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## **Finding the Words: Using Critical Theory to Speak Back to Our Institutions**

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**ABSTRACT.** Working as a Pacific critical university scholar in Aotearoa New Zealand necessitates the use of critical theory. Often our first encounter with critical theory involves furious nodding and highlighting as we find texts that speak to our own experiences of the world. We find ourselves revisiting these words as we would old friends, calling upon their support as we navigate the reality that is working within our neoliberal, white, masculine institutions. This paper explores how we can use these words to push, challenge and reject our institutional habits whilst simultaneously finding an odd comfort in how others have articulated their exclusion. This article will story the authors' encounters with critical theory and reflect on the ways in which it has provided the words needed to speak back to our academic institutions. Importantly, this storying is not without limitations. Critical theory developed elsewhere cannot always provide the words we need, and it becomes necessary to weave our own understandings and find our own words to story our experiences.

**Keywords:** critical theory; decolonisation; university; relationality; Pacific early career research

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## Introduction

My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. (Lorde, 2017, p. 2)

Lorde's call to connect with each other and examine the world is one that transfuses into Pacific understandings of relationality and knowledge. Perhaps that is why as Pacific scholars, we find ourselves drawn to Lorde and what they have to offer us as we deconstruct and reconstruct our worlds through critical theory encounters. Knowledge is created in relationship; it is through interacting with people, ideas, the vanua (land) and ancestors that we begin to understand and record the world around us. It is with all these relationships that we dive deep into what critical theory has enabled us to articulate as Pacific women in our universities. It is also in relationships that this article finds itself with a co-author. My sister Chelsea and I have had a mixed past – it's always awkward when somebody steps into your life because your sibling bought them in. However, we have found a connection to each other and our worlds through critical theory. For Chelsea's latest birthday, I went through the bookshop and picked Audre Lorde, Sara Ahmed and Toni Morrison so we could share and reflect on what these voices bring to our understanding of the world. Christmas saw us both gifting each other Lana Lopesi's (2021) latest book, *Bloody Woman*. On a personal level, these voices have brought us closer together while also providing us with the words to critique our lived realities. This article presented the opportunity for us to write the conversations that we so often have on drives home, over coffee or while my daughters and her nieces play in the background.

As such, this paper has become a somewhat blank canvas that Chelsea and I have scribbled ideas and thoughts onto. What does critical theory offer those of us who exist in an academy that, at best, is complicit in and, at worst, actively seeks to deny, extract or exploit us? How do these patterns of exploitation and extraction filter into our own practice of scholarship? And finally, we will ask, what does critical theory enable us to describe about the university?

### **Finding Comfort and Liberation in Critical Theory**

How do we begin to articulate the trauma that sits within our bones – handed down to us from generations of survival and resistance? We may often find ourselves lost in these academic spaces – expected to understand the detached words of a learned scholar whose wisdom has been built from the comforts of an armchair positioned inside an ivory tower. These distant accounts of our experiences are grossly mistranslated through such images that we simply refuse at an epistemic level to see any trace of ourselves in. It is only until we encounter scholarship written from

the visceral experiences of grief, loss and hope that we finally feel seen and heard. Thus, we arrive to discover what critical theory can offer us.

In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labour for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (hooks, 1994, p. 207)

Meaningful critical theory is both a labour of freedom and a labour of love. We owe it to ourselves and one another to boldly dream and create anew with our words. When we recognise such potentials, new visions forward are unleashed and materialised through the articulation of experiences and ideas. Scholarship centred on the lived experiences of the displaced and dispossessed reflects the true nature behind our current social reality, deliberately calling to attention and calling out the change which so desperately needs to shake the world at its core.

When we view living in the European mode only as a problem to be solved, we rely solely upon our ideas to make us free, for these were what the white fathers told us were precious. But as we come more into touch with our own ancient, non-European consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings, and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge and, therefore, lasting action comes. (Lorde, 2007, p. 37)

The insights of Lorde echo in alignment with our own Pacific scholars. We are reminded of the tireless work of Hau'ofa (2008), Trask (1993) and Teaiwa (2021). We are reminded of the poems by Wendt (1976), Helu-Thaman (1987) and Mila (2008, 2020). We are reminded *just* what is at stake for Pacific women in the academy and what the costs are when Alice Te Punga Sommerville (2018) pens a poem 'An Indigenous Woman Scholar's Prayer':

May I watch the old guard quietly move on, *but more than this*:  
may I live long enough to be part of an old guard  
who younger scholars wish would retire.  
(May I get to retire.)

