

Article

## **CHALLENGING KNOWLEDGE CAPITALISM. INDIGENOUS RESEARCH IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

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### **Biographical note**

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There is, of course, nothing new about the idea that Indigenous people conduct research. Indigenous peoples have been conducting research since time immemorial, in the sense of investigating and uncovering knowledge and developing new ways of understanding the world. Arguably what might be new, at least as far as the last thirty or so years are concerned, is the formalizing and positioning of Indigenous research as both an act of re-claiming Indigenous sovereignty and authority and as an anti-colonial process of engagement by Indigenous scholars and researchers with mainstream, western science, an engagement that is transforming western research. At the same time, Indigenous researchers claim their ways of knowing and doing research as valid, legitimate and essential ways of understanding and interpreting the world.

The last decades have also seen re-newed attempts within some sections of the academe to discredit both Indigenous ontologies and research methods. In such cases, Indigenous research is deemed inadequate unless it meets western standards of validity. In the context of the neoliberal turn, with its emphasis on market relationships and the related pressures to monetarize research, the efforts to discredit Indigenous researchers take on a dangerous new dynamic. In the past, political correctness concerns dismissed Indigenous research as the misguided political appeasement of disgruntled ‘minorities’.

Now such political correctness issues are recast as an insistence on the importance of promoting markets and private-public, or Indigenous-industry partnerships. Indigenous research is deemed important only insofar as it is compatible with overriding concerns for knowledge that creates profits. As I have argued elsewhere, the elevation of the market as the main driver of the academy has profound implications for how we think about knowledge. For Indigenous peoples in particular, this approach constitutes a form of cognitive imperialism which impacts on Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous scholarship in deeply contradictory but ultimately very damaging ways.

In this article, I reflect on these issues within the context of an environment that is in many ways familiar in its relative inhospitality to Indigenous research and in other ways changing at bewildering speed. But first there are some important disclaimers. I make no attempt in this article to define Indigenous people, an important and extensive debate that is however outside the scope of this paper. Nor do I attempt an authoritative definition of either Indigenous knowledge or Indigenous research. Just as there is no single definition of Indigenous people or even of 'western' knowledge or research, nor can there be single, authoritative definition of the nature of Indigenous knowledges and research. Rather, I briefly explore concerns raised by Indigenous scholars and raised by my own and other Indigenous experiences before considering the potential for radically rewriting the postcolonial project against new forms of imperialism, including within the academy. As Foucault points out, the genealogy of subjugated knowledges is important. Thus I take as my starting point the trajectory of Indigenous research within the academy.

### **Historicizing Indigenous research**

Since the earliest days of colonialism over five hundred years ago, the colonial endeavor has sought to codify, quantify and tabulate flora, fauna and peoples. Early anthropologists in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, for instance, literally 'collected' specimens of Indigenous peoples and displayed them in zoos. Within the last hundred years, the identification and study of Indigenous peoples, including their knowledge, ways of being and cultural practices has been dominated by anthropologists and to a lesser but still important degree by historians. The trajectory of Maori Studies in Aotearoa New Zealand underlines the role of anthropology in particular (see Steve Webster (1989), Ranginui Walker (1990), Hirini Mead (1983) and Catriona Timms (2007).

Maori Studies was established as a separate subject of academic study as early as 1952, when the University of Auckland established a branch of Maori Studies within the department of Anthropology. As Hirini Mead observes, the predominant view at the time was that Maori Studies was not worthy of a place within the academy in its own right and should not be "seen as separable from anthropology" (Mead, 1983, p. 335, cited Timms, 2007). These were the heady days of an 'Enlightenment' tradition that for centuries has

treated 'others' as their own private zoo to be identified, categorized, codified and tabulated (c.f. Stewart-Harawira 2005: 61-64), sometimes literally as we have seen. In particular, cultural anthropologist Steve Webster (1989:49) describes the detrimental influence of the positivist tradition of noted anthropologists Malinowski and Firth for Maori peoples and culture. These social scientists redefined and reconstructed Maori culture in ways that made sense to them within a worldview both foreign and in many ways opposed to Maori culture, accruing considerable prestige and advancing their careers at the same time as they developed deformed and distorted accounts of Maori social and cultural life.

