

Mana wahine: Decolonising politics

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Abstract

Mana wahine, often referred to as Māori feminist discourses, is a theoretical and methodological approach that explicitly examines the intersection of being Māori and female. There is little published academic work that engages with Māori women's embodied, spatial and spiritual experiences from an explicitly mana wahine standpoint. The exceptions, however, are significant. I draw on these, in this article, to highlight the exciting possibilities of mana wahine, an extension of Kaupapa Māori theory, as a localised and place-specific theoretical approach that examines the diverse and complex geographies of Māori women. The article reflects on Linda Smith's discussion of four mana wahine projects: wairua, whānau, state, and indigenous and white women's discourses. It is argued that the need to sustain and further develop mana wahine as an epistemological framework is still as pressing as ever. I contend that applying a mana wahine perspective not only challenges the dominant hegemony that continues to oppress Other Māori women but, and more importantly, validates mātauranga wāhine (Māori women's knowledges) and subsequently mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledges).

Keywords

Mana wahine, indigenous feminism, decolonisation, childbirth

Introduction

We as Māori women can, and do, provide analyses of our positions which, based on our own experiences, allow us the space to present and re-present our world. In doing so there remains a desire to be visible in our differences ... *We are* different, and those differences count. (Johnston & Pihama, 1995, p. 85, italics in original)

Difference has always been intricately woven into the fabric of my life. Similarly, a number of Māori women have reflected on how the intersection of being Māori and being a woman posits us in complex and tricky spaces that require careful negotiation (see Johnston & Pihama, 1995; Johnston & Waitere, 2009; Smith, 1992; Webber, 2008). Our difference(s) matter(s). Historically, our difference(s) has been defined for us, usually by non-Māori men but also by others, and has been defined predominantly in negative terms. That is, that Māori were/are different, and therefore somehow lacking, because they were/are 'not white'. The search for the tools to make sense of my lived and embodied reality, as a young Māori woman/mother/daughter/academic of both Raukawa and Pākehā descent, is on-going. I, at times, feel trapped in a space between worlds. Mana wahine, as art, as theory, as method, and as practice, recognises and provides for this in-betweenness and enables the exploration of diverse Māori realities from a position of power rather than having to talk or write 'back'.

Mana wahine is often understood to be a type of Māori feminism. It extends Kaupapa Māori theory by explicitly exploring the intersection of being Māori and female and all of the diverse and complex things being located in this intersecting space can mean. At its base, mana wahine is about making visible the narratives and experiences, in all of their diversity, of Māori women (Johnston & Pihama, 1995). Kathy Irwin (1992a, p. 7, italics in original) contends that 'Māori women must be provided with the time, space, and resources necessary to develop the skills to undertake this work, starting with the exploration, reclamation and celebration of our herstories, our stories as Māori women'. Mana wahine, then, is a space where Māori women

can, on our own terms and in our own way, (re)define and (re)present the multifarious stories and experiences of what it means, and what it meant in the past, to be a Māori woman in Aotearoa New Zealand.

This article highlights the exciting possibilities of *mana wahine* as a localised and place-specific theoretical approach that explores the everyday geographies of Māori women. First, I discuss briefly the difficulties in defining *mana wahine* using the English language. The fact that *mana wahine* is intimately woven with *mana tāne*, *mana whānau*, *mana whenua*, and *mana atua* is one of its distinguishing features and is vitally important to any theoretical considerations. In the second section, I promote *mana wahine* as an exciting theoretical development that enables Māori women to (re)present and (re)claim our knowledges, experiences, and practices. This discussion is framed around four key 'projects' identified by Linda Smith as being central strands to any articulations of *mana wahine* (Smith, 1992). These projects are spirituality, whānau, state, and the projects of both indigenous and white women. She defines these as 'projects' as they are made up of a constellation of social, political, and cultural discourses that inform and are informed by Māori women's lived realities. While some progress has been made, I believe that these are still key spaces where the energies of many Māori women are directed and that many of the same arguments still hold true in 2011. The need, therefore, to sustain and further develop *mana wahine* as an epistemological framework is as pressing as ever. It is argued that applying a *mana wahine* perspective to any of these spaces not only challenges the dominant hegemony that continues to Other Māori women but, and perhaps more importantly, provides a necessary space where *mātauranga wāhine* (Māori women's knowledges) are centralised and validated. Finally, I briefly offer my Ph.D. research on Māori women's embodied, spatial, and spiritual experiences of childbirth as one example of how *mana wahine* could be applied to deconstruct and reconstruct discourses pertaining to Māori women.