May I see scores of Indigenous scholars  
write hundreds of Indigenous books  
that ask thousands of Indigenous questions.

May I meet Indigenous vice-chancellors, presidents, professors, and  
deans;  
may they not all be men.

May I lie on a future death-bed and look back with regrets related to work rather than regrets related to family.

May my passing be unshocking, not early, not unexpected.  
May I run out of ideas before I run out of time. (n.p)

Or when Katerina Teawia (2018) pens a poem the same year for Tracey Banivanua Mar's sudden passing:

It is ok to rest  
your head  
your gut  
filled  
with decolonial concerns  
in a sea of white  
Australia.

It is ok to rest  
your heart  
your soul  
filled  
with deep care  
for indigenous pasts  
and presents  
and futures.

It is ok to rest  
your hands  
that typed  
and typed  
and typed  
and typed  
your books  
filled  
with decolonial revelations  
about an ocean  
of blue  
and black  
and brown  
South Sea  
Islands. (p. 260)

Or when Karlo Mila (in Patterson, 2018) voiced a poem of farewell for Teresia in 2018:

You are  
a voice,

a song,  
a poem,  
an essay,  
a direct quote,  
a protest sign,  
a presence.

Beloved. (n.p.)

One of the things we often speak of is what does it mean for us that, while, for others in the academy, there is a 'quit lit' (Pryal, 2018) genre, for Pacific women, there is a saying goodbye too early genre? How does this shape our world as Pacific women in the academy? These are questions that should not build relationality across an ocean, but they do as we engage in parallel fights against systems that aim to exclude and silence us. These identifiable parallels emphasise the importance of reclaiming and reinforcing previously dismissed knowledge systems as a means of arrival for an epistemic rupture. The echoing of Lorde's (2017) insights also reinforces what Gordon (2021) notes as the difference between physical and social distance. Although we may be physically distant through geographical borders, we are not socially distant through the intimate exchange of knowledge. In fact, we are closer more than ever through encountering critical theory, which resonates with our very epistemic and ontological framings. The power of such connections is the very essence that grants resistance to be the key to liberation. Knowledge is resistance, and knowledge is, thus, ultimately, liberation.

Navigating the current socio-political landscape, which has been built upon decades of deprivation and loss, it is paramount we find comfort and emancipation in the power of words. In an era where we find ourselves overwhelmed with information and not enough knowledge, critical theory serves as a catalyst to look beyond and discover ways of rebuilding. Just as Freire (2014) and Newton (1973) acknowledge that hope is an ontological need, critical theory can provide us with the spaces to cultivate such hopes and begin to illustrate a new landscape:

Without new visions, we don't know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever manoeuvres and tactics but a process that can and must transform us. (Kelley, 2002, p. xii)

Kelley reminds us that critical theory should not just sit within spaces of despair and pain. Rather, framing critical theory as a tool of liberation also requires channelling the yearning for better within that pain. It is within this very discovery that we may start to lay the foundations for cultivating what Fanon (2002) calls a New World, a chance to reintroduce humanity in ways in which relationality and reciprocity are situated at its very core. The shared global struggle against global capitalism has dislocated and dispossessed many of us, and yet the power of

knowledge exchange remains one of our most powerful tools to correct this. This dispossession and dislocation include not just of our physical bodies and our land, but also of our knowledge systems and our very ontological security as indigenous beings of the Ocean. The fluidity of truth, time and space we once knew as descendants of Oceania are forced into the linear binaries of a Western academy adamant on dismissing what we have to offer. The epistemic underpinnings of the academy and capitalism as a whole centralise such modes of violence. However, it is through the shared experiences of pain, loss and grief that we may find comfort and hope within communities built upon such dreams for better, giving us the ability to connect across different struggles for liberation.

