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Embracing a Pākehā cronehood: storying self, society, and the common good

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ABSTRACT

Within the social and professional circles of the Pākehā (settler) authors of this article, we witness and aspire to cronehood as a status to be embraced – an opportunity to make old bones enriched with life's experiences and promising the possibilities of shared life-enhancing wisdom. Cronehood, we posit, is something that may be nurtured in the context of community. Its potency cannot be separated from the consideration of the socioeconomic, political and environmental injustices that impact on the everyday choices of many people. Drawing on the work of Marshall, we pursue inner arcs of reflection on cronehood from our experiences as Pākehā women now in our thirties, forties and sixties. We also navigate the privileges and responsibilities we associate with our personal situations and the issues of our time and place. We then focus on Marshall's ideas about outer arcs of reflection and influence to amplify our advocacy for public investment in the common good. Writing this article together drew us into fluid motion between inner and outer arcs of reflection, generating mutual enrichment in our thoughts about ageing and our advocacy for more explicitly activist and *affective* research orientations in and beyond the Academy.

> We have given to the world what the wor(l)d required. Now we inquire what we ourselves need to feel complete. We enter understanding, standing under all we have done, all we are. We rest in the full spectrum of fulfilment, scanning the span of a moment's totality (Kemp, 2016, p. 125).

Separately and together, we (Heather, Maria and Miriam) are considering the possibilities and realities of embracing cronehood. We are three Pākehā women living in Aotearoa New Zealand. Our ages span from our thirties to our forties and sixties. We enjoy various levels of good health and some significant health challenges. We have varied access to steady incomes. We are each committed to a significant share of family and community relationships for mutual care. We share a critical/activist orientation to our vocations and our living in this jurisdiction where *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (The Treaty of Waitangi) establishes aspirations for an honourable relationship with Māori – the indigenous people of this land. We are ageing.

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Pākehā was the word commonly used to distinguish the incoming settler population at the time of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) between Māori and the British Crown, and is still the most frequently used word in Aotearoa New Zealand to refer to non Māori. However, the inference is that Pākehā come from British stock, and/or are white/European. As more people from other nations and/or who are not white have settled in this country, the term Tau Iwi (literally 'new bones') has become more widely used, with Pākehā reserved for non Māori who are New Zealand born. Although, by these definitions, two of us (Maria and Miriam) are Tau Iwi, in this article we use Pākehā as a term to encompass our collective identity – in a bicultural relationship and engagement with tangata whenua (the first peoples of this land).

We begin this article with a focus on *self* through a reflection on age and ageing from each author; a reflection prompted by conversations about a contribution to this special themed edition of the journal. Our conversations and our writing draw on the emancipatory idea(l)s found in critical (feminist) studies. In the telling of a little of our reflections on ageing, we are conscious of our part in the storying of the past, the present and the future. This storying is a form of personal and social sense-making – a setting out of personal observation and aspiration as integral to social activity/activism. Our orientation in this article is an intentional elaboration of the necessary and important discourses of the rights of the aged, a perspective that is represented elsewhere in this edition. This article invites integration of *self* into the process of writing about ageing *and society* and our quest to serve the common good. We broaden our focus from *self* to a reflection on *society* – not as two discrete entities, but entwined energies. In this article, we seek to contribute to a change in personal preparation and societal underpinning for ageing well throughout life.

Methodology

Research as a form of storytelling is a means for bringing forth a particular future. Boje (2014, p. 4) calls storytelling methodologies a 'sensemaking currency'. Telling stories is 'bound up with the very pragmatic functioning of every society, community, family and organisation, as well as self-identity' (p. xvix). Identity is created and enlivened through storytelling. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that storying invites possibilities where unpredicted and untold perspectives can be shared, conversation invited, self-reflection and analysis encouraged. Storying may inspire action, offering what Boje (2008, p. 1) refers to as a 'decentering force of diversity and disorder' by telling stories that disrupt the grand narratives of a time and place – living stories that are always unfinished, emerging, enabling or constraining diverse futures. Prompted by the call to contribute to this special themed issue, we began a conversation about our personal experiences and reflections on ageing, and our aspirations to contribute to the common good: stories about human dignity, justice and environmental responsibility.