Māori feminism: a complex weave

'Defining Māori terms in English can be a difficult task given the multiple meanings and understandings that each term carries' (Pihama, 2001, p. 29). Within Te Reo Māori there exists a uniquely Māori way of explaining and relating to the world. This does not necessarily mean Māori concepts are incomprehensible to those not fluent in Te Reo Māori. To suggest otherwise would mean that many Māori who, as a result of colonisation, have been denied their own language, cannot possess an understanding of concepts such as 'mana' or 'wahine'. It is important, however, to recognise that there are definite and distinct limitations when translating into English (Pihama, 2001). Providing a concise and accurate definition of *mana wahine*, then, is problematic. Much of this difficulty lies in trying to convey the multifarious nature of 'mana'. Dictionary translations of 'mana' most commonly refer to it as authority, prestige, power or control (Moorfield, 2005; Ngata, 1993; Williams, 2006). Numerous authors have attempted to tease out understandings of 'mana'. In discussing the complexities of the term they describe it as multi-layered, relational, spatial, and informed by spiritual influences (for a more detailed discussion see Johnston & Waitere, 2009; Pere, 1991; Waitere-Ang, 1999; Winitana, 2008).

Wahine, too, simply translated is often taken to mean 'woman'¹. Again this does not always reflect the highly relational and spatial nature of the Māori language. Leonie Pihama (2001) makes the point that while *wahine* generally refers to being a woman, to assume it carries the same culturally embedded meanings as the English term *woman* is problematic, in that Māori women move in and through a range of subjectivities at different times and in different places². As Pihama (2001, pp. 261-262) states:

The term Wāhine designates a certain time and space for Māori women but is by no means a universal term like the term woman in English. There are many times and spaces Māori women move through, in our lives, Wāhine is one of those. There are others. There are varying terms that relate to times in our lives and relationships. From birth we journey through those spaces.

Mana wahine grows from and is supported by Kaupapa Māori (Māori centred) theory (for more on Kaupapa Māori theory see Lee, 2005; Pihama, 2001, 2006; Smith, 1999, 2003; and Walker, 2006). Pihama (2001) promotes mana wahine as an exciting development of Kaupapa Māori which explicitly engages with gender relations. She notes (Pihama, 2001, p. 232) that 'the struggles for our people, our lands, our worlds, ourselves are struggles that are part of our daily lives as Māori women, they are never just about being Māori or just being women but are about a combination of what those things mean'. Mana wahine is often referred to as Māori feminism; this article shows, however, it is not quite as straightforward as this. Patricia Johnston and Hine Waitere (2009) acknowledge the complexity of mana wahine, which is about recognising the authority, dignity, and power (the mana) of Māori women. Its central strand lies in the intersection of being both Māori and female, and thus Māori women are often intimately entangled in multiple oppressions - those arising from sexism, racism, and colonisation, but others too, such as homophobia.

Māori, in fact indigenous peoples the world over, have never merely been passive recipients of 'colonisation' and have always engaged in the struggle over how to live in the multiple worlds created by our colonial history. Indeed, Māori women have been involved in the struggle to retain and regain their sense of self from the very moment colonial discourses and hierarchies reached our shores. Mana wahine, as an extension of Kaupapa Māori, is located in the wider indigenous struggle that has emerged because 'we' were unwilling to continue to try and 'find' ourselves in the words, texts and images of others.

A number of Māori women in the arts dedicate their work to (re)presenting and canvassing the diversity of Māori women's realities using, what I would describe as, a mana wahine perspective (for a few of the many examples see Grace, 1993; Hulme, 1983, 1992, 1993; Kahukiwa, 2000; Kahukiwa & Potiki, 1999; Mita, 1993a, 1993b; Tocker, 1993). Until relatively recently, however, mana wahine has been represented and enacted largely in 'non-academic' ways - through the creative arts, through flax roots political activism, through iwi, hapū, marae and whānau based projects, and in the lived and embodied struggles of individual Māori women. Important progress has also been made to promote mana wahine as a valid and necessary theoretical framework within the space of the academy. Over the past 30 years numerous women, both within and outside the academy, have written on mana wahine in various ways. Relative to wider feminist literature, and even more general Kaupapa Māori scholarship, there is still little published academic work that engages with Māori women's embodied, spatial, and spiritual experiences from an explicitly mana wahine standpoint. The exceptions, however, are significant and I draw on these throughout this article.

