, and maintenance of masculinities, I seek to unearth how gender influences political behaviour, decision-making, and leadership in Fiji. The centrality of masculinities in this discourse is pivotal, not only for its often-overlooked significance in mainstream gender studies, but also for its potential to unravel the complex layers of gendered power dynamics that permeate Fiji's political, social, and cultural landscape.

Central to this endeavour is examining positionality and reflexivity, and how they each influence the research process. Acknowledging these two aspects — my personal position as a researcher and my engagement in continuous reflexivity — is not merely an academic exercise but a critical component of research methodology (Shahbazi 2004). Positionality requires awareness of how my identity, background, and social positioning may shape my interpretations. At the same time, reflexivity involves an ongoing self-assessment to address any biases or preconceptions that arise during the research process. Together, these aspects demand a reflexive approach that engages with how my background, assumptions, and interactions influence both the process and outcomes of the research.

My contribution unfolds along two main themes central to my research endeavour. First, it navigates the experience of being an Indo-Fijian researcher studying Fiji. This position offers a rich, personal understanding of the nation's complex social and political milieu yet also presents specific challenges.

As an Indo-Fijian, I occupy a unique vantage point that affords me a deeply personal lens through which to examine the intricacies of Fijian masculinities. This perspective provides insights into how masculinities are shaped by ethnic divisions and historical experiences unique to Fiji's colonial and postcolonial eras. For example, the Indo-Fijian experience of marginalisation and the ongoing struggle for social and political inclusion have fostered expressions of masculinity that prioritise resilience, community solidarity, and survival. These expressions contrast with Indigenous Fijian masculinities, often influenced by *vanua* (land and community) obligations and chiefly



Resilience Is She

by Camari Serau

Ask me about strength,
and I will tell you about women
who carry continents on their backs,
the morning star on their shoulders,
their palms, like earth, raise life
and shape pebbles into boulders;
shift spirit into bodies,

I will tell you that their spines
only recognise the word, "Rise!"
that the soul of all war cries
is conceived in a woman's eyes
and that it thrives,
like an ancient language on her tongue,
it survives / the rup/ture of her lungs
when she lays her own breath
to give life to daughters and to sons.

Ask me about courage
and I will tell you she is the whisper
that every girl knows as Spirit within her -
the warrior in her voice,
the deity in the speech
of the spitting image of God;
the masterpiece unleashed.

Ask me about resistance
and I will show you the scars
the trace of blade, bone and teeth
scattered across my skin like stars
I will read to you the poems,
I will gift you the chants,
be beside you at every protest
turning riot into art.

Ask me about hope
and I will show you immortality
for even when life dies, hope stays alive
searching for a home inside of me,
saying, "giving up is not an option;
all that you are given, you can handle"
if the world crumbles,
in the wreckage where order yields to mess,
there is still purpose, keep your focus
on the rise and fall of your chest.

Ask me about resilience
and I will tell you about her;
her ability to make herself whole again
her will to turn pain into power

Now she blesses her body,
when she dresses her wounds
she grows mountains from valleys,
she makes suns out of moons.

When the depths try to swallow her whole,
she remembers how far her roots go -
entwined with others just like hers,
she knows she is never alone

She has persisted through lifetimes
In her resistance, she is free
Ask me about resilience,
I will tell you, resilience is
She.

Figure 5: 'Resilience Is She' by Camari Serau. This powerful poem by Camari Serau, an Indigenous Fijian feminist queer poet, was written for the launch of the Pacific Feminist Fund. It celebrates the strength, courage and resistance of Pacific women, embodying their ability to transform pain into power and create hope amid adversity.

Source: Camari Serau, launch of the Pacific Feminist Fund.

hierarchies. This dual perspective enables me to critically examine how political masculinities within Fijian institutions are negotiated and sometimes contested along ethnic and historical lines, enriching my exploration of Fiji's multifaceted power dynamics and identity constructions.

