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Race-Centred Me-Searching for Racialised Asian Researchers in Aotearoa New Zealand

Paolo Aquino[1] | Kyle Tan[1] | Lincoln Dam[2] | Shemana Cassim[3] | Minh Hieu Nguyen[3] | Mohan Dutta[4]

[1]Faculty of Māori and Indigenous Studies, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand | [2]School of Education, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand | [3]School of Psychology, Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand | [4]Centre for Culture-Centred Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE), Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

Correspondence: Kyle Tan (k.tan@waikato.ac.nz)

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ABSTRACT

'Me-search', or the intentional process of exploring one's positionality, is increasingly recognised as foundational to decolonising and anti-racist research. Yet in Aotearoa New Zealand, racialised Asian researchers have few praxis-oriented resources that speak to our liminal positioning within Eurocentric academic institutions and that recognise both our responsibilities to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and to the communities we research with and belong to. Through a series of tuakana–teina conversations, six Asian academic researchers engaged with questions structured around the 4Rs: racialisation, restructuring, relationality and reflexivity. We present narrative summaries that foreground context, tensions and praxis, demonstrating what me-search can feel like in practice: iterative, relational and responsive to shifting responsibilities. Key threads for the conversations included trust and 'relationships first' approaches, refusing inclusion as 'diversity' without Te Tiriti accountability; naming whiteness and accounting for privilege and complicity in knowledge production; and building from cultural selves, ancestors and Asian philosophies while resisting the homogenisation of 'Asian'. We offer the 4Rs as a flexible starting point that invites adaptation, critique and ongoing collective learning with scholars, policy colleagues and communities, towards accountable, race-centred research practices.

1 | Introduction

Across settler colonial CANZUS (Canada, Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand and the United States) nations, there has been growing attention to the reasons for, and processes through which, researchers may benefit from engaging in *me-search*, or the intentional exploration of our individual (and relational) positionality when conducting research (Fasavalu and Reynolds 2019; Keil et al. 2026; Milner 2007; Milner et al. 2025; Soedirgo and Glas 2020; Rata et al. 2021; Rata et al. 2025; Yip 2024). Through me-searching, researchers explore their own positionality, including how their worldview, ontology, epistemology and standpoint influence the research process (Rata et al. 2025; Yip 2024). Me-search is the first step towards critical consciousness (Curtis et al. 2019) and decolonising research (Smith 2012), as it involves actively challenging mainstream norms dictated by Western hegemony by interrogating and making sense of who we are in relation to broader social, cultural, historical and political contexts (Milner 2007; Yip 2024). It compels us to centre our lived experiences and community needs while critically reflecting on our values, beliefs, assumptions and privileges as we work towards liberatory, anti-racist and decolonial goals (Asafo and Tuiburelevu 2021; Milner et al. 2025; Rata et al. 2025). Realising a lacuna in translating the theoretical understanding of me-search into praxis for Asian researchers in Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter

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'Aotearoa'), a group of Asian academic researchers—ranging from early-career to more seasoned scholars—came together to collaborate and share narratives of how we understand the 'me' working within research contexts involving Asian communities.

The New Zealand Government defines Asians in Aotearoa New Zealand as individuals with North, East, South or Southeast Asian ethnicities or whakapapa (genealogy) (Yong, 2018). Statistics New Zealand (2025) projected that approximately 33% of Aotearoa's population will identify with Asian ethnicities by 2048, an increase from 19% in 2023. However, in everyday usage, the term 'Asian' in Aotearoa is sometimes used to refer primarily to East Asians and typically excludes people from the Middle East, Russia, and Central Asia. The term 'Asian' is placed in inverted commas to acknowledge that not all authors in this paper identify comfortably with this label, despite being racialised as such. In Aotearoa, the term is contested. While this identity category offers a sense of belonging for some and is used to generate traction in influencing political decision-making, others argue that it risks homogenising diverse cultures, histories, backgrounds and realities, and marginalising 'minorities within minorities'. For ease of readability, the term will generally appear without inverted commas in the remainder of the paper.

1.1 | The Aotearoa New Zealand Context

The constant process of *othering* reveals not only how society racialises us as Asians (Cormack 2007) but also how we, in turn, navigate and conduct me-search within these imposed boundaries. Asians in Aotearoa have a long history of concealing their race and remaining apathetic to the racialised construction of the social world as a survival strategy to assimilate, conform to model minority expectations and evade overt racism (Ip 2009; Tan and Tan 2025). The state of colonised mentality within Asian communities to not see race (as a ramification of racism), alongside internalised racism and complicity in coloniality, is, however, weaponised by political actors as part of a 'divide-and-rule' strategy to undermine Te Tiriti obligations (specifically Māori tino rangatiratanga or collective self-determination) and hinder equity provisions for Māori and Pacific communities (Gao 2026; Ngata and Dutta 2023; Tan and Tan 2025). With the rapid growth of Asian populations—soon becoming the largest minoritised groups—there has been limited research on expanding capacity for allyship, whakawhanaungatanga as a decolonial approach to relationship-building (Rata and Al-Asaad 2019) and collectivism to redress lateral violence between Asian and other minoritised groups. We are reminded by Rata et al. (2021) of our collective responsibility, in times of escalating anti-Māori attacks, to 'steer our communities away from [undermining Māori sovereignty] and towards the restoration of tino rangatiratanga' (p. 61).

While there are lessons that Asian researchers can learn from Pākehā (European) scholars' conceptions of their 'settler' positionality (Crawford and Langridge 2022; Rae et al. 2025), there is a concern that imposing expectations on Asians to become 'white allies' may reinforce white proximity. Further, tools focused on Pākehā reflexivity may fall short in addressing Asian racialisation, the complexities of Asian (im)migration, connections with home countries including those in the Global South and the specific forms of relational solidarity that Māori and tauiwi (non-Māori) of colour may cultivate (Cassim et al. 2023; Rata and Al-Asaad 2019).

1.2 | 4R: Racialisation, Restructuring, Relationality and Reflexivity

During an earlier scoping review of research conducted with Asian communities in Aotearoa over the past two decades, some of us collated a body of literature on Asian New Zealander identity, Asian racialisation and Māori–Asian relationships (see Aquino et al. 2025). These studies were read carefully to identify and summarise key points. We held multiple discussions that involved back-and-forth probing, questioning and explaining of how these points were relevant to the me-search process for us as Asian researchers.

We also drew on me-search resources developed by Māori (e.g., Rata et al. 2025) and Pacific (e.g., Asafo and Tuiburelevu 2021) scholars, as well as critical race scholars overseas (e.g., Milner 2007; Milner et al. 2025), to identify key elements of reflexivity that complement our findings specific to Asian communities. The key points were translated into guiding questions and subsequently revised for contextual relevance to ensure accessibility for Asian researchers across diverse disciplines, career stages and workplace settings. These questions were eventually organised into four R themes: racialisation, restructuring, relationality and reflexivity (see Appendix A for a comprehensive list of questions). Below, a brief summary is provided to outline each R.