The explicit assertion of mana wahine has been met with resistance from some. It was thought, in the 1980s and 1990s (and perhaps this still persists today), that being a 'feminist' was anti-Māori, specifically anti-Māori men; that in the struggle for rangatiratanga it was not appropriate to divert one's energies towards what was seen as predominantly a white women's struggle (Jenkins, 1992). Mana wahine is not anti-Māori or anti-Māori men (Johnston & Waitere, 2009; Pihama, 2001; Smith, 1992, 1996). It is not about seeking some 'oppressive matriarchal alternative' (Diamond, 1999), neither is it nor has it ever been 'about changing the sex of the winning team' (Johnston & Waitere, 2009, p.18). Rather, it is premised on the argument that pre-colonisation, mana wahine and mana tāne existed as complementary parts. The roles of men and women, while distinct, were not mutually exclusive or necessarily hierarchical

(Jhanke, 1997; Mikaere, 2003; Yates-Smith, 1998). This is evidenced by the lack of gendered pronouns in the Māori language - 'ia' meaning both he or she and tona/tana his or hers (Smith, 1994). That is not to suggest that pre-colonial Māori gender relations were a utopia of equality, and it is difficult to definitively argue that no form of sexism existed pre-colonisation. Power (or rather mana) existed, as did hierarchy; however, it was likely to be through claims to whakapapa rather than gender (Mikaere, 2003).

There is no denying that the effects of colonisation have been devastating for all Māori. The (mis)appropriation and (mis)representation of Māori knowledges historically and more contemporarily have, however, impacted on Māori women in specific ways. Numerous authors are quick to defend their focus on Māori women specifically, and rightly so. Extending this argument, others exact a challenge to those Māori men who have been co-opted and have internalised 'colonial paternalism', and thus continue to silence and marginalise mana wahine knowledges (for further discussion see Hutchings, 2002; Irwin 1992a, 1992b; Jahnke, 2000; Matahaere, 1995; Mikaere, 2003; Pihama, 2001; Te Awekotuku, 1991; Smith, 1992, 1996; Whiu, 1994). I agree with Pihama (2001, p. 253) when she states: 'Māori men that chose to address issues of colonisation and racism whilst being sexist, homophobic and abusive in their relations with Māori women should not be considered "leaders" and definitely have no right to the label "radical"'. Furthermore, as part of any mana wahine project we must also reflect on the extent to which we as Māori women have internalised and thus perpetuate colonial discourses (Johnston & Pihama, 1995).

At its core, mana wahine is about the intersecting spaces of being Māori and being female; however, it does not exist in isolation but is entangled with mana tāne (Johnston & Waitere, 2009). It is this that is one of the distinguishing features of mana wahine and locates it firmly in the wider social and political fabric of New Zealand. Colonisation has attempted to disrupt the balance between mana wahine, mana whenua, mana whānau, and mana atua. Mana wahine is but one space within which we can critically analyse the impact of colonisation on all of these institutions – there are many others.

Colonial disruptions in the history of mana wahine

On numerous occasions Smith talks of colonisation as a disruption of the Māori world (Smith, 1992, 1996, 1999, 2005, 2006). Others describe it as creating fragmentation, disturbances, disjuncture and disorder (Johnston & Waitere, 2009; Pihama, 2001). The impact of colonisation on mana wahine has been all of these things. As stated previously, mana wahine has grown out of wider cultural and political struggles of which Māori women have often been at the forefront (Johnston & Waitere, 2009). In other words, it is not new; it has existed in the minds, actions and spirits of tūpuna wahine for thousands of years³. It has only been relatively recently that mana wahine has begun to occupy theoretical space within the academy (albeit still only a comparatively small space).

Real gains in the struggle to make mana wahine visible within the academy have been made by Māori women such as Linda Smith, Patricia Johnston, Aroha Yates-Smith, Leonie Pihama, Hine Waitere, Ani Mikaere, Kathy Irwin, and Jessica Hutchings, to name a few. Indeed, this journal has featured a number of articles and a special issue dedicated to mana wahine⁴. All of this work has progressed mana wahine substantially.

In 1992, Linda Smith identified a number of projects important to mana wahine. She says 'by projects I mean a combination of politics, work, orientations and organisation of the activities in which Māori women were grouped' (Smith, 1996, p. 286). In what follows, I weave my way through each of the projects first discussed by Smith in 1992 and use examples from a number of mana wahine projects, to highlight the potentialities and complexities that may be

involved in a mana wahine approach nearly 20 years later. While progress has been made, a central argument in this article is that many of the same assertions made by Smith and others remain vital sites of struggle for articulations of mana wahine in twenty-first century Aotearoa New Zealand.

Wairua

Christian missionary discourses ascribed the cultural mores of European women to Māori women from very early on and the effects on mana wahine knowledges, particularly spiritual knowledges, was immense. These discourses portrayed Māori women as wanton, immoral, and undisciplined (Johnston & Pihama, 1998). Christian moral codes were also extended to matters of reproduction. The symbolic power of Māori women as the bearers of future generations and sustaining whakapapa that is derived from Māori cosmology was quickly trampled. Māori cosmological narratives stressed the importance of Māori women in sustaining whakapapa. The interconnectedness of wairua and the reproductive role of Māori women can be seen in the duality of words that can have both a sacred and everyday translation (Pere, 1991). For example, whānau can mean family and to give birth; hapū can mean subtribe and also to be pregnant; whenua can mean the land and also the afterbirth. Perhaps the term that highlights this most clearly is whare tangata, which can mean house of humanity and also womb. Therefore, the marginalisation of Māori women's reproductive processes and practices had a direct impact on mana wahine wairua knowledges. References to whare tangata, for example, were virtually erased with the introduction of Christianity, and colonisers were quick to impose shame upon the reproductive roles of women, thus disregarding the power and tapu of whare tangata (Mikaere, 2003).

