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Mobilizing Māori identity: cultural capital and expatriate “portable personhood”

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ABSTRACT Elliott and Urry suggest that the paradigm of mobilities is “becoming increasingly central to contemporary identity formation and re-formation” (7). I match this claim against a focus group study I undertook with expatriate New Zealanders in London. The participants were questioned about their experiences of watching Aotearoa New Zealand films while living overseas to understand their perspectives regarding “mobilized” national identity. While my findings regarding the responses of the majority of the participants have been published, I remained convinced additional work was needed to adequately represent the unique perspectives of the final group: four women who self-identified as being involved with Ngāti Rānana (a London-based Māori culture club). Utilizing Elliott and Urry’s term, “portable personhood”, these four women mobilized specific aspects of Māori affiliation through Ngāti Rānana and joint film viewings (3). The concept of portable personhood, as developed and employed by these women, both recognizes and expands their traditional indigenous relationships and responsibilities. These changes include, but are not limited to: (i) how the act of relocation allows for portable personhood (specifically, in this case study, mobile indigenous-orientated identities), not only physically but also culturally, “racially” and even in terms of kaitiakitanga (guardianship); and (ii) what it means—on the ground—to build a cultural network around an identity dislocated from the land that makes it.

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Introduction

This essay examines the specifically indigenous/Māori worldview that certain participants brought to a series of focus groups I held with expatriate New Zealanders in London. The piece sets these opinions within a mobilities framework as suggested by Blunt's (2007) overview of the cultural geographies of migration, specifically examining Molz's (2005) work on cosmopolitanism and, most recently, Williams *et al.*'s (2011) work on New Zealanders' circular international migration. The participants were questioned about their experiences of watching Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa is the Māori name for New Zealand) films, now that they were living overseas, to understand their perspectives on national identity. Such a focus aligns with one of the five mobilities laid out by Elliott and Urry: "the imaginative travel effected through the images of places and peoples appearing on, and moving across, multiple print and visual media" (16).

While my findings regarding the responses of the majority of the participants have been published in an article titled "Talking Film, Talking Identity", I remained convinced that additional work was needed to adequately represent the unique perspectives of the final group (Thornley, 2009). This group was made up of four women who self-identified as being involved with Ngāti Rānana (a London-based Māori culture club). As a Pākehā person (descendant of European colonizers) entering this experience with my own worldview and set of expectations, their focus group became both a quantitatively (in terms of responses) and qualitatively (in terms of interaction) different undertaking for me from those I had completed earlier that week.

It is this difference that I work through here, one that takes shape in relation to the mobile identities the women assumed, given the constitution of Ngāti Rānana and the women's connection to the club. As Williams *et al.* suggest, it is important to understand how such experiences are "highly place specific, but also to deconstruct those experiences in terms of the overlapping domains of family, workplace and community" (131). Harvey, in a 2001 paper on Māori diasporic spirituality that also focuses on Ngāti Rānana and which I will discuss shortly, adds further nuances to the club members' experiences. Given these preoccupations, New Zealand films functioned as simply one way to kick-start a much larger dialogue that spanned issues of identity, race, class, privilege (or the lack thereof), cross-cultural connection and mobility.

Although I only have space in this piece to focus specifically on the women's relationships to Ngāti Rānana, it is important to first create a strong link between this piece and my earlier published work. Therefore, I briefly discuss the rationale and methodology for the wider study¹ before moving on to define "portable personhood". By undertaking these steps first, I will then be able to more clearly guide the reader through the verbal terrain laid out by the women during our focus group conversation, especially as it relates to the club and their roles in it.