To frame the emergence of our thoughts from self-reflections to reflections among ourselves as authors and with a wider readership, we draw on the work of Marshall (1999), who demonstrates a way of living life as inquiry. She writes of the impossibility of researcher separation from who we are and those phenomena seemingly outside of ourselves that we so often frame as 'objects under investigation'. We think of 'world', 'society', 'the elderly' and 'self' as examples of ideas pragmatically objectified, categorized and

placed in the grid of the dominant institutional(ized) logic of the day. 'World', 'society', 'the elderly' and 'self' are always a 'becoming'. Cycles of self-reflection and conversations generate places of empathetic imagining that respect, recognize and respond to the importance of the relationship between self and society. Marshall's framing of inquiry as entailing 'inner and outer' arcs of attention resonates well with our inquiry into ageing. Be[com]ing a crone with intentions to remain actively engaged in the creation of the common good into ripe old age has captivated our imagination.

Be[com]ing a crone

'Crone' is a word used to define a category of human being. The word had an inauspicious start as a derisive term for elderly women in the fourteenth century. It does not surprise us that this word emerged during the era of transition from a Pagan to a Christian religious system and from an economy of survival to an early capitalist economy. Women's agency and social status came under attack, and after the European plague a systematic and intensifying persecution and control of women occurred through the great witch hunts (Federici, 2004).

While searching on the internet to develop an impression of the contemporary storying of crones, we read that a crone is an ugly old woman, not unlike the term 'hag' – but these terms are not uncontested. Feminists such as Kramarae and Treichler (1992, p. 185) reclaim the words 'crones' and 'hags' as 'wise women of independent spirit'. In a similarly political disruption of meaning, we use the term 'woman' to include those who were born with or assigned female identity as well as those who have chosen to become or assert a womanly identity, and those people who deliberately live between this gender binary. In our thinking, crones may be people of diverse gender identification who are wise, courageous, generous and independent of spirit – age may or may not be a necessary criterion. As women who aspire to such cronehood, we each provide a short vignette of the turn inward – the inner arc of attention that came from a conversation evoked by the invitation to craft this article on ageing.

Maria: 60 something

I am a daughter, sister, aunt, mother, grandmother and friend in a community coloured by both strong and less strident personalities; diverse cultural and gendered expressions; a wide spectrum of mental, physical and spiritual wellness; and patterns of significant wealth inequality. I am currently acutely focused on age(ing) and career-family implications with the recent disestablishment of my employment – an unwelcome event cushioned by a contractually secured pay-out. Much of my formal employment involved the co-inquiry into ways of well-being with more than 20 PhD candidates. Human diversity and redressing damaging marginalization features in many projects. Most of my co-inquirers are women scholars investigating the inseparable well-being of self and society and the entanglement of human and non-human environs.

Relationality and relational ethics are unifying themes among all projects under my watch. I notice the angst often expressed by these researchers when invited to name self-in-the-work, to state expressions of self-worth, and to articulate aspects of self-care as a necessary condition for care-for-others in their aspirations for the transformation of

injustice to justice, exclusion to inclusion, and empowerment over subjugation. The conversations that bring this angst and its alleviation to the surface reverberate in my own reflection on nearly three decades of research supervision as I moved from novice to competent scholar and now to imposed job-exit. Caring for an increasingly frail mother, thinking about my own ageing and the interdependency I value, and fearing any unwanted dependency foisted on my loved ones, preoccupy a significant amount of my self-reflections.

Much of my academic work has been in 'organizational studies' – the storying of who we are (as human beings) and how we organize ourselves, each other and our relationship with Earth. This storying has preoccupied me for over 30 years. The fulfilment of my *self* is manifest through a complex reciprocal engagement with others and through Earth, who sustains us. The cultivation of self is a necessary dimension of the cultivation of the common good. Whether my cultivation of self is enabled or constrained is intensely complicated as the radical competitive individualism of market-driven dynamics appears to invade all aspects of my life. I desire to enhance in myself wisdom and courage drawn from life, now as an older daughter, sister, mother, friend and currently unemployed scholar – a story yet to unfurl.