Aroha Yates-Smith (1998) has directed her energies to the immense task of reclaiming and re-privileging the power of the feminine within Māori spirituality. Research on Māori spirituality, she says, was carried out by white male ethnographers who privileged the stories of male gods while female goddesses and ancestors have been misrepresented as 'passive, old crones whose presence in the "story" was to add interest to an otherwise male adventure' (Smith, 1992 p. 34). Yates-Smith (1998, 2006) notes that the oversimplification of Māori spirituality by non-Māori, predominantly male, ethnographers firmly established a hierarchy of knowledge, and female atua were quickly replaced with Eurocentric ideologies of God. It did not take long before this hierarchy was entrenched in legislation by the state.

The 1907 Tohunga Suppression Act was perhaps one of the most aggressive assaults on wairua knowledges. At its very core, the Act was about defining what was considered important and legitimate knowledge. Māori spiritual knowledges were viewed by colonisers as superstitions or tales on the pathway to reality (Johnston, 1998). This law outlawed a whole class of Māori intellectuals and the ability of our ancestors to access their own cultural and spiritual experts was stripped away (Smith, 1996).

The marginalisation of wairua persisted and continues today. Māori spirituality is commonly described as symbolic and not real. While scientific knowledge is given credibility, almost un-problematically, discourses premised on the spiritual are lumped with the burden to prove their validity. Western feminism has been criticised as being 'spiritually impoverished' (Pihama, 2001) and it has been argued that wairua marks the clearest contrast between indigenous knowledges and the West. Smith (1996, p. 112) makes the point that 'for Western trained academics the whole area of wairua or "the spiritual", unless embedded in Christian theology, cuts across the rationalism and empiricism which is part of our training'. The spiritual realities of Māori women are inextricable from their physical realities; therefore spirituality discourses remain vital to any articulations of mana wahine (Hutchings, 2002; Pihama, 2001). One of the

most exciting possibilities of mana wahine is that it allows researchers to draw from a blend of lived and embodied experience, mythology and spirituality.

A degree of caution is required, however, and it has been argued that to isolate and analyse aspects of wairua could threaten its very fabric (Te Awekotuku, 1991). Engagement with the spiritual must, therefore, be informed by culturally appropriate tikanga to ensure that the tapu of that spirituality is maintained. That being said, spirituality discourses are an important platform through which many Māori women experience and make sense of their everyday geographies. Furthermore, a mana wahine approach which holds wairua as a core element challenges the hegemony of rational, masculine, and empirical discourses that continue to marginalise and silence Māori women's knowledges.

Whānau: a cornerstone of Te Ao Māori

Not only have mana wahine knowledges faced spiritual disempowerment, but those institutions that were vital to Māori society were subject to equal pressure to adapt and conform to Pākehā norms. The meaning of whānau as it is used here is not simply meant to denote the nuclear family – mother, father and children. Whānau is much more. It can include extended family, and wider still the hapū or iwi. Jessica Hutchings (2002) also makes the point that it can include non-traditional situations and relationships. It is argued that whānau is a cornerstone of Māori society (Pihama, 2001). The importance of whānau to any mana wahine framework, then, is immense.

The dislocation of women from their means of extended support through urbanisation and land confiscations has had devastating effects on Māori whānau. As the whānau unit became progressively smaller, the responsibilities of individual women grew. Many young Māori women live the effects of the fragmentation and marginalisation of 'whānau' on a daily basis. In their research on access to adequate health care for Māori women, Cram and Smith (2003) note that the impacts of the fragmentation of whānau on intergenerational knowledge transmission has meant that some Māori women have a lack of cultural knowledge to express cultural needs to healthcare professionals. For example, they point out that a lack of cultural knowledge about modesty and *whare tangata* can leave women bereft of a language to express what is culturally appropriate when they require treatments or examinations such as cervical smears.

Wikitoria August (2004, 2005) has also discussed the disruption of intergenerational knowledge transmission in relation to Māori women's embodied performances. A number of her research participants knew of and partook in tikanga surrounding the body, such as not cutting hair and nails at night, and not gathering food while menstruating or pregnant. The reasons behind these tikanga, however, were unknown to them. She states that often more convenient routes are taken by women at the expense of tikanga, or tikanga is enacted in hybrid and sometimes contradictory ways. Colonisation, she says, has provided Māori women with more convenient alternatives, but at the same time has left us with very few alternatives.