### **Importing Critical Theory**

Initial critical theory (at least the ones we continue to teach as foundational to understanding our world) was/is situated within specific histories in which the Pacific barely registered. As Bhambra (2021) notes, ‘At its simplest, then, modern social theory is properly understood as a product of European societies from the fifteenth century onwards, embodied initially in philosophical reflections about social changes that were beginning to transform those societies’ (p. 10). The decolonial academy is enabling us to critically engage with what it means for our communities, education and selves to be shaped by ideas and theories that ‘have at different moments excluded us, studied us, ignored us, begrudgingly included us, or misunderstood us’ (Naepi, 2021, p. 29). This work is important as it enables us to name the many ways in which the very basis of knowledge construction has reinforced and embedded social practices that exclude racialised bodies; however, we have done little to examine the ways in which Pacific peoples take up critical theory that has been developed within different contexts, histories and contemporary moments.

It has not escaped us that many of the theorists we have pulled on have critiqued a social space from different vanua (land) and spatiotemporal context. The globalised academy is enabling these critiques to travel instantaneously across veimuana (Pacific Ocean) to shape talanoa (conversations) at speeds that have not always been possible. While this speed means that those with the privilege of being within institutions can access both established and novel critical theory with relative ease, this speed also then enables the type of ‘fast scholarship’ that leaves little room for critical engagement with how theory travels and from where and to where it goes, from one encounter to another, from one context to the next. What would it mean for us to create the space and time to not only engage with the texts in extractive ways that enable us to ‘copy paste’ understandings from another’s reality to our own, but also to build meaningful scholarship communities with the people whose scholarship we use to understand our own realities? How do we design institutions that enable a shift from speed-based extractive work to work that fosters authentic relationships between ideas and people?

This call has been made by the people whose scholarship we often lean on. The argument expressed by Croom & Patton (2014) that black scholarship is often misused to centralise whiteness and co-opt voices of colour is one that we should be listening carefully to. Often 'brown' does not exist within the black/white binary, but that does not exclude us from hearing critiques that could easily be levelled at our own use of Black critical theory. We must work out ways to ensure that not only Black critical theory travels to our own vanua but that we also build and create opportunities for Black academics and writers to travel and build relationships with the Pacific academy. It is perhaps becoming clear that we are not offering a solution in these early scribbles; instead, we are articulating tensions and conversations that are often reserved for late-night musing or car rides home as we work through what we are reading or engaging with at the moment. Our ideas are not fully formed, but we wanted to table them as any conversation about how critical theory travels must also consider how some bodies are able to travel with their theories and others are not.

These conversations were in part triggered by Lorde's words:

The threat of difference has been no less blinding to people of Colour. Those of us who are Black must see that the reality of our lives and our struggle does not make us immune to the errors of ignoring and misnaming difference.... The need for unity is often misnamed as a need for homogeneity.... The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all ... to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference. (Lorde, 2007, p. 123)

However, these conversations are also informed by critical Pacific scholarship, scholarship that centres relationality in knowing and knowledge creation (Thaman, 2003a; Nabobo-Baba, 2008; Sanga & Reynolds, 2017; Futter-Puati & Maua-Hodges, 2019; Pasisi, 2020). Our own scholarship calls us to consider what our relationships are to the texts we read and the theories we use. Our scholarship calls us to consider how we are related to the authors that create this scholarship. A step further is to perhaps weave in the concepts around the *va* and reciprocity - how do we intentionally build a relationship between ourselves and the critical theorists whose work we use. Citations are our institutional way of showing relationships, but what practices do our ancestors call on us to engage in if we are using somebody's ideas and experiences to help inform our own understanding of the world in which we exist?

### **Encountering Critical Theory in the University**

As Ahmed notes, 'a movement requires us to be moved' (2017, p. 5). Critical theory moves us as it offers us a lens through which we understand both the trauma and the joy of being Pacific in our institutions. There is nothing quite like meeting for coffee with other Pacific women who work in the academy, where we move from laughter to knowing nods at breakneck speed. The visceral experiences

provided by critical theory remind us that even as teachers and knowledge makers, we continue to forever be students to each other. The scholarship of critical theory is a space where we are perpetually unlearning and relearning the world before us, utilising the fragmented pieces of poetry and prose written by our communities to articulate our current positionalities in relation to the fabrics of our social reality. These words are eternal in nature, crumbling linear conceptualisations of time. When we build upon the preceding legacies of scholarship before us, we keep them alive and simultaneously are clearing the way for future Pacific scholars whose dreams of the New World would be a far extension of what we could ever imagine. This is how we move each other and continue the movement.