1.2.1 | Racialisation

A race-centred analysis interrogates how institutions, policies and systems produce and maintain racial inequities. Racism in Aotearoa has its roots in settler colonialism and the Doctrine of Discovery which creates the myth that white Christians are superior to all other peoples (Jackson 2019). Despite the intention of hapū Māori rangatira (sub-tribe leaders) to manaaki (provide hospitality to) Pākehā immigrants pre-1840, and the subsequent signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi to ensure the sovereignty of collective Māori, myriad Treaty breaches have occurred (Waitangi Tribunal 2025). Māori continue to have limited influence over institutional decision-making, including immigration policies. For example, explicitly racist regulations targeting early Asian migrants, such as the Poll Tax and other immigration restrictions, directly contradicted core Māori values, such as manaakitanga (hospitality) and aroha (love), which emphasise the welcoming of manuhiri (guests) (Kukutai and Rata 2017).

The racialised construction of Asians in Aotearoa begins with orientalism that Pākehā historically employed to overgeneralise and stereotype Eastern societies as static, underdeveloped and inferior to the dynamic, civilised and superior West (Said 1978). It is estimated that 40% of Asian adults in Aotearoa have experienced racism or discrimination related to their ethnic backgrounds at some time in their lives (Jaung et al. 2022). The understanding of racism in this nation has frequently been

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reduced to interpersonal exchanges, which curtails discussions beyond individuals defending themselves as not a *racist* and hinders critical engagement with the systemic nature of racialisation. However, scholarly research into racism and Asianisation in Aotearoa, including their intersection with Māori racialisation, has only recently begun to emerge, despite Asian communities having long articulated concerns regarding prevalent racism (Shui 2021).

Applying these contextual dynamics to the context of research, then, means that failing to consider 'race' in research risks normalising apathy towards systemic racism. A deeper scholarly understanding of racism affecting Asian communities in Aotearoa also involves exploring issues such as migrant exploitation, religious discrimination, cultural assimilation and the oppression experienced by Māori and other minoritised groups, including Asians (Ngata and Dutta 2023).

For this study's focus on academia, it is crucial to highlight that the systemic racism claims lodged against tertiary institutions since 2020, including Unitec, the University of Waikato and the University of Otago, clearly demonstrate how these institutions operate to sustain colour-silent ideologies that benefit those who embody and adhere to Western traditions (Hamley et al. 2024). The longstanding under-representation, limited curricula and underfunding within academia and the broader research sector for anything related to Asians are casualties of institutional racism, affecting a homogenised group commonly racialised as *others* and, at times, as *model minorities* assumed to be hardworking and highly achieving (Roy et al. 2026).

1.2.2 | Restructuring

While seemingly permitting the inclusion of Asian people, diversity and multicultural policies within institutions are often performative and do not involve the redistribution of power, resources or decision-making authority (Ahmed 2012; Ngata and Dutta 2023). These discourses sustain whiteness by negating settlers' colonial histories and ongoing violence, diluting legitimate rights of Māori as Indigenous peoples and engendering lateral tensions between Māori and Asian communities by positioning them as discrete racial groups devoid of relational responsibilities to one another (Lee-Morgan 2024; Ngata and Dutta 2023; Omura 2014). Rather than *opening* institutions, such enactments of diversity can function as a wall—protecting institutions from complaints of racism, silencing whiteness and institutional racism and placing the racial and cultural burden on racialised groups (Ahmed 2012).

If existing institutions continue to function primarily as sites of coloniality, structural transformation may be the only viable path forward as we seek to envision and realise a different future. A future in which Te Tiriti-grounded relationships are embedded in everyday practice and where communities can form collectives that enter into meaningful, accountable relationships with Māori (Dutta and Bradford 2020). Matike Mai Aotearoa (the Independent Working Group on Constitutional Transformation) offers a starting point for envisioning an inclusive constitutional future for Aotearoa founded on tikanga (custom) and kawa (protocol), Te Tiriti and other Indigenous human rights instruments (e.g., UNDRIP). Matike Mai acknowledges Te Tiriti's role as an immigration framework for tauiwi (including Asians) and puts forward a set of values that should underpin how mana-enhancing relationships can be formed across kāwanatanga (Crown governance), tino rangatiratanga (Māori collective self-determination) and relational spheres of influence. For example, the value of place ensures respect for the authority of both rangatiratanga and kāwanatanga; the value of community facilitates good relationships between communities; and the value of belonging affirms a sense of inclusion and responsibility for all (Matike Mai Aotearoa 2016).

Me-searching within academia not only involves personal reflexivity in how we embed Matike Mai values in teaching and research practices but also requires exploring ways to drive structural change that redistributes resources, decision-making power and knowledge ownership. It can take the form of both individual advocacy and collective organising as we interrogate the status quo through engaging in community struggles for equitable research funding, decolonising curricula, resisting neoliberal university policies and addressing universities' complicity in anti-migrant agendas.

1.2.3 | Relationality

Neoliberal expectations in research that place limits on time and resources can contribute to extractive practices. In research with Asian and minoritised communities, relationships must be prioritised above the kaupapa (work). Meaningful relationships help to galvanise momentum, build movements for change and provide crucial resources to nourish and sustain people engaged in the exhausting work of constitutional transformation and systemic change (Dam 2024; Fu and Azarmandi 2023). However, the ways in which we form relationships at individual, community and collective levels should begin from our own cultural frameworks (Lee-Morgan 2024; Rata et al. 2021). When working with Māori, for instance, productive relationships require us to examine our identities as settlers and our relationship with colonised land (Dam 2024; Shui 2021) and to engage in whanaungatanga or relationships characterised as family-like, based on shared experiences and bound in solidarity (Rata and Al-Asaad 2019).

The conceptualisation of the *researcher* as a relational identity can help us navigate our multiple identities in relation to other researchers, policy colleagues and communities. We are not always only the *researcher*; we may possess insider perspectives when we are part of the communities with whom we engage in research and when we hold existing relationships as whānau (family), relatives or mentors/mentees. These shifting identities (dependent on the relationship) can influence what we and our research participants bring to the research process (Crawford and Langridge 2022; Dam 2024). We are also not always part of the marginalised, as we may gain power, status and privilege through our intersectional identities and experiences, including race(s), class, caste, age, gender, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, citizenship status, education and geography (Milner 2007). Knowing when one is an insider, outsider or both in the research, when to step back or speak up and how to share or transfer power is part of the reflexive process of navigating power relationships (Asafo and Tuiburelevu 2021; Curtis et al. 2019).