Whānau is an important site for the future of mana wahine. A mana wahine analysis would necessarily require a (re)framing and (re)claiming of whānau and would serve to empower wahine by 'reconnecting them to a genealogy and geography that is undeniably theirs' (Smith, 1996, p. 292). In addition, whānau discourses ground mana wahine in the lived - and often stark - realities of Māori women and their whānau and thus require a very practical application of mana wahine in order to prompt change for better realities. As Smith (1999) points out, simply theorising about whānau does not enable better access to culturally appropriate health care, nor does it stop violence and abuse against Māori women and children.

Decolonising state discourses

In 1994, a group of Māori women filed a claim with the Waitangi Tribunal arguing that mana tāne had been affirmed and protected (to an extent) by political dealings with the government and that mana wahine had not (Irwin, 1993). The claim sought to remedy exclusionary practices of the Crown which inhibited and prevented participation by Māori women in decision making. Annette Sykes (1994, p. 15) makes the point that ‘because Māori women constitute over 50% of Tangata Whenua there must be equal representation in all areas of decision making in the future’. The mana wahine claim highlights the guarantees for equal participation promised under the Treaty of Waitangi for all Māori, including Māori women, many of whom signed the original Treaty (Mikaere, 2003). Te Tiriti o Waitangi must be a central theme of any mana wahine research. Any mana wahine analysis is also an analysis of Tiriti rights. Some 16 years later, this claim is still yet to be heard.

The role of the state in marginalising mana wahine knowledges cannot be stressed enough. Decolonisation is a critical strand to any mana wahine analysis (Hutchings, 2002; Pihama, 2001). This necessarily requires deconstruction and critique of state policies, practices, and ideologies in order to reveal taken for granted assumptions. Hutchings’ (2002) research provides an example of how the application of a mana wahine framework can provide another language of critique of state policies. She engages mana wahine theory to contest the government’s position on the introduction of genetic engineering technologies in Aotearoa. In doing so, she not only challenges the hegemony of scientific knowledges, but also uncovers dominant assumptions underlying the introduction of GE technologies as patriarchal, imperial, and colonial. Using a mana wahine approach, Hutchings demonstrates the continued marginalisation of Māori women’s knowledges within the GE debate.

In her research, Pihama (2001) uses historical documentation and her own experience to demonstrate the way that colonial and patriarchal ideologies, entrenched in legislation and state policy, have posited Māori women as inferior not only to non-Māori, but also to Māori men. She promotes mana wahine as a transformative theoretical perspective in its own right. Mana wahine could provide another lens with which to engage the immense and on-going struggles to decolonise the state. From this standpoint, decolonisation is not about fragmentation resulting from colonisation, but about unlearning, disengagement, and strengthening Māori at multiple levels.

Indigenous and Pākehā feminisms: Making distinctions and finding connections

The experiences of Māori women are not entirely unique. Indigenous peoples all over the world have, to various extents, been systematically displaced from their lands and deprived of their knowledges (Anderson, 2001; Smith, 1999, 2005). It is important, therefore, to locate our struggles within an international context. Finding links with other indigenous women is useful and not difficult. While there are definite flows and disjunctures within and between indigenous epistemologies, at their most fundamental they share a language of critique; a critique of hegemonic, masculine, disembodied, ‘white’ discourses. To borrow from Lavell-Harvard and Corbiere-Lavell’s (2006, p. 2) discussion of the commonalities between indigenous women, ‘indeed if we have nothing else in common we share the experience of being different from (and fundamentally opposed to) the dominant culture’.

Given the history of Western/Pākehā feminism, finding workable links with ‘Pākehā’ feminists has perhaps been somewhat more of a struggle. Māori women were not the first to launch attacks on the supposed racially homogeneous ‘sisterhood’ being promoted by Western feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. In the book *This bridge called my back* (1979), a number of

'women of colour' reflect on the racism that existed within the 'women's movement'. They say that they cannot afford to ignore racism as many 'white' women did/do, as it has been 'breathing or bleeding down our necks' (Moraga, 1979, p. 62). Closer to home and some 15 years later, these same sentiments were powerfully reiterated by Leah Whiu (1994, p. 164) when she stated: 'it seems that my struggle necessarily takes account of your struggle. I can't ignore patriarchy in my struggle. Yet you can and do ignore the "colour" of patriarchy, the cultural-specificity of patriarchy, and in doing so you ignore me'.