Teresia Teawia's work *The Ancestors We Get to Choose: White Influences I Won't Deny* (2014) reminds us that, as Pacific scholars, we can choose our ancestral citation lines:

Engaging broadly with theory and theorists of all kinds is part of exercising intellectual agency and is a necessary foundation for achieving fuller self-determination for Native and Indigenous and Pacific peoples in the academy. (p. 170)

Limiting our scope of scholarship is a disservice to the potentials of achieving true emancipation for us all. When we look to the powerful words of Ahmed, Lorde, hooks and Fanon, we embody this construction of ancestral knowledge ties when engaging with our own knowledge-making. Let it be clear that, when we say ancestors, we do not claim them as our own. Rather, we establish a connection based on the relationality of our shared experiences with oppression. We find ourselves exhaling a sigh of relief as we can finally identify traces of ourselves in their words. We finally feel seen and heard, compelled to carry on these powerful legacies by expanding the horizons they have painted for us. We are moved, and thus heed the call to join the movement they have started. This is when they become our chosen ancestral knowledge ties. These ancestral knowledge ties ground us in the work of unravelling and dismantling we wish to do moving forward. If we understand critical theory as something that contributes to our relationality to each other, as a thing that gives us the words and framings through which to turn the knowing nod into a cutting critique of our institutions in ways that enable a movement. Ultimately, this is what the call from Lorde is asking of us; to share our truths in order to build relationality across those of us who wish to dismantle the house (and perhaps begin to rebuild). It is why we find comfort and liberation in being given permission to feel through critical theory. What is clear from research with Pacific women who work in our universities is that permission to feel is a rare moment and that often we are performing the excess labour of not only stereotypical presentations of Pacific women but also ensuring that we do not offend our Palagi colleagues through truth-telling (Naepi, 2021).



## **Critical Theory, Relationality, Pacific Peoples and the University**

The scribbled conversation pieces outlined above ensure that we unpack the nuanced spaces from which we pull critical theory to help us to understand our own experiences. Once we have begun to engage with these tension-filled spaces, we can look to how critical theory enables us to critique the institutions that we find ourselves writing from within. This section, in particular, will draw on how critical theory has been used to explore Pacific peoples' experiences within the institution or, in short, the grammar (Ahenakew et al., 2014) that we build in order to speak back to our universities.

Pacific peoples have often used critical theory to push our institutions. A recent example of this was in Leenen-Young et al.'s (2021) 'Pillars of the colonial institution are like a knowledge prison' where Pacific early career researchers explore the limits and possibilities of decolonial pedagogical practices in a university in Aotearoa New Zealand. This was achieved by using de Oliveira Andreotti et al.'s (2015) cartography of decolonisation as a starting point for processing their practices. Within this article, Pacific scholars share their reflections on engaging in decolonial pedagogies and map them to the soft reform, radical reform and beyond reform spaces that de Oliveira Andreotti et al. identifies within higher education decolonial discourses. Overall, Leenen-Young et al. (2021) finds that in order to engage in decolonial pedagogies, their institutions must be pushed to move beyond the current inclusion rhetoric:

Our talanoa contributes to assertions that our universities cannot be changed and transformed through inclusion alone. Instead, what is required is a dramatic foundational shift that shatters the Eurocentric colonial knowledge system that binds our higher learning institutions and destines us to universities and worlds in which our very being is determined by race, capital and the heteropatriarchy. (p. 12)

Similar arguments to push our institutions but still sustain hope in their capacity to contribute to Pacific communities' overall desires can be found throughout the Pacific academy in Aotearoa (Anae et al., 2001; Chu, Samala Abella, & Paurini, 2013; Coxon, Foliaki & Mara, 1994; Fairburn-Dunlop, 2008; Māhina, 2008; Nabobo-Baba, 2013; Samu, 2010, 2011; Suaalii-Sauni, 2008; Thaman, 2003a, 2003b).