Rationale and methodology

While I more fully outlined the rationale for my study in my article, "Talking Film, Talking Identity", I will briefly revisit some essentials regarding New Zealand expatriates, as well as outlining the importance of this type of project. In sociological terms, New Zealand holds an unusual position in that roughly a quarter of its population lives overseas at any given point (Lidgard and Gilson, 2002: 101; Statistics New Zealand, 2007). Overseas experience or "The Big OE Trip", where New Zealanders travel to live in other countries, often for extended periods of time, is an established national/cultural tradition. This creates a diasporic community overseas, "one that is geographically removed from,

but emotionally responsive to, what is going on back home" (Thornley, 2009: 99).

Due to the shared colonial history between the United Kingdom and New Zealand, London often features as a central stopping point on "The Big OE trip" and also acts as a major repository for New Zealand arts and cultural products—including national films—as they circumnavigate the globe. This study takes as given that it is useful to ask audiences about their relationship to films from their homeland because of what these audiences can tell academics about the currently contested field of national cinema. Given the uncertain position of such films in the face of globalization, audience-centred models allow cultural changes to be considered and included within this changing field of trans/national cinema.

Potential participants were located via databases kept by the New Zealand consulate in London, as well as through online recruitment and snowballing techniques. The requirements for participation were that the potential focus group member was a New Zealand citizen or permanent resident (from any ethnic group) and that they had been in London for a minimum of 2 months with the intention to remain for the foreseeable future. As this was an academic study and funding was limited, the only incentives on offer were evening supper and the possibility of meeting other New Zealanders. Twenty-five participants agreed to take part in focus groups held over four nights, with numbers varying from 4 to 11 participants per group. All the names used here are pseudonyms.

The groups were fairly evenly divided between male and female participants and ranged in age from mid-twenties through to late-sixties. The first three groups included one Asian, one part-Pacific Islander and one part-Māori participant, while all of the other group members were Pākehā. The themes that developed within the first three groups, and which were discussed in my 2009 article, included the importance of national film viewing by expatriates to create and celebrate "New Zealand-ness"; the "cultural translation" that expatriate New Zealanders undertake for their British friends and acquaintances; and the nostalgic associations produced through visual portrayals of national landscape and landmarks.

One of the recruitment methods was approaching pre-existing community/interest groups; participants often self-selected *vis-à-vis* these pre-existing group commitments in advance of the focus group meetings. Given this, the final group consisted solely of female members of Ngāti Rānana. Tribal affiliations are as follows: Mikara (Ngāti Maniapoto); Helena (Pākehā); Patricia (Ngāti Porou); and Violet (Ngāti Kahu/Ngāpuhi ki Whangaroa). Following the interests of the participants, we dealt with many specifically indigenous-orientated topics and perspectives. Therefore, before moving into a discussion of specific themes surrounding their involvement in Ngāti Rānana and as expatriates, I will trace how a mobilities framework can help us understand the concept of portable personhood as developed and employed by these women in ways that both recognizes and expands their traditional indigenous relationships and responsibilities.

The manuscript draft was emailed back to the Ngāti Rānana women for their comments, and changes were made before being submitted for publication. If applicable, it is indicated throughout where changes were made as the result of follow-on correspondence.

"Portable personhood": what does it mean within a mobilities framework?

Although Elliott and Urry introduce "portable personhood" early in *Mobile Lives* (3), Blunt suggests in her overview of the burgeoning field of mobilities research that the development of the idea occurs largely through case studies dealing with three interlocking terms: mobility, transnationality and diaspora, all of

which can be located under the broader heading of “cultural geographies of migration” (685, 691). These studies, as she exhaustively indicates, employ a range of methodologies including ethnographic research, interviews and the analysis of various cultural objects. As my findings rely on focus group interviews and audio visual material, they belong here; the purpose of this piece is to try to situate the group’s relationship to not only Ngāti Rānana and national films but, more generally, to what Blunt describes as the “creative interface” between all three terms (684). Elliott and Urry frame portable personhood as representing subjects that are increasingly mobile, pointing to the fact that such mobility “reshapes the self: its everyday activities, interpersonal relations with others, as well connections with the wider world” (3). Here, I am extending Elliot and Urry’s definition of portable personhood at that creative interface: in terms of understanding how the women’s club responsibilities shape their experiences while in London. I would further suggest that, while a Western theory may sit uneasily alongside traditional Māori notions of a more community-oriented approach to subjectivity (Moeke-Pickering, 1996), it becomes productive in explaining how Ngāti Rānana attendees have been forced to, in fact, generate *new subjectivities*. These new subjectivities arise from the portable conditions of their roles within the club.