Heather: 40 something

Working in Māori health, I appreciate that growing old is a luxury not afforded to all. My freedom to one day be crone-like in a community of my peers is tied up with the freedom of my friends to die of old age. In the last year, I have lost two crones from my life, so I have been thinking about cronehood and legacy – what you leave behind, what you have achieved.

Joan, a Pākehā crone friend, died last year. She was in her eighties and was a seasoned social justice activist doing peace and anti-racism work, human rights and feminist organizing, through to international solidarity work. We spent many happy hours together in political meetings, demonstrations and out socializing. She had been a nurse, and remains a mother and grandmother whose influence on her offspring and me does not stop with ceasing of breath. Joan used her privilege to tautoko (support) others. She hosted meetings, wrote submissions and provided wise counsel. She never sought the limelight but her funeral was attended by many whose lives she had touched.

Makere also died last year; she was a kuia (female elder), a matriarch of her whānau (family) and her hapū (sub-tribe). She was a woman of faith, a golfer, a Māori health pioneer. In her prime, she could hold a group of people in the palm of her hand, leading them out of conflict to a place of kotahitanga (unity) and rangimarie (peace). She always brought a big vision to any room. She carried her ancestors with her. She wept when recalling what colonization had done to her people, but was relentlessly forgiving and generous. She built the strongest, most inclusive family I have ever seen.

To me, these two mana wahine (strong women) are defined by their actions over decades, not their words. To the best of my knowledge, these two women didn't meet, but they shared a passion for justice and a commitment to act with integrity and to not reduce the mana (prestige) of others. I hope that they, and my ancestors who watch over me, will be pleased with my contributions to the storying of the past and the present into a future that serves the common good.

Miriam: 30 something

I am Italian and English and a relatively new migrant to this whenua (land) that has become the context of my passage to adulthood. I am sitting on my deck, looking out towards Paku hill, holding the nervousness of contributing to this conversation – being only 33. I remember when my grandmother (95) and my nonna (93) died a month apart from each other. I was on the other side of the world and not able to attend their funerals. It did not stop me from feeling the shift in identity of no longer holding the place of grandchild but taking the place of an aunt and zia, as I am, and wish to remain, childless.

In each decade of my life, I have lived in a different country. I was born in England and lived there until I was 10. Then I moved to Italy and lived there until I was 23. Now I live here in Aotearoa. These many shifts in location have created in me a sense that anywhere can be home and nowhere really is, so it is hard to imagine the cultural context of my cronehood. My 14-year-old self would smile hearing that I am now writing and reflecting about becoming a crone, una vecchia strega, when then I was fighting for youth rights in the Roman left movement. As youth, we were subjected to sermons of our 'elders' at every political rally or meeting. It brings reflections on the power of age and experience and how that can be used to silence and marginalize others. As a young, white, bisexual, cis-gendered woman, silencing was something I battled with my peers as well as with my elders.

The silencing of my inner world and the silencing of others are my reflections on becoming old, in the cyclical battles that seem to pattern our lives due to the systems and cultures of oppression that many cultures cradle and reinforce, in which we can be simultaneously oppressors and oppressed. With my last migration, my biggest loss was my community of compagne/i (comrades), an extended network of solidarity, passion and dysfunction that I was familiar with and a political platform from which I could fight for social justice. For my cronehood to not feel just like 'getting old', I will need to have a sense of belonging and the passion to still fight for the common and diverse good.

Storying cronehood

Stories of ageing are complex. The storying of ageing could and *should* be a book with many blank pages. Ageing begins at birth. For some, it extends before and beyond the taking of human breath. Copper (1997) bemoans the silence within feminist literature around ageing; she claims that this failure to engage reflects what Butler (1969) called ageism – the stereotyping and discriminating against people on the basis of age.

Using the search strategy of crone and/or ageing, confirmed literature on cronehood is sparse. There was a strong genre of feminist oral histories. We value the work of these authors as we reflect on what it may mean to be(come) a respected old(er) woman – a crone, a hag. We reflect on the idea of ageing 'in' a 'society' as 'crucible', where the grand narrative of ageing is often storied in terms of deficit capacities, limited social participation, market worth or economic cost. It *could* be otherwise. *What stories of ageing can we find or do we want to tell? Is it possible to disrupt degrading depictions? Can we use our positions to channel different stories into the public domain and have them take root?* Framing such questions is already a political action.