However, this positionality also introduces distinct challenges, especially when navigating the nuanced expectations and perceptions tied to my identity as part of an ethnic minority. For instance, as an Indo-Fijian researcher, I sometimes encounter scepticism about my capacity to fully understand or represent Indigenous perspectives on masculinity — a challenge further complicated by my gender and academic standing. My position can invoke assumptions that I am either biased toward my own ethnic group or lack the necessary cultural grounding to engage with Indigenous Fijian

masculinities authentically. Furthermore, there is often an expectation that I balance academic objectivity with cultural loyalty, which requires careful reflexivity to avoid reinforcing stereotypes or marginalising the voices my research seeks to amplify. These challenges compel me to adopt a reflexive approach, continuously assessing how my interactions and interpretations may be shaped by my background and by the sociopolitical expectations within Fiji's complex landscape.

Second, it discusses the complexities and responsibilities of employing feminist methodologies as a man. This approach necessitates a critical examination of one's position within gendered hierarchies and the adoption of a reflexive stance that continuously interrogates how male privilege might colour the research process — from the formulation of research questions to interactions with participants and interpreting data. More than simply a methodological choice, engaging with feminist methodologies is a political commitment to understanding and deconstructing power relations and gender dynamics (Perucchi et al. 2013). This commitment is deepened through interactions with feminist activists and scholars, whose insights challenge and enrich my knowledge about masculinities within Fiji's divided landscape.

Acknowledging the complexities of both positionality and methodology is essential to this research, as it demands a reflexive approach that examines how my background, assumptions, and interactions shape each phase of the study. Through this lens, the paper aims to contribute to broader discussions on gender, power, and politics, highlighting the significance of reflexivity and feminist methodologies in shaping more inclusive perspectives on political masculinities.

Positionality as an Indo-Fijian in a divided sociopolitical landscape

Being Indo-Fijian in Fiji is deeply intertwined with the country's colonial history, where British policies deliberately stratified society along ethnic lines. The indenture system brought Indo-Fijians to Fiji as labourers, establishing a socio-economic divide that lingered long after colonial rule ended. This historical legacy positioned Indigenous Fijians as traditional landowners and guardians of Fijian culture while Indo-Fijians were often marginalised and perceived as outsiders to Indigenous customs and governance structures. These distinctions have continued to shape sociopolitical dynamics, creating a landscape where identity and ethnicity are central to negotiating power and belonging. For an Indo-Fijian researcher, this legacy creates both a unique perspective and distinct challenges, as my positionality involves navigating what it means to be both an 'insider' with an inherent understanding of Indo-Fijian experiences and an 'outsider' in relation to Indigenous cultural and political spaces.

In this context, 'insider' status means holding an intrinsic understanding of the cultural narratives, historical grievances, and resilience characterising Indo-Fijian identities, providing valuable insights into the intersection of ethnicity and masculinity in Fiji. This insider perspective allows me to recognise the nuances of how marginalisation has shaped Indo-Fijian masculinities, often emphasising resilience, community cohesion, and adaptability. However, this status is complicated by the perception of 'outsiderness' in Indigenous contexts, where issues of land ownership, traditional roles, and community obligations shape Indigenous Fijian masculinities differently. Navigating this space requires reflexivity, as my Indo-Fijian identity might inadvertently affect how participants perceive me or how I interpret interactions. This dual positionality demands a careful balance between accessing and interpreting both Indo-Fijian and Indigenous perspectives on masculinity and a sensitivity to how historical and sociopolitical divisions continue to shape these identities in contemporary Fiji.

The historical marginalisation and current sociopolitical positioning of Indo-Fijians as a minority group within Fiji's ethnic and political landscape complicate the already contested space of Indo-Fijian identity. While Indigenous Fijians are constitutionally recognised as the traditional custodians of land and cultural heritage, Indo-Fijians often occupy an ambiguous position within the national narrative, viewed as integral to Fiji's economy but peripheral to its Indigenous traditions. This dynamic fosters belonging and exclusion among Indo-Fijians, shaping how they negotiate identity and political representation. Engaging with this complex reality requires a reflexive approach that actively considers how these historical and contemporary dynamics influence my interactions, access to information, and interpretations within the research process.