Throughout this article (and as Blunt also recognizes), the work of Bourdieu, Molz, O’Carroll and Williams *et al.* all provide distinct ways of understanding “transnational citizenship” or portable personhood: not only as the legal definition of the term but also the “social relations and cultural meanings, values and practices” embedded in such a concept (688). In the case of Ngāti Rānana, Bourdieu’s lived experience of citizenship/personhood may well be more meaningful and obligatory than the more widely recognized and feted legal moniker of “New Zealander” (or, particularly in the case of Helena, the “racial” one of “European”). This argument forms the basis of “New Possibilities”, the final section of this essay and one that works to uncouple such common sense understandings, given that they are often uncritically linked together.

“The broader whanau of Ngāti Rānana”: mobile (but grounded) community

One of the main themes discussed in my previous articles was the extent to which New Zealand connections figured in the participants’ lives. It is not unusual for expatriates to search for a sense of community in the places where they find themselves (Harrington and Bielby, 2005; Karim, 2003; O’Carroll, 2013; Ong, 1999; Williams *et al.*, 2011). Sometimes such connections come from associations formed in the new country, but just as often they are spaces from home recreated (and reconfigured) overseas. Such was the case with Ngāti Rānana. Embodying portable personhood, these four women mobilized specific aspects of Māori affiliation through Ngāti Rānana and joint film viewings. While other focus groups included some members who had prior connections (for example, the second evening group consisted of past and present members of the London New Zealand Cricket Club or LNZZC), only the final group evidenced a particularly complicated investment in their community group. By “complicated”, I mean that the definition and role of Ngāti Rānana took up a large part of the time allotted for questions, as it became clear that neither was clear-cut and both required in-depth explanation. This was one of the first, and most obvious, ways that my pre-structured research design was challenged by the women’s responses:

Mikara: What we officially do is, no, what we officially are is ... a club of kiwis [colloquial name for New Zealanders] away

from home ... no no no ... no no, because we’re not all kiwis ...

(In the background): No.

Violet: Officially Ngāti Rānana ... is probably a kapa haka [cultural performance] group.

Mikara: No.

(In the background): ... hmmmmmm.

Unidentified person #1: It offers people an opportunity to learn about Māori culture.

Unidentified person #2: Yes.

Helena: But in saying that ... we’re talking about our whole culture so, you know, although so much of the focus is kapa haka, there’s just so much more that goes on—it’s a whole social community. There have been spin-off groups: there’s been an entire taiaha [a weapon of hard wood] group, a kōhanga reo [‘language nest’ or early childhood language school], and there have been performing arts companies that have sprung out of Ngāti Rānana. It’s huge.

DT: So it’s been going on for quite a while?

Mikara: 48 years ... Over forty years.

Later in the conversation, Mikara suggested: “So it’s probably a ... group of like-minded people with a Māori focus—not a New Zealand focus but a Māori focus ...”, while Helena stated: “So we’re the main representative group of Māori in this part of the world—and not just [in] the United Kingdom”. It is interesting to note that, although Helena self-identifies as Pākehā, she has been (and continues to be) actively involved in the club. From their interactions, it appeared the other women in the group accepted her involvement as well. Along these lines, Mikara differentiates between two perspectives, one incorporating New Zealand and one specifically addressing Māori culture: Ngāti Rānana, in her view, exists to focus on the latter. In addition, Violet explained that Ngāti Rānana serves as a base for people interested in and involved with Māoritanga (Māori culture) who may be living in other European countries without similar networks. The physical space provided by Ngāti Rānana was only the start: as the women mentioned, there are kapa haka and te reo (Māori language) classes, several public performances each year, and annual fundraising events. The group also performs important cultural functions—such as being the protectors of any Māori artefacts in that part of the world: in Violet’s terms, “Keeping the taonga (treasures) warm”. As such, Ngāti Rānana provides a space for all who are interested in and identify with Māoritanga, whether or not they self-identify as Māori.