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1.2.4 | *Reflexivity*

Coined by Rita Wong (2008), *decolonisasian* seeks to facilitate consciousness about the limitations of multicultural discourses in constructing Asian identity. Instead of approximating whiteness as we express our identity through national belonging (e.g., Asian New Zealander), decolonisasian calls for reflexive identity work grounded in accountable relationships with Indigenous peoples and lands, alongside critique of Asian (though as racialised subjects) complicity in colonial violence and the homogenisation of 'Asian'. Reflexivity in a decolonisasian context entails coming to know oneself as a racialised being, challenging racialised stereotypes of our communities (Milner 2007) and confronting the whiteness and colonised mentality that exist within ourselves (Alam-Simmons 2024). We understand that responding to the question of 'where are you from?' can be emotionally unsettling for some due to the racialisation of Asians as *others* (Cormack 2007) but, within tikanga Māori, this inquiry can become a relational foundation for connection among Māori and Asian communities (Shui 2021).

Reflection on the dynamics between researchers and participants is also essential in the process of knowledge generation. This includes considering what we bring to the research relationship, the contributions we make to participants' livelihoods and ways of cultivating spaces in which participants can safely engage, reveal themselves and acknowledge one another in culturally affirming ways (Fasavalu and Reynolds 2019; Rata et al. 2021). The me-search process has no final destination; it is recursive, continuous and ever-active (Milner et al. 2025; Rata et al. 2021). Inviting other actors into the me-search process can illuminate the boundaries of self-reflexivity, especially in situations where personal power is not always apparent (Soedirgo and Glas 2020).

1.3 | Objective

In Aotearoa, all large-scale national funding applications in Aotearoa require researchers to complete a section that demonstrates their research relevance to Vision Mātauranga (VM) based on defined categories[1] and themes[2] (Royal Society Te Apārangi 2024). VM requires researchers to consider how their projects respond to Indigenous issues, needs and aspirations. Indeed, writing a VM statement can often be a mere tick-box exercise (Rauika Māngai 2020), and it is typically the bare minimum for research to engage with anything Māori. Other research processes, such as securing ethics approval, may also inadvertently prioritise procedural tick-box compliance. In accordance with their respective organisations and professions, researchers may also be tasked to respond to Te Tiriti o Waitangi policies; diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) plans; and cultural safety and competency guidelines (Curtis et al. 2019). In our experiences of interacting with other Asian tauiwi researchers, in practice, many do not know where to begin, despite recognising the importance of honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi, working relationally with Māori and introspecting their positionality throughout the research process.

Asian researchers occupy a liminal space in which we must navigate Eurocentric research norms as racialised selves while also negotiating our ethical responsibilities to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and accountability to the communities that we represent and research with. However, the scarcity of resources, including academic courses and guidelines on Asian identities, racialisation and histories, alongside the dearth of literature on Asian positionality, means there are few resources to turn to, which complicates efforts toward self-directed learning. In this paper, we seek to offer some (counter-)stories as Asian researchers who have had more time to engage in me-search through the 4R framework and reflect on how we conduct our research. These stories are not intended to position us as experts in the me-search conversation, nor do they imply that our experiences constitute objective or standard responses to positionality statements. Rather, we hope to open space for further reflection and kōrero on what it means to do me-search with care and justice.

2 | Methodology

2.1 | Tuakana–Teina Conversations

A postgraduate student, Paolo, held a series of conversations with five researchers who have experience conducting research with 'Asian' communities in Aotearoa. The conversations were not positioned as extractive interviews but as relational learning encounters shaped by a tuakana–teina philosophy (Winitana 2012). As the teina (a younger or less experienced researcher), Paolo brought questions derived from the 4R framework (see Appendix B) in an open and inquisitive way and invited guidance from the tuakana (senior, more experienced researchers), as people who have been holding these complexities for longer than he has.

Across the conversations, Paolo was attentive to how knowledge is carried through relationships, not just through 'data'. Often, the kōrero (conversation) moved between research and life, including shared social backgrounds, migration and upbringing, experiences inside Eurocentric academic spaces and the realities of doing community-engaged work while being read as 'Asian'. In that sense, the conversations were not one-directional. While he sought mentorship and practical direction, the tuakana also reflected alongside the teina, testing ideas, naming tensions and offering stories and strategies that felt grounded in lived experience rather than abstract principle.

Paolo understood the tuakana–teina approach as not only a method but also an ethical commitment. It required him to show up with humility, to listen carefully and to take responsibility for how he carried what was shared. It also involved recognising moments where connection mattered—where laughter, mutual recognition and thoughtful challenge helped to build trust and uplift each other's mana. At times, these kōrero were not confined to a single, organised conversation, but unfolded across different moments and settings. What emerged was not simply guidance for Paolo as a teina but a collaborative reflection on what it can look like for Asian researchers to practise research that is relational and accountable, grounded in philosophical traditions familiar across many Asian communities, as well as in the principles of tuakana–teina.

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3 | Reflection from Tuakana–Teina kōrero

The analysis that follows is framed through the teina's perspective.

3.1 | Paolo Aquino

I am a 1.5-generation Filipino researcher in Aotearoa, born in the Philippines and raised across cultures and expectations. I immigrated here as a child and have grown up learning what it means to be read as 'Asian' in contexts that often treat that label as obvious and stable, even when my lived experience is not. My relationship to language and culture has been shaped by migration, including what I have retained, what I have lost and what I am still learning. This matters to how I approach research because it keeps me attentive to identity as relational and shaped by power.

Part of that shaping happened through schooling. I spent time in a boarding school far away from family, where distance was not only geographic but cultural too. Being away from my own people sharpened the everyday work of 'fitting'. Learning what could be spoken, what was too much and what needed to be translated or softened to be understood. Over time, I became more aware of how race travels through ordinary interactions: who gets assumed to belong, who gets asked to explain themselves and how 'Asian' becomes a quick shorthand that can erase as much as it names. These experiences did not teach me race as an abstract concept; they taught me that race is a social reading that lands on the body and shapes what feels possible.

I then entered psychology through largely Eurocentric training, where knowledge is often positioned as universal, culture is treated as an add-on and power can disappear into the language of 'individual difference'. In those spaces, I felt a repeated gap between what mattered in community life and what counted as knowledge in the university. I also noticed the selective inclusion of Asian identities within diversity frameworks, with little engagement in relation to Te Tiriti discourses: present as a category but rarely engaged as situated communities with obligations and relationships in Te Tiriti contexts. This is part of how my interest in race and racism took form: not only through personal experience of being racialised but through watching how institutions organise what becomes legible, researchable and worth taking seriously.

I do not claim a neutral vantage point, nor do I claim to speak for Asian communities. I locate myself as a budding researcher in psychology, working with Asian communities, trying to stay accountable to the people and places that have shaped me. I am also conscious that 'Asian' can function as both an umbrella and an erasure. It can create shared language for coalition and visibility while also flattening differences in histories and migration responsibilities. This tension sits underneath my interest in how Asian researchers position ourselves and how we learn to hold complexity without defaulting to sameness or fragmentation.