Many Māori women have lodged criticism towards Western feminism over the years and have been quick to distinguish *mana wahine* as distinct and unique (Irwin, 1992; Jahnke, 1997; Johnston, 1998; Johnston & Waitere, 2009; Whiu, 1994). Trying to fit our experiences within existing and/or imported frameworks is difficult given the 'cultural borderlands' within which many Māori women are located (Johnston & Waitere, 2009). Mita (1993a, p. 287) states: 'the way I see it, if you're a Māori woman and that's all you are, that alone will put you on a collision course with the rest of society and its expectations'. Other wahine Māori reflect on the 'baffling inconsistencies' (Te Awekotuku, 1991a), 'harrowing contradictions' (Te Awekotuku, 1991b, p. 21) and experiences of 'multiple contradictions and marginalities' (Middleton, 1992). Mikaere (1999, p. 45) sees that these 'inconsistencies and contradictions seem to be endless' as a result of the complex amalgam of colonising influences in twenty-first century Aotearoa New Zealand. In a similar vein, Smith (1992, p. 33) notes that:

As women, we have been defined in terms of our differences to men. As Māori, we have been defined in terms of our differences to our colonisers. As both, we have been defined by our differences to Māori men, Pākehā men and Pākehā women. The socioeconomic class in which most Māori women are located makes the category of Other an even more complex problematic.

These feelings of in-betweenness, contradiction, complexity, and inconsistency expressed above, all highlight the distinct yet diverse realities of Māori women. As Ani Mikaere (2003, pp. 141-142) so eloquently states:

All Māori women are involved in the struggle, some consciously, others without even realising it; whether rural or urban, whether fluent or not, whether they choose to bear children or not, whether lesbian or heterosexual, whether proud or ashamed of being Māori. Ultimately, we are all connected by *whakapapa*, to one another and to our Māoriness. To question the authenticity of one another's Māori womanhood, as though there is a standard definition to which all "real Māori women" must conform, is to deny the complexities of colonisation. It is also highly destructive, introducing divisiveness which Māori women can ill afford.

Mana wahine, therefore, must be multiple, plural and provide for the diversity and complexities of Māori women's lived realities (Hutchings, 2002; Mikaere, 1999, 2003; Pihama, 2001; Smith, 1992, 1996). This is a potential strength. It is also problematic, however, as any attempts to describe *mana wahine* run the risk of delineating definable parameters that may exclude the very women we wish to represent. Donna Matahaere-Atariki (1998) issues a word of warning that as Māori women academics, we must be conscious of the unequal power relations that are produced in our attempts to speak for Other Māori women. She goes on to argue that:

[b]ecause our location is always measured in relation to Pākehā women, we never have to question our relationship to other Māori women. Therefore, in our desire to speak on behalf of our silenced sisters, we may be in danger of participating in their continued exclusion (Matahaere-Atariki, 1998, p. 73).

This article argues that engaging with Māori women from a position where *mana wahine* knowledges are centralised, rather than having to justify and struggle for the legitimacy of such knowledges as has been the case, enables us to critically reflect on our relationships, not only with non-Māori women, but amongst ourselves.

There are important connections to be made to 'Pākehā' feminisms, and the shift of Western feminism from the monocultural bias of the 1970s and 1980s to a feminism that is concerned with multiplicity and diversity makes it somewhat easier to find commonalities. Pihama (2001) draws on Taina Pohatu's (1996) notion of 'hoa mahi' when utilising other non-Māori critical theories. I draw on this in my research and agree that simply dismissing the entirety of 'Pākehā feminism' is not helpful and does not account for the interplay of both cultures in the formation of our subjectivities (Matahaere, 1995).

Johnston and Waitere (2009) rightly point out that Pākehā feminists can never fully account for our struggle. They can, however, support Māori women in the struggle to create and (re)claim space to explore our own histories and geographies on our own terms. They go on to point out that there will be important times and sites where we must meet, debate and connect with others. At other times, however, Māori women must distance themselves from Pākehā men and women, and Māori men, 'as a means to explore our differences, centre ourselves and [re]claim, [re]define who we are' (Johnston & Waitere, 2009, p. 27). I believe that mana wahine is one space where we can do just that.

Decolonising politics of childbirth in Aotearoa: A mana wahine perspective

This article has emerged from my Ph.D. research which seeks to (re)present women's embodied, spatial, and spiritual childbirth narratives within a mana wahine framework. By providing a 'spatial imperative' to understandings of Māori maternities, this research contributes to the on-going theoretical and methodological development of mana wahine. I am cognisant of the fact that the lived realities of Māori women are central to any mana wahine research project. Narratives from ten first-time Māori mothers are woven with my own autobiographical narrative and ground my research, and it is from these stories that my Ph.D. thesis takes form. While I do not have the time or space to include empirical material in this article, I take inspiration from the everyday instances that affirm mana wahine knowledges shared with me by wahine Māori and their whānau as part of this research. In what follows, I provide a very brief glimpse into a mana wahine perspective on the marginalisation of Māori maternities. My aim here is to offer a mana wahine framework as a useful lens to explore the complexities of Māori women's lived and embodied geographies.