As authors, we often find ourselves torn between the desires to reform or break the system; and critical theory has provided us with the space to articulate the tension that arises from consistently gifting the university with the tools it needs to change to find that the university itself is unwilling to shift in ways that ultimately undermine the traditional power holders. This co-option can be seen in Naepi et al.'s (2017) piece 'A Cartography of Higher Education: Attempts at Inclusion and Insights from Pasifika Scholarship in Aotearoa New Zealand.' They articulate the difficulties of transforming our universities, despite our universities' stated commitments to diversity and inclusion. Importantly, to do this, Naepi et al. (2017)

lean on a number of different universities based critical theory concepts to anchor their argument, including colour blindness, counting diverse bodies and pluriversities. These three different moments create a clear challenge to the university that without change, universities will continue to replicate the inequity that they claim to be against. Ultimately, they conclude that ‘there is still a risk that institutions will translate these complex insights into Eurocentric utilitarian frameworks that instrumentalise Indigenous knowledges and transform Indigenous insights into boxes to be ticked’ (Naepi et al., 2017, p. 94). Being caught between reforming and breaking is an uncomfortable space because at what point does the university finally run out of the goodwill of Pacific communities? How much racism, exclusion or undervaluing is the point when we say enough? Is it when they underpay us for being Pacific women (McAllister et al., 2020)? Is it when the percentage of Pacific academics employed in New Zealand universities hasn’t changed for over a decade (Naepi, 2019)? Is it when even though our Pacific student pass rates have increased, the gap between Pacific and non-Pacific achievement rates remains the same (Naepi et al., 2021)? Or is it when we have recorded our stories of racism and sexism in our universities, but there has yet to be any significant redress of these practices (Naepi et al., 2021)? While we may not have the answer to this, critical theory gives us the words to articulate the experiences that contribute to the tension and enables us to build relationships of shared hope and trauma through our collective engagement in critical theory.

A recent spate of collective publications by Pacific early career researchers who are utilising critical theory and Pacific scholarship to story also suggests there are significant relationality possibilities within critical theory for Pacific peoples. Collective publishing by Pacific researchers (Baice et al., 2021a, 2021b, 2021c; Fa’avae et al., 2021; Fa’avae et al., 2022; Leenen-Young et al., 2021; Thomsen et al., 2021a, 2021b, 2021c) is enabling us to story our experiences and answer Lorde’s challenge about remaining silent by ensuring that our realities are not just whispered in corridors or laughed about over coffee; instead, they are recorded and sent out into the world to make ripples not just in our own universities but across *veimuana* (Pacific ocean) back to the spaces and places through which we find ideas that enable critical conversations about our realities. These collective pieces read like the coffee table conversations of academics that we were all promised when we began this journey; that we would be able to talk about big ideas with amazing people. However, for Pacific peoples’ because we must engage not only in the work of our own disciplines but also in the work of unmaking and remaking the university, these conversations could never remain at the coffee table. These conversations needed to be recorded, written, reviewed and shared. These articles offer insight into the Pacific academy and how critical theory shapes our day-to-day work and offers a way of processing the experiences we have.

## **Conclusion**

Critical theory has provided a vocabulary to not only explain our experiences but also to connect us with a global struggle against a system that actively and passively works to exclude or diminish our worth. Critical theory calls us to engage deeply in the relationships that these connections make possible as one way to collectively move against this system. This call for relational existence is echoed across the Pacific academy, where our ontological constructions mean that there can be no knowledge without relationship. This becomes particularly poignant when we consider the service that critical theory has done to develop our own grammars for describing how we experience this world. This shared international grammar creates not just a connection but also an obligation to connect. What remains to be seen is how we can leverage our positionality within the universities to enable these connections and to build critical theory that is not just borrowed from across veimuana but also constructed, debated and contributed to via relational existences within this world. When we utilise the grammar of critical theory to outline our experience within the university, we have a shared language for speaking back to the university, and this language connects us to each other as we attempt to navigate the tensions-filled spaces of being both within and without the university.

## **Post-Script**

On a more personal and important note, critical theory enables us to connect to our families and to heal past relationship faux pas through our shared understanding of the limitations of modernity and its dependence on our exclusion. Perhaps you can even write a paper together.



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## **Author contributions**

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy and the integrity of the data analysis.

## **Conflict of interest statement**

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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