Practically, this reflexivity involves examining how my Indo-Fijian identity might affect rapport with participants, especially in spaces dominated by Indigenous Fijian perspectives. For instance, I prioritise transparency with participants about my background and research aims, consciously striving to build trust while remaining aware of potential biases that may arise from shared ethnic experiences. I also engage in regular self-assessment and consultation with Indigenous and feminist colleagues to ensure my interpretations remain grounded in diverse viewpoints rather than inadvertently reinforcing dominant narratives or marginalising the voices I aim to elevate. By integrating these reflexive practices, I seek to mitigate the risks my positionality poses, striving for a balanced research narrative that acknowledges but does not perpetuate Fiji's sociopolitical divides.

My research's theoretical underpinnings are rooted in a confluence of masculinities, feminist institutionalism, and political decolonisation theories. Each offers a distinct lens through which to examine the intricate fabric of Fijian political life. The intersection of these perspectives is not merely a theoretical exercise but a reflection of the complex, interwoven realities of gender, power, and politics in Fiji. My position as an

Indo-Fijian man significantly informs this theoretical convergence, introducing a nuanced understanding of how gender relations and power dynamics are constructed, performed, and navigated within the context of Fijian politics. My personal and cultural background shapes my perspective on the issues and informs my approach to applying these theories. The relational dynamics between my standpoint and the theoretical underpinnings of my research are pivotal, as they guide my exploration of gender relations and power dynamics in Fiji.

Feminist methodologies: Navigating the terrain as a male researcher

Feminist methodologies, emphasising power relations, gender dynamics, and the pursuit of social justice, offer a robust framework for examining masculinities within Fijian politics (Curato 2010, Wickramasinghe 2010). However, as a man, adopting this approach necessitates a critical examination of one's own position within the gendered hierarchies that these methodologies seek to dismantle (Davison 2007). It requires an ongoing reflexivity to interrogate how male privilege might colour the research process — from the framing of questions to the engagement with participants and interpretation of their experiences.

This reflexivity is not a solitary exercise but a relational one, deeply informed by interactions with feminist activists and scholars who bring critical insights into gender dynamics. For instance, my conversations with Fijian feminist activists such as Virisila Buadromo, Roshika Deo, Noelene Nabulivou, and Mereoni Chung have challenged my perceptions of masculinity and its intersections with ethnicity in Fiji. These interactions have highlighted how masculinities are constructed and contested differently across ethnic groups, particularly how Indo-Fijian and Indigenous Fijian masculinities are framed within broader sociopolitical contexts. Engaging with insights from individuals such as Noelene Nabulivou and Adi Finau Tabakaucoro, who works with queer and Indigenous communities, has deepened my understanding of the unique challenges faced by women and marginalised masculinities in Fiji, underscoring the need to approach this research with sensitivity to intersecting identities. These engagements remind me of my responsibility to leverage my research position to examine and challenge patriarchal norms, striving to contribute to a more equitable understanding of gender relations (Pease 2000).

The adoption of feminist methodologies serves as the cornerstone of this inquiry, guiding the examination of how masculinities are constructed, performed, and maintained within political spaces, as well as their consequent impact on gender relations and power dynamics. The application of feminist methodologies is instrumental in highlighting the nuances of gendered experiences and in advocating for a gender-just society. Yet, as a male researcher engaging with these methodologies, I am presented with unique challenges and responsibilities that necessitate careful navigation.