I was unprepared for having to have a standing bath supervised by someone I didn't know ... I was unprepared, when taken to the theatre in the early hours of the morning, to have to lie on my back while strangers pushed my knees up under my chin and a mask was held over my mouth and nose. I pushed the mask away, I pushed my baby down, heard myself scream, unprepared for the sound of it, felt myself breaking in two. Then little Gloria came, my own wet baby, into the hands of strangers, but I don't mean to say they were unkind. At last she was given to me, but there was no one there to see her except for *kind strangers* ... That night I woke in the dark and thought of the placenta, wondered what had happened to it. Where was the little parcel wrapped by Kui Hinemate, or the basket made by Keita, for the whenua to be buried in? I tried to sleep. *It was best not to think of such things* (extract from *Cousins* by Patricia Grace: Reflections on birth by Missy, 1992, p. 233).

I include this passage by Grace not simply to add a 'nice' or 'interesting' quote, but rather, I use it purposefully. While *Cousins* is fictionalised it is based on historical events and accurately depicts the struggle for mana wahine from the 1930s onwards (Banks, 2000; Donley, 1986; Wood, 2008). There are important connections between Grace's work and mana wahine as an epistemological framework. *Cousins* focuses on the geographies of Māori women; it is authored, and therefore the parameters of the story are defined, by a Māori woman, and it provides insight into the diversity of Māori women's lived and embodied realities⁵. In addition, the above passage highlights that Missy's embodied experience cannot be understood outside of the milieu of discourses that shape and are shaped by her location - as a young Māori woman birthing at hospital in post-World War II Aotearoa New Zealand.

Just as Missy was unprepared for what was about to happen to her in hospital, I believe that our ancestors, too, were unprepared for the extent to which Māori culture would be impacted upon by the arrival of these ‘kind strangers’. The fragmentation of mana wahine knowledges surrounding birth, and subsequently of whānau, began with the deeply held assumption by colonisers that hospital birth was safer and ‘cleaner’ than Māori ways of birthing. The move from home to hospital, however, did not support this belief. Māori maternal mortality by the 1960s had risen to be three times that of non-Māori. The supposed safety of the hospital space had failed to reduce inequalities. Discourses questioning the hygiene and safety practices surrounding Māori birthing were thus replaced by discourses of blame and questions about the moral capabilities of Māori mothers and whānau (Donley, 1986). For example, the ‘Hunn Report’ in 1961 blamed Māori women for poor antenatal care, unsatisfactory feeding of babies, and labelled Māori women as apathetic and ignorant. Over 30 years later, similar sentiments were expressed by a number of health professionals working in maternity service provision (Ellis, 1998). They continue to label Māori women as shy, passive, and complacent. This is in stark contrast to the ‘ideal consumer’ who they say is confident, assertive, and well informed. A mana wahine analysis, in my opinion, offers new ways to conceptualise discourses of blame and inadequacy of Māori mothers and whānau.

The state too was instrumental in marginalising those Māori institutions surrounding childbirth. For example, the Midwives Registration Act of 1904 required midwives to be registered by law. Traditional Māori birth attendants or tāpuhi were not recognised as qualified, and therefore had to be trained in Pākehā ways of birthing to warrant registration. Although many Māori managed to continue birthing at home with tāpuhi for quite some time, by the end of World War II legislation ensured that childbirth was largely relocated into state-owned maternity hospitals (Kenney, 2009). When Māori women were slow to move into hospitals to birth, the state began to link eligibility for benefits to birth registration, which had to be done at hospitals with doctors in attendance. Over the course of the following three decades Māori birthing became almost completely institutionalised, so that by 1967, 95% of Māori births occurred in the space of the hospital. The marginalisation of mana wahine existed in a very material sense, forcing many Māori women to birth in foreign spaces.

To return to Missy: her experience, unfortunately, is representative of a number of Māori women in post-World War II Aotearoa. Unfortunate also is that the marginalisation of wairua, whānau, whakapapa, and atua wahine through colonisation continues today to contribute to the fragmentation of mana wahine knowledges. While there was a time (and sometimes I, too, still feel this way) when ‘*it was best not to think of such things*’, it is promising that a number of Māori women are reclaiming these knowledges. It is hopeful to see the energies, no matter how dispersed and/or fragmented, of Māori women, not only in the academy but in whānau, hapū, and iwi and as individuals, being directed towards consideration of ‘*such things*’. Despite the marginalisation of mana wahine maternities they still exist and are enacted, in various and often hybrid ways, through Māori women’s birthing experiences. While I have not had the time or space to provide empirical material in this article the women that have shared their birthing experiences as part of my Ph.D. research have all affirmed that they are not passive recipients of continued colonising discourses but instead are able to negotiate multiple, complex, and at times contradictory geographies, owing to their location in post colonising Aotearoa, by (re)claiming, and often (re)creating, mātauranga wāhine pertaining to pregnancy and childbirth.