At this stage, showing up has meant staying close to Filipino and broader Asian community concerns through research, teaching and other forms of community-facing work, and treating these spaces as opportunities to listen and build trust. I am still learning what it means to move beyond academic reflection into more sustained forms of solidarity and responsibility, particularly in relation to Te Tiriti and to the communities I write with and from.

I wanted to write this paper because there are limited resources on me-search for Asian researchers in Aotearoa. Scholarship that spoke directly to Asian experiences here was difficult to locate, and I often felt a gap between what I needed and what was available. This project offered a way to respond to that absence by gathering grounded reflections from Asian scholars who have been navigating these questions for longer than I have and by making that learning more reachable for those coming through after us. The same absence has shaped how I engage in research: as a teina, through relationships and listening rather than claimed expertise. Coming to the tuakana with questions I could not answer alone was itself the beginning of that practice. My hope is that this paper supports readers to reflect, shift research practice and take action, including rethinking research design, engaging with Te Tiriti more seriously and building work that is relational and accountable.

Standard responses to reflexive questions can imply the existence of a single objective truth. For this reason, I presented a summarised narrative of my conversations with each tuakana to show why these questions are critical to understanding positionality.

3.2 | Kyle Tan

Kyle positions himself as a queer Asian (Malaysian Chinese) migrant scholar, but what I took from our kōrero is that he does not treat these identities as a fixed script that tells him exactly how to do research. Arriving in Aotearoa from Malaysia in his mid-20s (where queer identities are criminalised and his interest in advocating for queer equality had been suppressed), he initially prioritised the articulation of his queer identity in his search for belonging. However, he quickly realised that his accent, skin colour and unfamiliarity with the host culture exposed him to ever-changing forms of Asian racialisation from experiences of othering to being subjected to model minority expectations. Early on, he resisted giving a neat or 'standard answer' because he seemed wary of positionality becoming a polished statement that stays the same no matter where we are. Instead, he kept returning to relationality, saying that who we are in research shifts 'depending on who is the person in front of you and the community that you're engaging with', and with 'the context, the background and the time and place' (Lam 2022). For me, this was a reminder that identity is not only something we carry but something that becomes visible differently depending on the relationships and power dynamics we are moving through.

A core commitment for Kyle is disrupting the homogenisation of 'Asian' as a singular identity. He described being 'racialised quite a bit as Asian or Chinese right away' based on appearance and explained that, when he enters Asian spaces, he often names himself as 'a migrant' and 'a queer person' to show 'there is more diversity' underneath the Asian label. This disclosure is not

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simply personal. In Kyle's framing, it functions as an interruption to how Asians are commonly positioned as 'the model minorities or the politically neutral group'. The task, then, is not only resisting external stereotyping but also unsettling how Asian communities can internalise and reproduce flattened narratives about ourselves.

What stood out to me throughout our kōrero was his honesty about academic privilege. Even as a racialised scholar, he acknowledged that university credentials can open doors: 'we benefit from the colonial processes within university… because then we get access to certain places that others don't'. He described being approached by community organisations and government entities because 'I have a PhD… and the relevant credentials', and he treats that access as a responsibility rather than an entitlement. In practice, this looks like using his position for the 'little activism': being mindful of who is missing, pushing institutions to engage beyond 'safe' voices, and redirecting attention towards communities that are less heard. He offered examples that certain organisations only wish to engage with 'academics or people who are less controversial, people who would respond to emails', and he pushed them to connect with grassroots groups who 'will have much more experience…the grassroots part of it…much more experience than I do'. In that moment, Kyle positioned himself less as a 'spokesperson' and more as a 'connector', someone who uses institutional access to shift the spotlight towards those with fewer platforms to be heard.

Kyle also spoke about disruption as an impulse shaped by queerness: 'being queer, I like to disrupt what's normal'. At the same time, he emphasised that this must be done relationally. He described learning to raise challenges 'in a relational way so I don't trample on other people's mana'. Rather than confrontation as default, he often 'provides perspective from another angle' so others can 'take it on board' without perceiving him as 'a threat'. This resonated with me as a form of wero (challenge) that refuses both silence and domination, challenging structural power while staying responsive to relationship.

In building relationships with communities, Kyle repeatedly returned to usefulness and reciprocity. He explained that he does not enter community spaces announcing 'I have a PhD' or listing publications. Instead, he tries to show he can be of value: 'when I go into that space, I want to prove that I'm useful to them'. He shared an example of being approached to support migrant parents with transgender children, where his immediate role was to become 'the contact person' for referrals and support. What stayed with me was his sequencing: 'I need to be there for them…before I can begin a conversation on what's important for me'. This reframes research as something that emerges from contribution, not extraction.

Kyle reflected that much of his recent work has been 'reactionary': responding to policy shifts and racist discourses by 'providing the alternative perspective', often because 'Asian people are not represented in those discussions anyway'. But having to constantly respond to reactionary politics comes with a cost. This work can become 'not very healthy', pulling time away from deeper community commitments and from building the foundation for structural transformation, which he linked to the 'politics of distraction'. He is now seeking to refocus on longer-term interventions, including conscientisation within Asian communities to work collectively in addressing racism (Smith 2017). His long-term goal is to facilitate conscientising wānanga (learning discussions) that build on the existing work of Asians Supporting Tino Rangatiratanga (ASTR), Multicultural New Zealand and Tāhono Trust, and his volunteering in related areas, to mobilise community awareness to challenge the status quo. He also named the difficulty of engaging highly credentialed Asian professionals: 'how do you tell them that they are missing this part of knowledge when they have such high credentials?' His response was one of accompaniment, not blame: 'it's like a journey…we need to hold their hands'. This prompted me to reflect that conscientising efforts cannot be directed only toward 'marginalised groups' but must also engage many of our more socioeconomically privileged Asian communities.

I left our kōrero with the sense that Kyle's work is fundamentally connective. He noted that 'time will prove itself', suggesting he does not always justify himself directly because 'the people who I have relationship with…they will speak for me'. Yet, he was clear that maintaining relationships is difficult in the current moment: 'there's so much division within our communities', and people pressure you 'to take a stance'. Much of his labour, he said, is the patient work of bridging: 'education, debunking the racial myth…trying to get people to understand what relationship means'. For me, Kyle's kōrero clarified that Asian research praxis in Aotearoa is not only about critique; it is also about building the relational infrastructure that makes ethical scholarship and solidarity possible.