This initial difficulty in defining the core purpose of the club led me to think more about the mobile (in the sense of both “shifting” and “expatriate”) relationship of these participants to Ngāti Rānana, given Mikara’s background sketch:

It really did start as just a kapa haka group and ... it got more—and eventually along the way—when I say along the way, I do only mean at that time, a couple of years, years or months? [Someone in background—“Years, I think”] OK, years. They ended up at New Zealand House in central London in Haymarket Street and it moved all around the building ... and Ngāti Rānana tries to stay away from the politics ... so I’ll try and stop that one there ... that’s what it is ... see, even the performance isn’t what it’s all about because it’s invited to do performances [Too many people talking to hear clearly]

I am not assuming that there is some kind of essential (and by extension, essentialist), unique connection that can be seen only in the relationship between Māori and the cultural groups they participate in—as though all other groups somehow fundamentally

lack the ability to form the same sort of connection. The LNZCC members clearly had long-standing and emotionally/socially influential ties to the sport and to their fellow members, but where the participants' understandings of the two groups differed was in terms of clarity around the clubs' respective remits.

“Not a New Zealand focus, a Māori focus”: carving out a Māori space in London

The LNZCC members were secure in their definition of what the club did (encouraged New Zealanders to get together as a “wandering side/team” to play cricket while away from home), the roles it performed (facilitating this interaction) and the legitimacy attached to its purpose to begin with (few—whether Londoners or expatriate New Zealanders—would question either the club's definition or its roles). On the other hand, based on comments by participants from the final group, I would venture to say that Ngāti Rānana had struggled (and continued to struggle) with all of these issues, based largely on a lack of cultural legitimization to begin with. If the larger societal groups within which the cultural club operates—Londoners, expatriate New Zealanders and even New Zealanders “back home”—fail to either understand or support the club's goals, it makes it difficult to pin down the operating parameters so essential for reaping the “cultural capital” awarded to such groups, particularly when they are operating away from their home environment (Bourdieu, 1986; Wetherell and Potter, 1992). In this respect, having a mobile identity carries many challenges, in addition to oft-touted benefits.

Although I did not knowingly “set up” having participants present from these two groups to compare and contrast them, it remains that fairly stark areas of contrast do arise because of the differing information surrounding each group. In many respects, a club such as the LNZCC starts off with a great deal more mainstream (white) cultural capital invested in it than does a club to do with things Māori. Cricket, in effect, can be seen as the quintessential “colonial” game: a sport well known to British people—who, in turn, exported it to New Zealand. Indeed, the LNZCC's website states that the club's remit is to “provid[e] the opportunity for its members to play and enjoy cricket in the home of the game and to meet socially” (<http://www.lnzcc.org/>). Bringing the game back to the country and people who invented it does not require Londoners or New Zealand expatriates there—whether Pākehā, Māori or otherwise—to move outside of their comfort zone in any tangible way, whereas a group like Ngāti Rānana challenges any number of usually unspoken assumptions by the white majority.

Such assumptions might question why is it necessary to have a separate Māoritanga group and what the placement of Ngāti Rānana's headquarters in New Zealand House says about the place of Māori culture in relation to a wider “New Zealand focus”. And following on from these questions, does this mean that New Zealand culture is simpatico with cricket but not with kapa haka—or defined without question as including British colonial culture but not necessarily Māori culture? Mikara's earlier comment about a Māori focus versus a New Zealand one suggests that she sees the two cultures as very different. Being part of or conversant with one does not mean that you are conversant with another, but perhaps this is not recognized within the larger societal circles made up of Londoners and/or New Zealand expatriates.