As a man employing feminist methodologies, it is essential to critically reflect on my positionality and the power dynamics I bring into the research space (Sundberg 2003). My identity as an Indo-Fijian man influences my interactions, shaping both the access I have to certain narratives and the way participants perceive me, particularly in discussions surrounding masculinities. For example, I take deliberate steps to build trust by being transparent about my positionality and research intentions, clarifying that my objective is not to judge or reinforce stereotypes but to understand the nuances of gender dynamics. I regularly engage in reflexive practices, such as journalling after interviews to analyse my interactions and identify any biases that might have influenced my understanding of participants' perspectives. Additionally, I consult with colleagues including feminist and Indigenous scholars, such as Glenn Finau, to gain alternative viewpoints on my interpretations, ensuring that my analysis respects the diverse voices in Fiji's sociopolitical landscape. These practices allow me to address and mitigate the biases that my positionality may introduce, reinforcing the integrity and ethical commitment central to feminist research.

Engaging with feminist methodologies also requires me to confront and challenge the entrenched masculinist epistemologies that have historically dominated the social sciences (Halewood 1995). This involves a deliberate effort to decentre the traditional notions of objectivity and neutrality, recognising that the researcher's standpoint inherently influences knowledge production. Embracing a feminist epistemology means valuing the lived experiences and voices of those who have been marginalised or silenced by patriarchal structures, including women and non-dominant masculinities, within the Fijian political landscape. It calls for an empathetic and inclusive approach to research that seeks to understand and represent the complex realities of all participants (Sarantakos 1998).

Moreover, the use of feminist methodologies compels me to examine how political masculinities are both a product of and contribute to gender inequalities in Fiji. This requires a nuanced analysis that goes beyond the identification of gender disparities to explore the underlying mechanisms through which masculinities are reproduced and contested within political institutions. By focusing on the relational aspects of gender and power, my research endeavours to uncover the strategies and practices that can potentially transform political cultures into more inclusive and equitable spaces.

As a man engaging with feminist methodologies, it is also critical to ensure accountability to the feminist principles and the communities and individuals my research seeks to serve (Doucet and Mauthner 2002). This entails a commitment to transparency, openness to critique, and willingness to engage in dialogues challenging patriarchal norms and practices (Pease 2010). It involves leveraging my position to amplify the voices of those who have been marginalised, while also

being mindful of not overshadowing their narratives with my interpretations.

Engaging with feminist activists in Fiji

Before my thesis proposal seminar in October 2022, I embarked on a journey back to Fiji with a clear purpose: to engage directly with feminist friends and mentors, including Roshika Deo, Virisila Buadromo, Tara Chetty, Mereoni Chung, Michelle Reddy, and Krisneil Prasad, each of whom has dedicated years to advocating for feminist causes across Fiji and the Pacific. These individuals, with their deep-rooted commitment to feminist principles and extensive experience in activism, provided an invaluable source of wisdom and critique. For example, Roshika Deo's insights into the intersections of gender and politics in Fiji challenged me to consider how masculinities are reinforced or contested within political institutions. At the same time, Virisila Buadromo and Tara Chetty shared experiences that highlighted the nuanced challenges facing women leaders in these spaces.

This trip was more than just an opportunity to receive critical feedback on my research ideas; it was an exercise in accountability — a foundational element of conducting ethically sound research that aligns with feminist methodologies. Engaging with these activists helped refine my research questions and approach, particularly in understanding the need to centre women's experiences and perspectives. Their critiques emphasised the importance of positionality and how my Indo-Fijian and male identity might shape interactions with participants and interpretations of data. This process of seeking and incorporating feedback from feminist activists has become an additional methodological step, grounding my research in the lived realities of those actively working to dismantle patriarchal structures in Fiji. Through this relational accountability, I aim to ensure that my work remains ethically rigorous and meaningfully connected to the feminist principles that drive it.