3.3 | Lincoln Dam

Lincoln positions himself as an Asian (Chinese-Thai-Khmer) scholar whose relationship to research is inseparable from his family's migration history and his own experiences of growing up racialised in Aotearoa. Lincoln was born in Aotearoa, but his story begins with his parents, particularly his father's arrival as a refugee from Cambodia in the 1980s. Growing up during the so-called 'Asian invasion' era, Lincoln recalled his schooling years shaped by moral panic around Asian immigration, where messages of non-belonging were routine. As he recalled, this was a time when being told to 'go back to China or Asia or wherever it was that people thought I was from' was normalised. Normalised, too, was the absence of Asian communities from discussions of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. While these experiences did not immediately translate into a research agenda, he reflected that, in hindsight, they formed the conditions that later shaped his scholarly trajectory.

What stood out to me was how Lincoln described his turn to research as emerging from absence, specifically the absence of Asian voices, experiences and epistemologies in his own tertiary education. As a student, he found it difficult to locate scholarships that reflected his lived realities or offered conceptual language to make sense of his identity. 'There just weren't the papers', he said plainly. This absence revealed to him the power of research not simply as a tool of analysis but as a means of documentation, legitimation and visibility. I was struck by how he framed his work around a deceptively simple question:

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what kind of research would a younger version of myself have needed in order to feel seen, understood and affirmed? This question helped me rethink research less as knowledge production for an abstract audience and more as an intergenerational practice of care.

Responding to the abovementioned backdrop of absence, Lincoln now centres Asian ontologies and epistemologies in his work, especially notions of relationality. He repeatedly emphasised that identity, whether racialised or otherwise, does not exist in isolation but is always formed through relationships with others, ideas, histories and power structures. Drawing on a yin–yang metaphor he often uses in research and teaching (Dam 2024), Lincoln explained that we cannot understand ourselves without some form of 'otherness'; however, racialisation complicates this process because it is structured by a hierarchy. Asians in Aotearoa are positioned through binaries of desirability and undesirability, belonging and foreignness. These power-laden relationships shape how Asian communities come to understand ourselves, often in ways that are internalised and difficult to unsettle. Listening to him, I realised that relationality in Lincoln's work functions as a way of revealing power, showing how Asians are positioned through everyday binaries of belonging and foreignness rather than through overt acts of exclusion alone.

Rather than advocating for overtly confrontational forms of resistance, Lincoln articulated a preference for what he described as a 'softly, softly' approach to decolonial and anti-racist politics. While acknowledging that antagonistic politics have their place in responding to settler colonialism, he admitted that such orientations 'don't really gel' with him and sometimes felt deeply colonial in their origins. Instead, his anti-racist praxis lies in centring Asian ontologies, epistemologies and philosophies, particularly within disciplines that have historically dismissed them as non-rigorous or 'not real philosophy'. He offered an example from his doctoral research, where he challenged individualistic research ethics by encouraging participants to share interview transcripts with others implicated in their narratives. From an Asian worldview, he explained, ethical responsibility extends beyond the individual participant to their wider relational network embedded in the story.

Lincoln also reflected on the structural constraints that complicate decolonial research practice, particularly institutional ethics frameworks shaped by white, individualist assumptions. He noted that long-standing relationships with participants, understood within Asian ontologies as foundations of trust, are often misread as coercive by ethics committees. To help bridge understanding, he reckoned kaupapa Māori research could serve as a crucial resource in navigating these tensions. Kaupapa Māori theory, he explained, has provided both conceptual grounding and institutional language to legitimise relational, non-Western research practices within Aotearoa universities (Smith 2017). This resonated with me, particularly in how Indigenous scholarship can create openings for Asian researchers, without collapsing distinct histories or struggles.

Lincoln described the ambivalent racial position that Asians occupy in Aotearoa, as we are simultaneously cast as perpetual foreigners and as model minorities. While acknowledging the value of celebrating cultural difference, he critiqued forms of boutique multiculturalism that exoticise Asian cultures while leaving Pākehā normativity intact. These frameworks, he argued, can obscure power relations and contribute to the pitting of Asian communities against Māori through narratives of hard work and merit. Drawing on the Chinese proverb about conflict benefiting a third party—'when the snipe and clam fight, the fisherman benefits'[3]—Lincoln highlighted how such divisions ultimately serve colonial interests rather than the communities involved. This metaphor stayed with me, as it named succinctly how racialised competition distracts from structural critique and undermines Māori-Asian solidarities.

For Lincoln, Te Tiriti o Waitangi is fundamentally about relationships and ethical responsibilities. He emphasised that Te Tiriti cannot be understood outside of relational obligations, including the responsibility of Asian communities to understand their place in Aotearoa and to uphold Māori tino rangatiratanga. While he does not primarily research with Māori communities, much of his work is oriented toward supporting Asian communities to engage ethically with Te Tiriti and to resist narratives that position them in opposition to Māori. He was led to this work by his own lived experiences, where Te Tiriti was considered a relationship between Māori and Pākehā alone (Dam 2024). Lincoln is now a facilitator for Tauiwi Tautoko, which is an educational intervention and community that supports tauiwi to enact their responsibilities as tangata Tiriti (www.tauiwitautoko.com). In this work, he draws on Asian values as a way to engage Asian communities in ethical relations with tangata whenua and Te Tiriti. He has done similar work with the New Zealand Chinese Association (see, e.g., www.paruru.nz). This prompted me to reflect more critically on my own responsibilities as a Filipino researcher, particularly the work required within Asian communities to counter colonial logics.

Lincoln reflected on an emerging tension in his thinking: namely, the limits of binary and adversarial ways of engaging with political differences. He expressed curiosity about how relational worldviews might allow us to live with tension between ideas, positions and communities, without defaulting to erasure, domination or false consensus. I left the conversation with a deeper appreciation for what he described as 'thinking slowly', an intellectual orientation that resists colonial demands for neatness and certainty, and instead embraces entanglement, responsibility and be(com)ing.

3.4 | Shemana Cassim

Positioning oneself comes naturally to Shemana, who identifies as a Sri Lankan first-generation migrant, as she predominantly conducts research with communities she has relational and cultural ties to (Muslim and Sri Lankan). Shemana's way of engaging with communities was learned from what/who she now respectfully calls her academic whakapapa including her mentors, teachers and elders. Her 'way of working' is, then, a combination of her cultural values (both as a Sri Lankan and as a Muslim), alongside the values learned from her academic whakapapa. The negotiation of insider–outsider positions within research—even within Asian communities of which we are part (or are racialised as such)—can be a complex task. In Aotearoa,

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we can become overly caught up in 'identity politics', spending more energy justifying who we are than giving effect to clarifying what the work is trying to achieve. When I shared my concerns as a Filipino student researching and speaking beyond Filipino communities, Shemana kindly noted that the legitimacy of conducting research with particular communities should not be assessed solely on the basis of one's identity. As she reflected, 'sometimes we find that we are busy justifying our position, that we tend to kind of overlook the importance of the actual work, you know, or what we are trying to achieve'. For her, the ethics of creating positive impact in communities and practising cultural safety are more paramount.