Violet voiced this challenge during the meeting:

When I try and explain the club to my friends [Another speaker interrupts: “Oh, you can't”] I usually start with, “You know the All Blacks? Yeah, the haka? Right, there's a lot more

where that came from [laughing].” I get really sick of it, explaining it like that because Māori culture and New Zealand is not defined by the All Blacks or the haka, you know, it's such a small part of New Zealand and Māoridom and it's frustrating—so that's a really good parting dance [sharing New Zealand and Māori culture through films]. By sharing our films is actually a better way. It's more direct, it says more—just than saying haka. [clapping noises; more laughing]

Violet recognizes that club is about many more aspects of Māori culture than kapa haka or the All Blacks or even national films, but—by the same token—that films are one of the most direct and accessible ways to help outsiders understand what it is that the women gain from being involved in such a community. In effect, just as national films began a wide-ranging conversation between the Ngāti Rānana women and myself, they can also kick-start similar conversations when the club's members come in contact with other London-based people and groups.

New possibilities: “adding colour” to racial and national mobilities

On resending the final draft to the participants for their comments, Helena responded with the following clarification regarding her relationship to the club. While these are long quotes, I include them here so that the reader can ascertain their own relationship to the material, as well as considering my reading:

I came to Ngāti Rānana after I started attending Te Reo Māori classes in London ... when you learn another language you also learn another way of thinking. You learn words for concepts that are not defined within the English language e.g. mana, ihi, wehi, hōhā ... And I feel that this has been one of club's (Ngāti Rānana's) greatest gifts to me. Ngāti Rānana has given me another way of thinking and approaching the world.

The quote on page three gets lost as everyone starts talking at once. This is a shame as I think that discussion probably held the key for understanding our relationships to club. You see, membership of club goes beyond attending meetings or forming an affiliation. To me, club [Ngāti Rānana] is a lifestyle choice. Yes, I have my work life and my home life [with non-Kiwi flatmates], but club is more closely linked to my own perceptions of my identity than either my work life or home life [original underlining]. Club is an entire community: it is almost like a living breathing creature in its own right. It doesn't depend on individuals and it is operated according to Māori principles. For instance, decisions are made by the collective. Not by a manager, chair or even the committee [komiti]. The network club has is phenomenal ... it's been fascinating being the Pākehā minority within club and being immersed in Māori culture and understanding the issues that come with that.

Through Helena's comment, it is possible to glean a sense of her place-specific commitments in London, commitments that Williams *et al.* identify as revolving around the triad of work, family and community: in Helena's case, the club figures in addressing the latter two, to differing extents (as she outlines in the following quote). She highlights the role of Ngāti Rānana in her identity formation as a Pākehā person, both while in London and more generally as an expatriate New Zealander, and, in so doing, unpacks how those choices necessitated shifts in her national allegiances. Williams *et al.*'s (2011: 126) article acknowledges “expatriate bubbles”: the fact that most New Zealanders who travel go to the United Kingdom, many of them living in London-based “ethnic enclaves” that shape relationships and

networks. However, the authors argue that this is not every expatriate's experience, and Helena's story stands as a particularly rich example of someone who has chosen differently. She becomes one of many "whose lives are largely lived in very different types of places outside of such bubbles, even if they maintain contacts and relations with individuals and organizations within them" (Williams *et al.*, 2011: 127–128). Furthermore:

Being a member of [Ngāti Rānana] club provides that sense of belonging, history and community that can be difficult as a Pākehā to find in London. Although I have British genealogy, there is no memory in my family of what it means to be 'British'. All four of my grandparents speak with a Kiwi accent. I came to the UK expecting to find a sense of kinship, but learnt while living here that I am not British. I will not use the term 'European' to describe myself on the census as I do not identify with that. I am Pākehā, and for me, I feel more at home within the extended whanau of Ngāti Rānana, although that did not happen at once. [...] I understand what it is like to be Pākehā and not relate to British culture. [However,] while I can identify with aspects of Māori culture, the experience of being Māori is very different to being Pākehā, and Māori and Pākehā do come from very different perspectives. I think Pākehā are still struggling to understand our heritage and our culture.