At that time, measuring 'acculturation' was an important anthropological project, associated with a covert assimilation agenda and implying the inevitable absorption of the Maori into colonial development. The merger of social anthropology and psychology during the 1950s and 1960s saw the strengthening of the assumption of western social scientists of the right to explain and defines Maori social functioning, personality development and the directions for future Maori social and economic development. Indices for measuring 'Maoriness' (Ritchie 1963: 39) based on the survival of belief and behavior from pre-European Maori culture discounted more recent elements of Maori world views and cultures and simultaneously assumed non-Indigenous 'experts' had the authority to decide who was and was not Maori. As settler anthropologist James Ritchie asserted in his study "Rakau Maoris who continue to base their identity on their Maoriness do so at their own peril" (Ritchie, 1963: 191). In other words, as Webster argues, anthropologists' cultural definitions and normative assumptions about the 'dangers' of continued Maori identity, as defined by anthropologists, were an expression of colonial power, both over what constitutes Maori identity and regarding the (lack of) desirability of that identity in a context where settler development was assumed to be the destiny of Maori peoples (Webster 1989: 48) 55). The assimilationist agenda of social psychology and anthropology became the commonsense belief of many Maori who absorbed the notion that they must subsume their 'Maoriness' for the greater good, although there has always been important Maori resistance.

It is against this history that Maori research in particular, and Indigenous research more generally, can be understood. In claiming the rights of self-definition, the right to tell their own histories, recover their own traditional knowledge and culturally grounded pedagogies, epistemologies and ontologies, Indigenous scholars are engaged in an arena of struggle which is systemic and sustained. In Aotearoa New Zealand, as elsewhere, at the centre of this struggle are relationships of power and the right of Maori to sovereignty. Nor is this story unfamiliar outside of the Maori context. The complaint that Aboriginal people had been "researched to death" reported by Marlene Castello (2000: 31) regarding the 1992 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in Canada echoed complaints from many Indigenous communities over many decades. To a large degree this sense of being "researched to death" drove Indigenous initiatives to assert their own sovereign authority

over the right to name and claim their own identities, definitions, traditional knowledge and cultural practice. Most notably, this encompasses the right to their Indigenous intellectual and cultural property and to the repatriation of cultural treasures referred to in the social science community as ‘artifacts’. Integral to this movement was the politicization of Indigenous communities and activists during the 1960s and 1970s. The background and details of this global Indigenous movement and its connection to ongoing misappropriation of traditional lands and the loss of language and cultural knowledge has been well recounted by those who were in the forefront of this movement (c.f. Harold Cardinal [1969] 1999; Linda Tuhiwai Smith [1999] 2012; Graham Hinangaroa Smith 1997, Kathy Irwin 1994; Marie Batiste 2000). In Aotearoa New Zealand, Canada and the USA, Indigenous education initiatives by and for Indigenous people emerged alongside legal challenges to states for redress of illegal land appropriations (Smith, 2005; Walker, 1990). In Aotearoa New Zealand, early childhood immersion language programs in Maori expanded to include elementary schools and colleges and leading ultimately to the establishment of autonomous Maori Studies programs in certain universities (for a more detailed account, see Smith, 2005). Similar processes occurred in Australia Canada, the US and elsewhere

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Indigenous studies programs are significantly different from colonially oriented studies of Indigenous peoples. Once, such studies limited their attention to the cultural artifacts of ethnic groups who expected to pass peacefully or otherwise into oblivion. Today, Indigenous Studies Faculties, Schools and Departments exist within multiple universities across Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, Canada, the United States and the Pacific, testimony to the ongoing survival and strength of Indigenous communities once programmed for cultural and in some cases, physical, genocide. These academic programs include post-graduate instruction in Indigenous law, international politics, arts and literature, pedagogy, epistemology and research, all recognized as integral to the success of Indigenous post-secondary students and programs and to the broader project of decolonization, not least within the university. Yet these successes have not been achieved without constant and determined negotiation and re-negotiation on the part of Indigenous scholars who have continued to struggle within and without a system whose environment today, while familiar in many ways, is undergoing rapid changes. First signaled in the late 1980s by the World Bank followed by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in the 1990s, the reconceptualization and reconstruction of the academy as the driver of the new ‘knowledge economy’ heralded a new kind of struggle over the nature and meaning of knowledge (Peters 2003). Accompanying this redefinition of knowledge within the academy, without the academy has been an inexorable resurgence of the re-appropriation of Indigenous lands and identities, often through legislative measures which redefine Indigenous self-determination as economic development, remove environmental

protections over lands and waterways, and reduce requirements to consult the traditional Indigenous landholders prior to initiating resource development activities on those lands.