Much of the literature about older women we located was from North America and spoke to the experiences of white women. Comerford, Henson-Stroud, Sionainn, and Wheeler (2004) use the term 'crone' to designate a wise elder. They report on a study of older lesbians living in rural Vermont, in the USA. The participants spoke of the importance of self-reliance, social support, connections with community and being partners as success facts in navigating aging. Herzig's (2012) study of post-menopausal women in the US identified the key themes of wisdom, ageing, relationship, spirit and knowledge. A central assumption of her paper is that cronehood occurs after menopause. The participants asserted that they have achieved mastery in key dimensions of their life by this point on the biological clock. The study participants wanted to guide and contribute to future generations. Cronehood is depicted in this study as being able to navigate the physical, emotional and psychological changes of menopause and entering into a state of acceptance. Belenky, Clincy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1997) report women trusting their own sense of authority and trusting their inner voices and 'gut' reactions more after menopause.

How a woman can be impactful in her later stages of life will look different in Brazil or Kenya, on a Pacific atoll, or in the various suburbs of any nation. Māori have a rich tradition of what Te Awekotuku (1991) calls mana wahine – strong, female Māori leaders. In the Māori context, kuia – sometimes known respectfully as 'aunties' – may have powerful impacts within their communities (Glover, Kira, & Smith, 2015). Such women often create change from the kitchen, and elsewhere, wrangling the rangatahi (young people), and setting the scene for political and social activity through karanga (formal call to commence a gathering).

Maria reflects:

> Some of this cultural reflection resonates also with my working-class origins. Women in my family commanded the household – from budget control to setting acceptable codes of conduct for any occasion. All older women in my familiar circles were required to be addressed as 'Tante' (aunty) – a title of respect and authority. It seems to me that in my 'liberation' to a professional career a false sense of emancipation has been foisted on me. I am required to compete in a gendered world for the necessities of life while the governance of the household is diminished in value – even by my feminist friends. And as I become an old(er) woman in a global economy that values youth, speed, and innovation as necessity, I sense my silencing.

Speaking into the silencing of women is an example of activist scholarship (Gatenby & Humphries, 1999). The silence may come from intentional exclusion or the unconscious overlooking of diversity in the stories told. Henneberg (2006) uses the literature of Sarton, whom she identified as a creative crone, as a pathway to understand cronehood. Sarton advocates for the active construction of rather than passive succumbing to ageing. Ageing and entering into cronehood for Sarton is about a cycle of lamentation, acceptance and celebration. Henneberg explains Sarton's continued faith in the idea that she was fundamentally loving and lovable despite the effects of ageing hinged on the belief that mind and body could be at peace with each other, even in advanced age (p. 109).

Sternberg (1995) described wisdom as having gained knowledge and successfully integrated it into one's life. Kramarae (2015), who identifies as a crone-in-training, explains: 'I hear from long-time social activists that our abilities to communicate and otherwise act in

the most generous and beneficial ways possible seem to be what brings us our greatest fulfilment, as well as social transformation' (p. 113).

Utilizing a postmodern feminist analysis, we can bring into the arena of our reflections that 'gender is not a property of individuals but a socially prescribed relationship, a process, and a social construction' (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1994, p. 69). The gendered nature of caregiving, not just within gerontology, is less about biologically determined factors and may be more about social conditioning and the cost-effectiveness of the unpaid labour of women (Hooyman, 1992; Stoller, 1993; Walker, 1985). Feminist psychologist Wehr (1987, p. 104) expresses the dynamism between self and society by stating, 'we all tend to become who we are addressed as being'.

The Western thought, which is the dominant thought of our own social milieu, is built on language and symbolism of binary opposition. As Derrida (1978) argues, the binary opposition of reason/emotion, mind/body, male/female takes its meaning from the other (what it is not), and the first member of the pair becomes the standard of comparison and takes on a higher truth value in the hierarchy of knowledge (Culler, 1982). An obvious example of binary opposition in gerontology is the caregiver/care-receiver distinction, which assumes an active/passive relationship that does not account for the great deal of effort the 'receivers' may be exerting on their own behalf. Our reflections on self, ageing, caring and future are coloured by the recognition that we will need to play both roles.