The insights gained from these feminist activists have been integral to shaping my thesis proposal and resultant fieldwork. Their critique and guidance have not only enriched my understanding of the feminist landscape in Fiji but also provided a foundational ethos for my research approach. For example, Roshika's critique of the tendency to focus solely on male-dominated spaces encouraged me to incorporate the perspectives of women's organisations and their responses to political masculinities, adding a dimension that deepened the scope of my research. Virisila Buadromo's advice on the importance of understanding institutional power dynamics led me to refine my interview questions, ensuring they addressed how masculinities are constructed and how they impact women's representation and participation in Fijian politics. This feedback provided a foundational ethos for my research approach, reminding me that feminist research should be as attentive to the voices of women and marginalised groups as it is to structural analysis.

These engagements ensured that my research was academically rigorous and ethically aligned with feminist activism principles by emphasising the need to balance scholarly inquiry with accountability to the communities and activists involved. For instance, following their suggestions, I have committed to regular check-ins with local activists to ensure that my research interpretations do not inadvertently reinforce patriarchal norms but aim to be transformative. This process of bridging academic inquiry with activist wisdom has enabled me to approach my fieldwork with a more nuanced, ethical framework that honours the principles and lived experiences of those actively working for gender equity in Fiji.

Navigating relational dynamics

The relational dynamics between myself, my study participants (the knowledge holders), and the various groups within the research context were central to conducting ethical and meaningful research. Understanding and managing these dynamics was integral to my methodological approach, requiring a careful balance between building trust and maintaining critical distance. For example, when interviewing Indigenous Fijian men in political spaces, I was mindful of the potential power imbalances that could arise due to my Indo-Fijian identity and academic position. I took steps to build rapport by openly acknowledging my positionality, explaining that my research aimed to understand rather than critique or reinforce stereotypes. This sensitivity was essential, as it helped foster trust while respecting the diverse identities of participants whose experiences often differed significantly from my own.

Effectively engaging with these relational dynamics involved prioritising an empathetic and inclusive research approach that respected Fiji's diverse experiences and perspectives. For instance, when engaging with female activists and feminist scholars, I was careful to create spaces for dialogue where their perspectives were centred, ensuring that they felt heard and valued, especially when discussing sensitive topics like gendered power dynamics. I remained vigilant about my biases, regularly reflecting on how my assumptions might shape interactions or interpretations. To ensure the research process was collaborative and participatory, I sought participant feedback at various stages, inviting them to comment on my findings or correct any potential misinterpretations. This approach not only strengthened the ethical foundations of my research but also honoured the sociopolitical complexities of Fiji, allowing me to conduct respectful and inclusive research.

Conclusion: Reflecting on contributions and challenges

This research, through the dual lenses of an Indo-Fijian researcher and a man employing feminist methodologies, offers insights into the intricate intersections of identity, power, and gender within Fiji's unique sociopolitical landscape. Navigating my

positionality has underscored how ethnic identity and historical legacies profoundly influence the research process, highlighting both the potential for enriched understanding and the risk of introducing biases. As an Indo-Fijian, I bring a personal understanding of Fiji's ethnic dynamics, which has been instrumental in contextualising the diverse experiences of masculinities. However, this same positionality demands a rigorous reflexivity, ensuring that my interpretations do not unintentionally reinforce existing stereotypes or marginalise voices. Reflexivity, therefore, is not only a methodological tool but a necessary practice to maintain the integrity of my findings. This approach has been pivotal in aligning the research with ethical standards and ensuring that it meaningfully contributes to understanding gender dynamics in a politically and ethnically divided society such as Fiji.

Engaging feminist methodologies as a man has presented unique opportunities to deepen the discourse on gender relations and masculinities. This approach has emphasised the critical need to examine power dynamics from a standpoint that acknowledges male privilege while striving for an ethical and inclusive perspective. Working closely with feminist activists and scholars has enriched the research, challenging traditional hierarchies and encouraging an approach that is not only analytical but also actively engaged in challenging patriarchal structures. These interactions have underscored the transformative potential of feminist methodologies, especially in contexts where gendered power imbalances are pronounced. Through this engagement, I have been reminded of my responsibility to advocate for gender equity and support marginalised voices. Employing feminist methodologies has broadened my understanding of masculinity, allowing for a more nuanced, intersectional perspective that seeks to bridge academic inquiry with meaningful social change.