Conclusion

In this article I have highlighted the multiple challenges for mana wahine theorists. Not only must we challenge the hegemonic discourses and assumptions that posit Māori women as Other, we must also create space for mana wahine knowledges to be reconstructed and reclaimed, whilst at the same time being mindful of our power in speaking for those voices we seek to privilege. The first section of this article was framed around four key spaces, identified as 'projects' by Linda Smith in 1992: spirituality, whānau, state, and indigenous women's and 'white' women's projects. The ability to (re)claim and (re)centre wairua and whānau discourses from a mana wahine perspective will go a long way towards (re)connecting Māori women to a whakapapa, whenua, and mana that is rightfully theirs. As is shown in this article, this necessarily requires a deconstruction and decolonisation of state ideologies, policies, and practices. In addition, as Māori we must question the internalisation and co-opting of patriarchal and colonial ideologies into our own tikanga. Those practices that continue to marginalise and oppress Māori women under the guise of 'tradition' too must be challenged. The distinctiveness of mana wahine is such that it enables Māori women to analyse and understand our place in the world on our own terms. This is important, as Pākehā feminisms, while able to support us, can never fully account for us. There are, however, connections to be made with other indigenous women, with women of colour, with third world women, and with Pākehā women.

In the final section of this article I offered a glimpse into my Ph.D. research as one way in which a mana wahine framework may be used to reconceptualise knowledges, experiences, and practices surrounding pregnancy and childbirth. In using a mana wahine epistemological and methodological approach, I hope that my research not only challenges those discourses and practices that continue to Other Māori women, but will also offer new ways to conceptualise experiences of pregnancy and birth in a way that affirms and celebrates the individual and collective experiences of Māori women in twenty-first century Aotearoa.

While many of the arguments made by Smith and other mana wahine theorists are relevant nearly 20 years later, progress has been made on a number of fronts and across a number of spaces within the academy and outside. I am inspired by the energies that many Māori women have invested and continue to invest in mana wahine, and I am excited by the possibilities housed in mana wahine as a theoretical (and methodological) framework. It is important to remember, however, that mana wahine must not only be theoretical but inform and empower the embodied and spiritual geographies of Māori women in a very material way. Mana wahine emerged to describe and analyse Māori women's lived realities, and it must always be remembered that 'beyond the label are the lived experience of generations of Māori women' (Smith 1996, p. 288).

Difference in twenty-first century Aotearoa is being reconceptualised through exciting theoretical developments such as Kaupapa Māori and mana wahine. If we are to create space for the multiple realities of Māori, then there must be multiple articulations of mana wahine. This article weaves together a number of important threads to offer but one conceptualisation of mana wahine. There must necessarily be many more.

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Glossary

Aotearoa New Zealand
Hapū be pregnant, sub-tribe
Hoa mahi a friend that works alongside
Iwi tribe, human bone
Karakia prayer, chant
Kaupapa topic, subject, theme
Mana prestige, authority, control, power, influence
Mana atua power and authority of celestial realm
Mana whānau power derived from whānau
Mana whenua territorial rights, power from the land
Noa be free from the constraints of tapu, ordinary, unrestricted
Rangatiratanga self-determination, sovereignty, right to exercise authority, ownership
Raranga to weave, weaving
Taha side
Tapu be sacred, set apart, under atua protection
Te Reo Māori the Māori language
Te Tiriti o Waitangi the Treaty of Waitangi
Tikanga procedure, custom, practice, habit
Tohunga healer, skilled person, chosen expert, priest
Tupuna ancestor
Tūpuna ancestors
Wairua spirit, spirituality, soul
Wahine woman
Wāhine women
Whakapapa genealogy, descent lines
Whānau family, to be born, give birth
Whare tangata womb, house of humanity
Whenua land, placenta

Notes

- 1 A macron over the 'a' of wahine changes the term to mean women – woman in the plural.
- 2 This complexity occurs with the English term too. Being a woman can mean experiencing multiple and diverse realities.
- 3 Much of the mana of wahine is said to be derived from the cosmological narratives of Papatūānuku and other atua wahine such as Hine-ahu-one, Hine-titama and Hine-nui-te-po. Furthermore, Māori women have been at the forefront of the Kohanga Reo movement, battles for land rights and political struggles such as the formation of Nga Tamatoa, to name a few.
- 4 See the *Women's Studies Journal* Special Issue (2007), Vol 21, Issue 2; Beets (1997); Hoskins (1997); Hutchings (2005); Johnston & Waitere (2009); and Yates-Smith (2006).
- 5 *Cousins* is framed around the lived experiences of three cousins - Mata, Makareta and Missy - who are all located in very different social, cultural and political spaces. Their diversity and struggles offer insight into the multiplicity and complexity of Māori women's geographies in contemporary Aotearoa.

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