Derrida challenges knowledge built on opposition, arguing that similarities are ignored and marginalized in order to maintain the status quo. Derrida's insights are applied to the reading of texts in general, for,

> just as the meaning of a word partly depends on what the word is not, the meaning of a text depends on what the text does not say. Deconstructive readings thus rely on gaps, inconsistencies, and contractions in the text, and even on metaphorical associations. (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1994, p. 64)

Layers of resistance

Ray (1996) argued that feminist gerontology

> works to change attitudes that construct older people's positions in society through restrictive roles, beliefs, and stereotypes. The goal of such scholarship is to assist in liberating elders, especially women, from these stereotypes and to increase their personal and political agency. (p. 675)

A crone's self-presentation may span from a donning of the societal uniform to retain a place at the tables of power, to a choice of costume to distinguish herself from the long domesticated and silenced space of 'old woman'. Joseph (1991, p. 8) in her ironic poem explains:

> When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
> With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.
> And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves
> And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter …

A crone knows that having *both* silver and/or purple hair, or the latest 'in-vogue grooming', may serve as a passport to realms of power or resistance to subjugation best

understood by them. In women-centred circles, a recognition of experience and expertise may rely not so much on physical presentation, but on the substance of the fragmented and complex lives of each woman. Rebellion or compliance in dress code has contributed variously to empowerment, assimilation and the further demonization of communities by drawing attention to the mass normalization of a narrow form of identity.

Embracing the common good: storying self and society differently

Ray (1996) maintains that ageing is a feminist issue due to the fact that women outlive men and the majority of carers are either unpaid (family) or paid females. This category includes the ground-breaking work of socialist-feminists, who look at the economic relations between men and women across the life course and gauge their cumulative effects on older women. Socialist-feminists point to inequities in the gender-based division of labour and argue for major changes in the way society defines, distributes and rewards 'work'.

In the latter case, many of the contributors seek to explain, among other things, the comparatively high rate of poverty among older women, and to propose changes in the ideologies and institutions that perpetuate it (Hall & Morice, 2015). In the words of Stoller (1993):

> a feminist gerontology, particularly one built on a socialist-feminist perspective, understands family caregiving as an experience of obligation, structured by the gender-based division of domestic labour, the invisibility and devaluing of unpaid work, occupational segregation in the work force, and an implicitly gendered work place. (p. 166)

Writing for this special issue has focused our attention on our part in the storying of the past, the present and the future as a form of personal and social sense-making – a setting out of personal observation and aspiration as integral to social activity/activism. We invite increasing integration of *self*-reflection and deepened dialogue into the process of writing about aging *and society* as a necessary aspect that brings selves into service of the common good. To reflect, to converse, to observe and to write with an intention to contribute to personal and social change is to be an activist researcher contributing to a change in personal preparation and societal underpinning for ageing well throughout life and for our part in the collective responsibility for the common good on which our well-being will certainly remain dependent.

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Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributors

Dr Heather Came is a seventh-generation Pākehā New Zealander who grew up on Ngātiwai land. She has worked for nearly 25 years in health promotion, public health and/or Māori health and has a long involvement in social justice activism. Heather is a founding member and co-chair of STIR: Stop Institutional Racism, a fellow of the Health Promotion Forum, co-chair of the Auckland branch of the Public Health Association and an active member of Tāmaki Tiriti Workers. She currently embraces life as an activist scholar. She is a Senior Lecturer based in the Taupua Waiora Māori Health Research Centre in the School of Public Health & Psychosocial Studies at Auckland University of Technology.

Until the end of 2016, ***Dr Maria Humphries*** served as Associate Professor of the University of Waikato. Teaching, research and supervision covered a range of topics in organizational and management studies, much informed by her qualifications in economic and organizational sociology and women's studies. Maria was an early member of the Pākehā Treaty Workers in the Waikato area and the New Zealand Human Rights Foundation. She finds much joy and many challenges in attempts to live more intergenerationally.

An Italian/English activist, ***Miriam Sessa*** began feminist and social justice activism at the young age of 14 while living in Rome. Her past and current involvements include empowerment workshops for women, self-defence training, and domestic violence and sexual violence prevention and intervention.

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