### **The politics of reclaiming**

Before turning to the new challenges posed by this reconceptualization of the university, it is necessary to consider the politics of reclaiming historical research by and for Indigenous peoples. As discussed above, Indigenous historiographies have frequently been subjected to invisibilization, misrepresentation and misinterpretation by historians trained in the positivist tradition, as well as some more critical traditions. Thus the reclaiming of those historiographies and the insurrection of subjugated Indigenous cosmologies and ontologies continue to be central in Indigenous peoples' resistance to the homogenising impulse of modernity, including in its current manifestations. At the heart of the decolonizing project has been the restoration and legitimation of Indigenous knowledge systems and methods of conducting research. For some Indigenous scholars, an important step on the journey has been to see the convergences between Indigenous and qualitative research methods (see for instance Kahakalau, 2004; Smith, 2008) For others the most important part of the process is to distinguish the nature of Indigenous knowledge and research from dominant western forms of knowledge, for example comparing individually based approaches to knowledge and research to the collective approaches of most Indigenous communities (c.f. Bishop, 1998; Urion, 1999). Often these comparisons take the form of 'writing back' against mainstream interpretations which describe Indigenous peoples' information-gathering methodologies as evidence of the 'prescientific', pre-causal nature of Indigenous knowledge systems, proof of an inability to conceptualize in an objective symbolic manner (c.f. Widdowson and Howard, 2008). Thus it is not unusual to see Indigenous thought systems described by Indigenous scholars (and some non-Indigenous scholar) as circular or spiral in nature and inclusive of both experiential and intuitive data. This contrasts with western knowledge systems, frequently described as linear and concerned primarily with empirical data and materiality. Lakota scholar Vine Deloria Jr. describes Indigenous conceptions of knowledge as intrinsically connected to the lives and experiences of human beings, both individuals and communities and emphasizes that all data and all experience is seen as relevant to all things. All human experiences and all forms of knowledge contribute to the overall understandings and interpretations, with no experience or piece of data seen as invalid. The critical task, Deloria (1999) explains, was (and is) to find the proper pattern of interpretation. Knowledge itself is commonly described as sacred, having come from the Creator. Rather than being limited to a 'codified canon', a canon separated from everyday life and taking place only in the special conditions of the laboratory, the experiment, as 'field work' and in other highly codified ways, traditional or Indigenous

knowledge is an expression of life itself, of how to live, and of the connection between all living things. From an Indigenous perspective, everything is living. This includes inanimate objects that are understood to hold their own energy, or in Maori terms, *mauri*, through which they are connected to the energetic web of the entire planet. Thus, as Vine Deloria wrote, nothing is considered in isolation, rather, all data within the whole system is carefully included.<sup>1</sup>

In short, interconnectedness, or relationality, is frequently described as the foundational principle in Indigenous ontologies and cosmologies and the epistemological and ontological base of Indigenous research. In this respect, it has much in common with some kinds of 'western' scientific discoveries in the field of quantum physics and related canons, although there may be important differences too. For instance, Métis professor Carl Urion insists that Indigenous knowledge is at once spiritual, emotional, physical and mental. In contrast, even 'holistic' western approaches like quantum physics fail to take seriously spiritual and emotional experiences as well as physical, material and mental ones. From this Indigenous concept of relationality derives sets of ethical principles that define the boundaries for engaging in Indigenous research.

### Considering method

Indigenous research operates within a complex set of interrelationships and rules whose specifics are always determined by the Indigenous community itself. Indigenous research has been defined as emerging from an epistemological base that foregrounds the legitimacy and validity of locally determined Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies (cf Pihama, Cram, and Walker 2002), is conducted only with the full consent and participation of the Indigenous communities concerned, and within the boundaries, protocols, principles and practices determined by the community. Within this space, protocols, relationships, reciprocity, methods, process and ownership of data and findings define the parameters of the research project and are carefully and thoroughly negotiated with the community. At the heart of Indigenous research lie issues of who benefits, how, and to what purpose. Not infrequently, these questions may be negotiated over and over again in the process of a major research project. At any given point, the community may decide to discontinue the research. And at that point, the research stops. In a very important sense, then, this is the heart of Indigenous research.