By addressing the complexities of studying masculinities in Fiji, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how gender, power, and politics intersect in postcolonial societies. It highlights how masculinities are not monolithic but constructed and performed within specific cultural and political contexts, particularly in institutions shaped by colonial legacies. This work challenges conventional narratives in gender studies that often centre on dominant masculinities, instead providing new insights into how marginalised masculinities navigate and interact with institutional power. By foregrounding feminist activist perspectives, this research aligns with the broader goals of dismantling patriarchal structures and promoting gender equity. It envisions a more just and inclusive future, encouraging gender studies scholars to adopt approaches that centre on marginalised voices and aim for tangible social transformation.

Looking forward, further research is needed to explore the intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender in shaping political identities and practices, particularly in societies marked by colonial histories and ethnic divisions. The application of feminist methodologies in gender studies research, especially by male researchers, warrants additional inquiry to understand its implications for knowledge production and social change. Such work would contribute to a more comprehensive framework for understanding masculinity, moving beyond traditional perspectives to embrace the nuanced ways in which gender and power are negotiated. Reflecting on the contributions and challenges of this study, it is clear that advancing gender justice and equality requires a commitment to ethical scholarship, continuous reflexivity, and ongoing engagement with power dynamics. Through academic debate and collaboration with activists, the field of gender studies can contribute meaningfully to creating more inclusive and equitable societies.

Judy Putt: The Discomfort of Collaboration — Being Positioned and Related

During the many years that I have been involved in research, except for when I did my PhD, the work has primarily been done in collaboration with others. Collaboration in its simplest form involves a team or group of researchers and seeks to work ethically with participants through respect, cultural sensitivity, reciprocity, and meaningful engagement. In particular, I want to stress and consider the last part — meaningful engagement — and the underlying hierarchies that are often tacit in these engagements.

Collaboration makes sense for practical and ethical reasons, and has given many opportunities to reflect upon and reconsider both personal and collective relationships. Such pause for thought occurs in many settings, and not just within the institutional settings of academia. However, this is the context in which we currently operate and which I returned to some years ago. It is a terrain fraught with contradictions and uncertainties, most notably in the humanities, where our understandings of, and the value placed on, certain kinds of knowledge have been overthrown or at least shaken by postcolonial theorising and discourse in academia, and by long-marginalised or less-heard voices outside of academia (see, for example, the impact over the past 40 years of the work of Bhabha 1994, Crenshaw 1991, and Said 1985, to name just a few).

Self-reflection

From an Anglo-Australian background, and as a child migrant to Australia, I represent in the crudest sense 'white privilege'. The position of privilege is nuanced by personal experience of not having a strong sense of place and weak kin ties, with the nuclear family being the most significant network of relationships that carry responsibility and obligation. I have therefore travelled lightly though the social landscape, with connections rooted in happenchance, and affinities in interests and values. There were silences surrounding family history and the few stories were of scandal, of class oppression and female disadvantage, and the ravages wrought on family by World War II. For example, my grandmother was a maid at the age of 12, and my grandfather never recovered from his six years serving in the war and died soon after it ended.