That said, she does not discount the value of reflexive exercises of positionality. For instance, they help her legitimise her position as a Sri Lankan researcher. She shared the art of 'taking that identity hat off and putting another one on' through her positionality as an 'insider to a particular strand of Muslim communities' but that she remains an outsider to other Muslim communities, as well as to other Sri Lankan communities, such as Sinhalese and Tamil communities. This awareness reminds her of the trust she needs to establish when working with communities with whom she has no prior relationships and who have experienced harm, including from researchers and Crown institutions. Importantly, she emphasised that this trust-building labour is still required, even when one is positioned as an insider because insiderhood is not partial and does not remove the need to build, maintain and remain accountable to trust. Further, within the discipline in which she is situated (i.e., psychology), the embedded assumption of neutral positionality has prompted her to advocate for greater reflection on privilege and cultural baggage.

In academia dominated by Anglo-colonial norms, Shemana encouraged us to build confidence in our cultural selves. This involves validating our 'unapologetic' cultural knowledge and heritage, as well as our relational ways of engaging with communities. It is about 'shifting the balance' to grow and legitimise our cultural strengths in the face of norms informed by colour-silence and objectivity. While she acknowledged the importance of responding to and critiquing racist rhetoric, she also found such engagement emotionally draining and exhausting, particularly when it involves 'politics of distraction' (Smith 2017). For her, this is where it becomes important to stay anchored in purpose and praxis rather than getting pulled into debates that do not move communities forward.

Given the ivory-tower nature of academia, she found 'armchair criticism' unconstructive when scholars are 'fighting with one another in papers' while having little involvement on the ground. We discussed a vision for research with Asian communities that recognises multiple forms of expertise, preferences, and ways of being. While some scholars focus on debating whether their projects have met Te Tiriti or decolonial criteria, which she saw as important work that has a place, she preferred to centre what she described as the work of 'repowering'. Repowering entails finding ways to move collectively through Indigenous and community-grounded knowledges after dismantling oppressive mainstream systems. It is about placing community interests at its core. She helped me realise that while there are 'activist-scholars' leading from the front, there is also significant value in staying back and doing the groundwork to support communities.

This commitment to repowering also came through in how Shemana described her role in relation to community struggles. What stood out to me was her clarity about what it means to show up without centring herself. She spoke about taking a back seat, approaching this work with humility, and being guided by what communities themselves are asking for. In practice, this has meant actively engaging with initiatives that communities are already driving, rather than initiating work on their behalf, and being willing to get her hands dirty in the everyday labour that sustains those efforts. At times, she described lending her institutional credibility when it could help community-led initiatives be taken more seriously, recognising that, in the current realities of academia and policy spaces, titles such as 'Dr' can open doors that might otherwise remain closed. However, she was careful to emphasise that this does not shift the locus of control. The community remains central, setting the aims and direction, while her role shifts depending on what is needed, whether that is to follow, support or, when asked, to step forward and voice concerns on behalf of the collective. Relatedly, she located this practice within a broader way of understanding research itself. Together with colleagues, she has been involved in articulating the idea of the community researcher as a scribe (Cassim et al. 2026), where research is understood not as extraction or ownership but as a form of service. Through this framing, the role of the researcher becomes one of documenting and working in alignment with community aspirations rather than producing knowledge that sits apart from them.

Remembering whakapapa (genealogy), including those who have produced scholarship before us and those whose thinking has shaped our own, is fundamental to Shemana's work. She sees herself as someone who helps pave the way for future generations through the work of ancestors and seniors, as she 'learns from the people who came before me and teaches forward to my students now'. I sensed her humility when she said, 'We can't change the world in a day. We can't change the world by ourselves either, right? All we can do is chip away at it, take baby steps, and that's where we work as a broader collective'. As subject experts, we may possess theoretical knowledge about how to combat racism and achieve liberation, but it is naïve to expect immediate uptake of our research findings when there has been little or no relationship-building with communities. When we discussed addressing racism and colonial mentalities within our communities, she noted: 'If you go in guns blazing and accuse people, pointing fingers and saying they are wrong, they're not going to listen to you. They're not going to change'. Indeed, meaningful change requires patience, humility, trust and sustained relational work.

The concept of 'balance' is in her mind when considering the pressing literature gap within Asian communities. Building on our earlier discussion about the inequitable power dynamics within academia that have marginalised our ways of knowing, she talked about the need to expand scholarship to areas that are less known, such as understanding our relationship with Māori and Indigenous-migrant solidarity. However, we must find ways to tell our stories beyond the diluted frameworks of 'diversity' and 'multiculturalism', which constrain our imagination

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and limit how we think about the unique challenges faced by diverse Asian communities and our heterogeneous relationships with one another. Across the kōrero, Shemana reframed positionality not as a gatekeeping test of identity but as a reflexive and relational practice oriented to collective praxis, cultural safety and community benefit.

3.5 | Minh Hieu Nguyen

Minh positions herself first and foremost as a Vietnamese. She spoke explicitly about being an 'imported Vietnamese' to Aotearoa, emphasising that Vietnam remains her home, while Aotearoa has become home for her children. Her research is fundamentally driven by a dynamic, transnational identity that bridges her Vietnamese homeland with her life in Aotearoa. By navigating the continuous movement between these diverse worlds, she grounds her scholarly practice in deep relational accountability and shared community responsibility. Listening to her, I reflected on how identity is not simply about where one lives, but about ongoing attachment and responsibilities to home and host countries. This transnational positionality deeply shapes how she understands identity, belonging and responsibility in research. Rather than claiming a stable or singular sense of place, Minh described herself as constantly moving between worlds and cultures: Vietnam and Aotearoa, academic and community, seniority and humility. Her research practice emerges from this movement, not despite it.

Relational orientation is central to Minh's research with communities in Vietnam. She repeatedly emphasised that her research is driven by a desire to support the community with whom she already has relationships. She puts relationship over methods (Nguyen et al. 2026). Her process starts 'informal first' through shared meals, drinks, fruit offerings and extended socialising. Minh described how trust must be cultivated slowly and patiently before meaningful research can occur. I was struck by her insistence that academic status, while respected in Vietnam, can become a barrier to truth-telling. She spoke about the specific challenges of engaging with Vietnamese communities back home as an Aotearoa-based researcher, where perceived privilege can influence these engagements. Because 'we have the chance to go overseas', we risk inflating our egos, assuming superiority and forgetting about the fundamentals of listening as an ethical act.

She noted how the high adherence to academic hierarchy in Vietnam may lead participants to 'tell you what makes you happy, not what is true'. Hearing this prompted me to reflect on how easily research can become extractive when relationships are rushed or hierarchies are left unexamined. For Minh, being a researcher-as-'learner' involves working through numerous reflexive tasks, recognising that we are not always the 'experts' and that our role is to listen to communities' stories, which have strengths of their own. Minh was clear that she does not speak on behalf of others. She said, 'It's hard for me to speak on someone's behalf', a statement that made me pause and reflect on how often academics are prompted to make broad claims about communities.