Intuition, dreams, and insights and ceremony frequently play an important role in the protocols of Indigenous research. Ceremony, the details of which vary widely from continent to continent and group to group, can prepare and open the mind to the possibility of intuition and insights. As well as opening the mind, ceremony and prayer are important mechanisms for ensuring that the researcher is of good mind, good heart,

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<sup>1</sup> This section has to a large extent been drawn from Stewart-Harawira 2005, pp. 35-39.

and good motive – all three critical in conducting Indigenous research – and that the proposed research is in alignment with the highest good. Often a project will not begin without this preparation. Notwithstanding that intuition, insight, and reams have not infrequently been the catalyst for new discoveries and understandings within ‘western’ sciences, principles and practices such as these that are often the target of mainstream scholars’ critiques which understood them as ‘unscientific’.

Another common target for critique is the recovery of data that is orally held and sourced. Indigenous research recognizes that important historical and cultural knowledge is often held in Indigenous communities in the form of story and songlines. Jo-ann Archibald (2008) describes deep storying, or storywork, as an Indigenous research methodology which builds on seven critical principles of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy that form a framework for understanding the characteristics of stories, appreciating the process of storytelling, establishing a receptive learning context, and engaging in holistic meaning-making (Archibald, 2008). Meaning-making can involve the process of comparing and cross-matching oral accounts and it also involves careful interpretation of the language in which the information is held, be it song, chant, story. Linguistic changes over time mean that often such knowledge is described in language not readily accessible today, thus the need for careful discernment of the pattern of interpretation, as Deloria points out. On this basis, the notion that orally held knowledge lacks validity and verifiability is readily challengeable by those who have access to understanding these processes. Stories’ in fact provide a rich source of verifiable data that can be cross-matched and compared from multiple perspectives when viewed through the right lens. The trick is in the knowing. Just as mainstream knowledge systems have their own processes for ‘gate-keeping’, Indigenous communities also have strategies for protecting the integrity of knowledge. These are but some of the critical issues that are shaped and negotiated within particular frameworks and relationships when entering the space of research negotiation with and for Indigenous communities.

Inevitably, gate-keeping strategies have both positive and negative consequences. Among the latter are gross misinterpretations and misrepresentations of, for example, the rationales for particular cultural practices, the genealogy of certain aspects of knowledge – often delivered in only partially accurate forms, in order to protect both the receiver and the knowledge itself. For instance Maori have commonly held the view that in certain cases the right to particular aspects of knowledge has to be earned, whereas in other cases that right may be ascribed. Similarly, aspects of historical events, practices, and rationales, may be creatively reinterpreted for the listener. In each situation the objective is protection of that knowledge base. The difficulty, of course, is that these partial truths are often replicated through dissemination activities by western scholars and administrators such as presentations, publications, and texts. Ironically, these partial truths are frequently mobilized by western scholars to justify attacks on the credibility of

Indigenous cultural knowledge and research methods; in fact, this is simply partial knowledge that has been decontextualized and therefore robbed of its meaning, which appears only within the proper relational context.

Careful observation and testing, often over hundreds and thousands of years, is equally part and parcel of Indigenous research methods. When Indigenous scholars write about Indigenous scientific knowledge they are referring to minutely detailed knowledge of the natural world and comprehensive understandings of the nuances that signal phases of change within the natural world. Some of this is reflected in the traditional practices of naming, as is also well documented and hardly needs recounting here (see for example Basso, 1996) From the multitude of possible examples from Aotearoa New Zealand, Huhana Smith's (2008) doctoral thesis carefully tabulates five years of painstaking, rigorous community research seeking out, analyzing and applying the necessary information to restore a badly polluted and diverted river system. This provides an outstanding example of an Indigenous methodological approach to research. The methods utilized by Huhana Smith and the community included identifying, cross-matching and analyzing oral stories and histories, songs, proverbs and other forms of orally recorded information. The vast reservoir of traditional knowledge that emerges from such painstaking tabulation and recording certainly can and does contribute immeasurably to eco-system restoration. Its importance in enlarging scientific understandings of the impacts of, for instance, climate change or industrial development has been well documented (c.f. Gadgil, Berkes, Foke, 1993; Berkes, 2008; Green, D. & Raygorodstky, 2010; Tyrell, 2011). The astronomical and cosmological knowledge recorded in some communities may also contribute to our understandings of the potential effects of proposals to mitigate the effects of its climate change. The possibilities are limited only by the narrowness of our gaze.