For me, what had a huge impact (and says much about how people like me construct our sense of identity) were the angry books I read as an adolescent, on the population explosion, environmental destruction, patriarchy, and labour exploitation by elites. Writings such as these altered and coloured my vision, and underpin much of the research I have been party to since then. However, such a worldview is biased and rooted in certain strands of Western thought, and does not necessarily accord or resonate

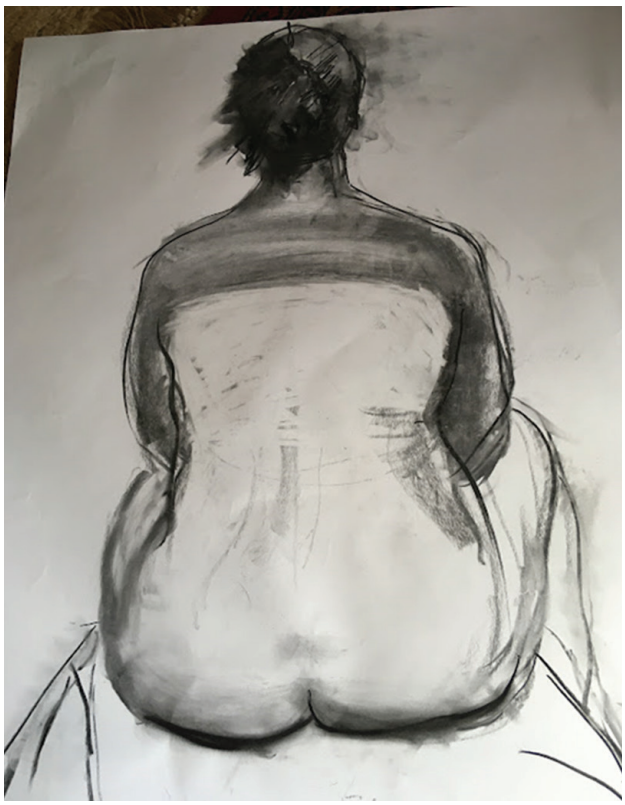


Figure 5: Self-portrait
Source: Drawing and photograph by Judy Putt.

well with scholars or research participants who bring a different framing to what they perceive and name as important, and the research process, as articulated in the works of Melani Anae (2020), Kabini Sanga (2004), and Linda Tuhiwai-Smith (Smith 2021). Given the boundaries inherent in the individual (and my own personhood), being in collaboration with others becomes desirable, if not downright compulsory, in order to bridge the subterranean impediments to understanding and influence.

Case study

A recently published article, called 'Love Shouldn't Hurt', about co-designing a theory of change to prevent violence against women in Samoa, provides an excellent example of the tensions that arise in collaborative research, even where there is a significant commitment to transparency about the process and the research team members' multiple positionalities (Mannell et al. 2023). The article had 11 authors, and the research project was described as a collaboration between 10 Samoan villages, the Samoa Victim Support Group (SVSG), the National University of Samoa, the Samoa Bureau of Statistics, and University College London (UCL).

The article ends with a positionality statement, where it is explained that the paper is the outcome of a collaborative process involving academics and practitioners, 'all with very different positions of identity and power':

> As academics, many of us have PhDs (JM, LB, ECM, TSS) while others are enrolled in PhD programmes and/or in academic institutions (HL, CV, HT), which affords us with a certain amount of privilege and status in comparison with our peers. Many of us belong to and identify with Samoan ethnic, cultural and religious communities (HT, ECM, TSS, PT, SH, SF, SLC), and have contributed to the cultural, historical and linguistic reading of the theory of change described in this paper. (Mannell et al. 2023:13)

In effect, in relation to privilege and status, two distinct domains are referenced — academia, and being and identifying as Samoan. For the research process, the Samoan domain is the critical social landscape, the positionality and relationality of the SVSG members, and their network of village representatives played a pivotal and determinant role — for example, in conducting the interviews and in selecting participants. The process itself was infused with culturally sensitive and gender-sensitive approaches — for example, holding village meetings at the final stage, and having interviews with separate groups of men and women.