Casting the net back to Elliott and Urry's introduction of portable personhood, they suggest identity is fundamentally reorganized through the demands of mobility. Along these lines, Molz and also Harvey's earlier work on Ngāti Rānana provide several case studies of mobile groups existing to provide community for their members. Molz examines online travel narratives in terms of their propensity for civic responsibility, specifically how cosmopolitanism is rooted in and routed through national affiliations performed both electronically and corporeally. Molz's concern with the "multiple embodied and emplaced attachments, particularly to the nation, that travellers maintain as they travel the world" (529) is both addressed and reconfigured through Ngāti Rānana's focused attention on Māori culture, as Mikara stated earlier.

Likewise, Harvey states:

Travel is nothing new to Māori: their ancestors migrated from elsewhere, and they maintained connections of various kinds by movement among the islands [...]. Beyond the geography, indigenous peoples also 'travel' in the sense that 'tradition' is not about a fixation with, or in, the past but about the continuous unfolding of new possibilities. (Harvey, 2001: 2)

Ngāti Rānana is one of these new possibilities, a space given permanence by its connections back to Aotearoa New Zealand in the form of "objects, people, information, and images travelling [...]", all of which could be considered taonga (Elliott and Urry, 2010: 15). Furthermore, to this list Harvey and I would add mana (according to Mutu, 2011, this is "power, authority, ownership, status, influence, dignity, respect derived from the gods"), a concept that elides these other categories but also undergirds them all. Finally, Helena's attendance at, and commitment to, the club (as a Pākehā person) is another of these new possibilities.

Indeed, Harvey goes further, pointing not only to the status of the Embassy as New Zealand territory and therefore subject to the Treaty of Waitangi (4), but also the importance of Māori sovereignty in legitimizing the "re-visioning" of place and protocols (5). In this way, it is possible for Ngāti Rānana members to embrace both tradition and progression, acknowledging "very different power dynamics and geographies than

those at 'home'" (5). In addition to Mikara's gesture towards the politics involved in the club's location, Violet discussed how she and other members of the club were often required to take up positions of responsibility that would not have been theirs back in Aotearoa New Zealand (for example, when inadequate numbers of respected elders were on location to perform particular protocols). "On-the-ground" navigation of complicated etiquette bolsters Molz's argument regarding cosmopolitanism that "memberships at the local, national and global scales may even overlap and constitute each other" (520). One does not preclude the others and each has to be constantly and imaginatively managed, particularly where two—the local (tangata whenua [people of the land]; turungawaewae [having a place to stand] claims) and the national (New Zealand)—frequently collide.

Conclusion

The ways indigenous and national identities "travel" were only two of several issues that sidestepped my original goals for the project, morphing out into unexpected territory. As already mentioned, a focus group ostensibly about films became an ongoing conversation about many other topics. These included, but were not limited to: (i) how the act of relocation allows for portable personhood (specifically, in this case study, mobile indigenous-orientated identities) not only physically but also culturally, "racially" and even in terms of kaitiakitanga (guardianship); and (ii) what it means—on the ground—to build a cultural network around an identity dislocated from the land that makes it. This clearly constitutes an ongoing project, both for the participants—the women of Ngāti Rānana—and for myself in terms of trying to theorize these concepts (and situate myself in relation to them). I see this essay as a beginning step in that process.

Notes

- 1 Due to their shared methodology, I have quoted directly from my previous *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2009) and *Studies in Australasian Cinema* (2012) articles in outlining the steps I took when putting the project together.

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