As the academy undergoes deep and radical reconstructions, the unequal status and ongoing attacks upon Indigenous knowledge and research demonstrates the "epistemological tyranny" of 'Western' science, its rules for determining truth and so its rules for disqualifying and marginalizing Indigenous ways of knowing (Kinchloe & Steinberg 2008, pp.144-145). On the extreme end of such critiques are scholars such as Widdowson and Howard who insist that the term 'traditional knowledge' is tendentious, and that each item of purported traditional knowledge should be evaluated on the basis of the evidence for and against it. Unless and until subjected to scientific (western) methods of validation, traditional knowledge – which they distinguish from Indigenous knowledge defined as a postmodern construct – can make no claims to validity. On the other hand, they argue, if traditional knowledge is subject to the same kinds of scientific method as western knowledge e.g. replicating and testing, what is the point of distinguishing it from scientific knowledge? (Widdowson & Howard 2008, p. 231-240). Small wonder that Indigenous scholars tend not to rely for validity on western science research methods by which 'heads, you lose; tails, you lose'. Yet arguments such as those presented by



Widdowson have been met with enthusiasm by many western scholars and critics of the Indigenous turn in the early twenty-first century.

New Zealand scholar Elizabeth Rata, whose critiques of cultural relativism target Maori education policy and practice, is more refined in her argument. Rata attacks the equalizing of status of Indigenous knowledge in New Zealand universities, the unfortunate creation of what she terms a ‘global industry’ (2011, 1-22), arguing that the deployment of culturally appropriate pedagogies in education and by extension, traditional cultural knowledge which is described as an expression of “immanentism – the practice of asserting a necessary movement of history that confers subordinate groups with objective interests in radical change” – works against social justice goals for those whom it is intended to benefit. Her argument rests on what she holds to be the blurring of the social knowledge and disciplinary knowledge within the curriculum following the turn towards constructivism. The problem, she argues, lies with the relativist claim that all knowledge is socially constructed, a claim that extends to worldviews, ways of knowing, and ‘knowledges’ and consequentially to the equalizing of status between social and disciplinary or ‘scientific’ knowledge. Attacks of this nature are symptomatic of an ongoing and systemic cognitive imperialism, an imperialism that fails to recognize the ways that western science is historically and socially constructed. Far more troubling than such attacks, however, is the radical shift to monetized knowledge and research and the implications of this for Indigenous knowledge and research within the academy.

### **Futures for Indigenous research**

As universities are reconstructed as the drivers of knowledge capitalism, the challenges to Indigenous scholarship and research are significant. The conundrum faced by Indigenous scholars and researchers in this environment is played out in our entry into the global market model of knowledge capitalism in scholarship, in the discourses of excellence and best practice, and in academic performance reviews which measure the value of research in terms of its marketability. This substitution of industry and the operation of the market for the pursuit of truth and meaning as the main driver of the academe constitute a new form of cognitive imperialism which impacts on indigenous knowledge and indigenous scholarship in deeply contradictory but ultimately damaging ways.

On one hand, the new ‘knowledge economy’ operates to marginalize Indigenous philosophical knowledge and traditional ways of being in the world as valid and legitimate forms of study, insofar as Indigenous ways of knowing do not immediately produce profitable research. On the other hand, it repositions (some) Indigenous knowledge and scholarship within the discursive framework of innovation, excellence and contribution to economic wealth. As university-industry partnerships substitute public funding and demands and scholars and researchers are faced with monetizing

their teaching and research in order to maintain programs and spaces of engagement, there are difficult decisions to be made, especially by those of us who see our work as holding the space for Indigenous community-University relationships and engagement. At the root of these decisions lie ethical and philosophical principles that are complex, contested and contradictory. For Daniel Heath Justice (2004), the academy is a place of engagement where “the world of ideas can meet action and become lived reality.” It is here, he argues, in this borderland space of profound contradiction that cultural recovery work can begin. Here also, I believe, is the place where the intersection of western and Indigenous science can address the triple crises of ecological and economic catastrophe and human wellbeing that confronts us – and which our children, and their children’s children, will inherit (c.f. Addison, et al, 2010). On this account, a radically different paradigm is required. Perhaps that, after all, is the true challenge of decolonization. Most certainly, outside the academy, that sits at the heart of the rising crescendo of struggle over the right to maintain, protect and preserve lands, waters, and ecosystems.

There is no question that inequity regarding Indigenous research and knowledge is prevalent within the academy. There is equally no question that Indigenous knowledge and research together with those of social and natural sciences provide a complex and dynamic set of skills and understandings. These may yet enable humanity to find its way out of the worst set of crises in the known history of humankind and towards a radical reconceptualization of the complexity of interrelationship and the nature of being.

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