Academia begins to emerge as the dominant social landscape in the analysis, and ultimately takes precedence in the ordering of authorship. The thematic reflections found in the paper were described as collaboration involving the research team over several meetings. 'Several' of the team wrote up the reflections and presumably finalised the journal article. When we look at the ordering of the 11 authors, the UCL academic takes top position, followed by a woman who I assume is the head of the SVSG. Here the conventional hierarchies of academic knowledge take precedence, in contrast to the power held by local knowledge holders during the research process. Within the latter, there are also hierarchies, as evidenced by the selection of elders and where pre-existing relationships exist. It is not stated how kinship and family affiliation between and among researchers and villagers had an influence on the process.

The shifting nature of positionality and relationality within different contexts of members of the research team and attendant privileges of different knowledges is illustrated by this article. It also underlines that the significance of certain activities and outcomes do vary across a research project. What appears to have bound the research team was an adherence to a 'feminist perspective', although there may have been different understandings of feminisms among the practitioners and academics. What is emphasised in the article is the gulf or fracture between villagers and the research team in their understandings of what causes violence against women. The article makes it clear that they did not 'overtly' challenge the villagers' views, as to do so was seen as fostering 'unhelpful hierarchies between theoretically-informed foreign perspectives and local worldviews' (Mannell et al. 2023:7).

It is ironic that what provides a degree of alignment and shared understanding among the research team undermines 'meaningful engagement' with the village participants. Surely, taking a feminist standpoint that is integral to this team's and my own research entails making visible your own or your team's understanding of the issues, as it invariably colours and shapes the design, conduct, and interpretation of the research. The villagers' explanations may be presented or made visible, but the research team overpowers their worldviews by privileging their interpretation of the causes of violence, with the villagers potentially remaining oblivious to this overarching narrative and control of the argument.

Acknowledging and addressing privilege

The above comments underscore some limitations that exist in relation to meaningful engagement. In conclusion, and in recognition of these limitations, I will make a few observations in relation to three key areas of concern: institutional sites of power; the collaborative process; and the credibility of personal rationalisations.

Privileging specific forms of knowledge is endemic within institutions and encoded within structures in academia and in development practice. Tawake et al. (2021), although primarily aiming at development practitioners, pose questions that include addressing systems and institutions (also see Guttenbeil-Likiliki 2020). It is essential to have continuing conversations that involve an honest facing up to and dialogue about what we want to retain from the academic tradition, and how to expand rather than restrict what we do. This encompasses both the process and the communication acts (and not just journal articles and books that are traditionally synonymous with academic prowess) that emerge from the process.

Collaboration involves clarifying and articulating the hierarchies, and the differences in priorities and what people want from it (as the case study illustrates). Finding common ground among the research team — in their case, feminism — lays the foundations of meaningful engagement between team members. However, although much stress is placed on relationality and reciprocal relationships, engagement with local and leader participants through research is frequently fleeting or episodic in nature. Thus, we strive for respectful relationships rather than the embedded quality of enduring relationality. This is often simplified as 'two-way learning', as we seek to accommodate and harness the empirical and the subjective (e.g. Grey et al. 2016).

Where I am placed as a co-researcher in a collaborative team, which is situated within the Pacific region or involves participants from Pacific Island countries, the ongoing question is whether non-locals (outsiders) have a place within collaborations, in the practice and in the process. The rationale for such inclusion, and that I resort to, includes the transfer of

resources and funding, as they remain concentrated in high-income countries and donor organisations. Other reasons relate to the subject matter, where for example the focus is on the ongoing legacy of formal legal and Western systems, and more broadly, the topic may not be easy or safe for participants to share with those they are not close to and/or they have not had the opportunity to date to share their views in a confidential way.

In these circumstances, it may be politic and preferable to convey their perceptions and experiences to an 'outsider'; examples being women recently released from prison, or those who have experienced domestic violence and where the perpetrator's dense social and kin networks may pose a risk. Finally and personally, being mindful of intersectionality as a means to not overly homogenise my own identity, the colonial narrative, or the differences among the 'others' and between teams, is helpful, even if we should never shy away from the continuing uneven fields of power that structure our practice and what is valued as knowledge. But is this rationale credible?

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