Minh's accounts of her fieldwork in the South of Vietnam illustrated how relational research must be responsive to the context. Through an example in rural farming communities, she described using drawing, storytelling and land-based research methods. In urban contexts shaped by political histories and post-war divisions between North and South Vietnam, relationship building requires a different kind of sensitivity. Minh spoke candidly about navigating distrust linked to regional identity, noting that people did not initially trust her. 'They don't know me…someone from the North, working overseas, coming to talk to them'. What enabled connection was not methodological expertise but shared humanity. She explained that trust emerged when she acknowledged collective loss: 'In the war, every mother bears the same wounds'. I found this moment particularly powerful, as it showed how relationality can open space for dialogue where political identities alone might foreclose it.

When discussing epistemology, Minh resisted the framing of objectivity versus subjectivity as a battle to be won. She did not see objectivity as entirely harmful, nor subjectivity as inherently emancipatory. Instead, she argued for a 'balance', suggesting some degree of objectivity is necessary to respect difference, while subjectivity is unavoidable in any human-centred research. For Minh, the more important question researchers should ask of themselves is not epistemological purity, but the 'why' of conducting particular research. She was explicit that her research is not driven by publication metrics, but by whether it produces tangible benefits for communities. She said, 'My research aim is not for publication—it is to make a real impact into the community'. This challenged me to reflect on how often research design is shaped by academic expectations rather than by what communities actually need. Where research is oriented toward generating impact, she argued, methods must emerge from community needs rather than pre-designed academic frameworks.

Minh also reflected on how Te Tiriti has indirectly shaped her research orientation in Aotearoa, particularly through her engagement with Māori social enterprise scholarship. She was careful to note that she has not worked 'on the ground' with Māori communities as participants yet; instead, she began with desk-based research because, as an Asian researcher, she felt a responsibility to 'learn more first' to avoid accidental disrespect or harm. I read this not as distance but a deliberate relational ethic: an acknowledgement that entry into Indigenous spaces carries obligations and that preparation can be a form of care.

From this work, Minh grappled with the politics of 'priority'. She recognised the ethical importance of equity while also cautioning that 'giving priority' can sometimes be felt as disrespectful when it positions people as deficient or in need of special treatment rather than recognising Māori as already holding their own authority and ways of doing things. What stayed with me was how she moved beyond categorial difference by foregrounding shared values: Māori enterprises, in her reading, are already grounded in collective responsibility and environmental care, and she connected this to Vietnamese practices of respecting land, rivers and mountains as life-giving relations, including rituals of gratitude to the 'spirit of the land'. For Minh, these resonances are not just interesting parallels; they reorient research toward social benefit: building common ground where Māori and Asian communities can meet each other with dignity, rather than hierarchy or competition.

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In reference to her point about researchers needing to 'collaborate rather than compete', she returned to the importance of unity, not as homogeneity or opposition to others but as collaboration across difference. She was clear that competition within academia undermines the collective effort to make society more just. Drawing on her relationships with mentors and colleagues across generations, she described scholarship as an intergenerational process of transmission and growth. For Minh, the role of the researcher is ultimately that of a connector and a scribe (Cassim et al. 2026), someone who helps communities retain their values, affirm their identities and speak to one another across difference. This work, she suggested, may not always produce immediate change, but it lays the relational groundwork necessary for more ethical and humane futures.

3.6 | Mohan Dutta

Mohan explicitly situated himself as an upper-caste, middle-class, cisgender heterosexual man, shaped by the Bengali left traditions of Kharagpur and the broader West Bengal context. He acknowledged that the unearned privileges associated with his caste, class, gender and heteronormative position place a responsibility on him to continually interrogate these structures of power. This ongoing self-reflection has informed his solidarity with working-class, Adivasi, anti-racist and queer movements, both through community organising and participation in left political struggles across India, the United States, Singapore and Aotearoa, the various spaces he has inhabited and engaged politically.

For Mohan, the way he understands his role as a researcher is through an active process of communication of 'meaning making, sense making, [and] interpretation' to construct the 'I'. It is important for him to locate himself before coming to define where he sees himself as part of broader communities and in relationship with Māori as Indigenous peoples. He reflected on the Bengal colonial context and his parents' mixed and upper-caste background, and their involvement in union and social movements (with opportunities that he could access but was also barred from) which shaped his upbringing. He carried these influences to Aotearoa as a tauiwi migrant of colour, who is now part of the progressive South Asian diaspora but remains connected to the Indian subcontinent and beyond.

He drew parallels between working with Indigenous groups in India (e.g., Adivasi) and working with Indigenous communities here. He prompted me to reflect on my 'position as a settler of colour, complicit in the colonial project, and at the same time bearing the harms of the colonial project, … [but seeking to form] solidarity, in dialogue with tangata whenua here in their struggles against settler colonialism'. By the 'colonial project', he was referring to the violence of white supremacy and dispossession that produces inequalities for Māori and perpetuates divide-and-rule situation between Māori and migrants (Ngata and Dutta 2023). As researchers situated within neoliberal structures, Mohan reminded me of our risk of being complicit with colonial processes if we continue to prioritise speaking English, fixate on high scholarly metrics and not find ways to nurture our diverse thriving.

Mohan was particularly keen to decentre whiteness in our research analysis; to do so, he suggested beginning with the naming of 'whiteness' and understanding its operation in knowledge production. Whiteness gains legitimacy through hegemonic values that are held up as universal, such as the individualisation and reductionism that reduce property into marked boundaries through which it can be extracted and owned. He cautioned against the normalisation of objectivity and positivism in research, where knowledge claims can seemingly be generated 'at a distance', as 'it is other cultures, other people that are to be colonised, that are to be studied and brought under the lens'. Positivism assumes we are 'neutral sites' and 'apolitical categories' but, in reality, we are deeply political.

Mohan and I discussed the 'seagull' phenomenon (Drew 2006), where researchers descend into communities, extract knowledge and exit, leaving disruption behind and offering little of value in return. Increasingly, seagull researchers can be found beyond positivist disciplines, including within cultural interpretivist studies (Smith 2012). Mohan observed that some funded research framed under the banner of 'critical studies' often has little impact on mobilising structural transformation. Research must not be a vehicle for personal advancement, nor should it reinforce white agendas. Instead, he encouraged researchers to be in struggle with communities, actively invested in translating research findings back to communities and engaging in public scholarship and activism. We cannot build careers as critical scholars while 'having absolutely nothing to say in public spaces and spaces that matter about genocide and ongoing settler colonial violence'.

Mohan quoted Graham Hingangaroa Smith (2017), 'show me the blisters on your hands', to emphasise 'we have to get our hands dirty, we have to get our bodies dirty, and we have to be in struggle'. Some of the ways he suggested that we can contribute as scholars include providing evidence through formal submissions, delivering public talks, educating our communities, participating in protests and organising collective action. His mode of engagement is one of public and, at times, unpopular stance-taking. He noted that his privileges afford him protections that many of his community collaborators do not have and that to stay silent from this location would be to let those privileges reproduce the colonial, authoritarian populist and white supremacist structures their shared work seeks to dismantle.

Mohan is the Director of the Center for Culture-Centered Approach to Research & Evaluation (CARE). He places marginalised communities at its core and employs participatory and culture-centred methodologies to develop community-driven communication solutions to build and sustain human health and well-being. In Aotearoa, Mohan's work is also informed by a commitment to honour Te Tiriti, where researchers actively support Māori to exercise tino rangatiratanga and where tauiwi work in solidarity within the kāwanatanga sphere. In academia settings, the performance of standing in for Te Tiriti 'in a palatable way' is sometimes seen as 'fashionable' and earns progressive credentials, but it is not equivalent to standing in resistance to state violence. To be genuinely in solidarity in the 'struggle to enact tino rangatiratanga', Mohan stressed that researchers cannot rely solely on Vision Mātauranga statements or other tick-box approaches. Struggles against sovereignty and

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oppression, he argued, cannot be co-opted into facile language of partnership. As migrants of colour living on Indigenous Māori lands, he advised us to 'listen to the voices of tangata whenua and to build spaces of listening'; otherwise, we risk perpetuating whiteness and racism, even as we claim marginality ourselves.

In the context of rising white supremacist attacks and attempts to sow division between migrant and Indigenous communities (Ngata and Dutta 2023), he reminded us of 'how urgent it is that we act with all our abilities and all the resources that we have around us to resist and challenge these'. This sometimes means being the 'unpopular' person who critiques the influence of whiteness, including its links to caste privilege and Hindutva ideology. It also involves calling out scholars—and reminding himself—who benefit from playing the 'diversity, equity, and inclusion' card to advance their own causes and mobility within existing structures while remaining complicit in the colonial project. When we are portrayed as 'model minorities' who pay taxes and are positioned as hardworking in contrast to racist depictions of Māori, we risk reinforcing the racialisation of Asians as fixed cultural essences.

Another crucial lesson I learned from Mohan is not to silo struggle in Aotearoa as merely a local issue but to connect it to the violence we witness overseas. This approach helps us remain vigilant to international dynamics and their influence on political developments here, reconnect with our home countries or the lands from which our ancestors migrated and critically locate our own positions and privileges in relation to the ongoing oppression of Indigenous peoples in Aotearoa.

4 | Discussion and Conclusion

One of the most grounding reminders from the tuakana–teina kōrero was the idea that we are still learning and that there is 'no blueprint or perfect path' (Fu and Azarmandi 2023), only an ongoing obligation to stay reflexive and responsive as contexts change. In that spirit, the 4R framework is not a checklist. It is an early-stage wayfinding tool that requires ongoing refinement, including input from researchers working outside of academia. It helps us make visible how racialisation (re)shapes our lives and those of our communities, how we might revise what research could be for, how relationality becomes an ethic rather than a practice of convenience and how reflexivity can move beyond self-description into accountability. Read together, the kōrero illustrate that me-search becomes meaningful when it changes how we relate, not only how we describe ourselves.

Positionality does not sit still—it shifts depending on relationship, place, time and the structural hierarchies we move through (Lam 2022). It was iterated across kōrero that me-search is, first, relationship-work. The *me* matters because it shapes how we enter, sustain and repair relationships; engage with the communities we belong to and conduct research with; and pursue structural transformation. This relational emphasis is more pronounced compared to some overseas framings of me-search, which can often lean toward individual self-narrative within the academy. Identity was described as evolving and context-dependent rather than a stable label that can be neatly *declared* in a methods section. This matters for Asian researchers in Aotearoa because the category is often treated as obvious, even though it contains different histories, migration pathways and relationships to Te Tiriti (Omura 2014; Roy et al. 2026). When 'Asian' is treated as a single, coherent identity, it can become an umbrella that creates visibility while also erasing internal differences, including minority-within-minority experiences and the uneven distribution of recognition across Asian communities. We must interrogate who is represented under the category of Asian, whose pain is made legible and whose knowledge is taken seriously within institutions. Keeping 'Asian' open, fractured and accountable is crucial, not only to capture a wide variety of voices but also in relation to understanding and enacting Te Tiriti responsibilities (Dam 2024; Omura 2014). The work of solidarity cannot be built on a category that obscures the uneven power dynamics within it.

Holding positionality as relational also creates space to hold home and host countries together rather than assuming research only happens within a single (national) context (Cassim et al. 2023; Fasavalu and Reynolds 2019). The kōrero returned to remembering ties with home countries, carrying layered identities and staying attentive to transnational responsibilities and struggles. This is another way in which me-search expands beyond the *me*: what we carry shapes how we show up for others through volunteering in community-organised work, writing policy submissions and leveraging our privileged position (as assumed experts) to speak out against local and global injustices. In this sense, shifting positionality is not only about how we are reading here but also about what we carry from elsewhere, what we remain accountable to across distance and how our research choices can either flatten or honour those complexities.

We learned that relational positionality requires an honest accounting of power (Crawford and Langridge 2022). Academic status can shape whose/which knowledge is taken seriously and can position university credentials as prestige, even when community-grounded expertise is central to doing ethical research. Several kōrero highlighted privilege and complicity alongside marginalisation, noting that colonial processes can marginalise us while also presenting us with institutional access and legitimacy (Waitoki et al. 2024). This is an uncomfortable but necessary part of reflexivity. It asks what we do with our platforms and whether we use them to redirect attention and resources towards less-heard voices, resist extractive practices and stay connected to community struggle rather than professional advancement.

Humility sits within this orientation, not as self-erasure but as a relational stance that makes learning possible and reduces the risk of harm. The kōrero emphasised patience and slow relationship-building, reframing change as intergenerational and collective rather than individual and immediate. Hierarchy is something to be actively navigated rather than ignored. When the academic role is read as authority, researchers must work harder to listen, slow down and create conditions where people can speak without managing the researcher's expectations. In this way, humility becomes part of ethical method, shaping how we offer wero without trampling on mana, how we hold tension without defaulting to performance and how we remain

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accountable to the people who have carried knowledge before us and alongside us.

Community interest must be the anchor, not an afterthought. The kōrero emphasised that research needs to stay close to communities, not only by including community voices but by being in struggle with communities and accounting for relationships within the methodology (Lee-Morgan 2024; Ngata and Dutta 2023). This reframes what conventionally counts as research rigour. It is not only about the elegance of our arguments or the sophistication of our theory but also about whether the work is useful, accountable and connected to community priorities (Rata et al. 2021). When community interest is centred, the question shifts from 'is this publishable' to 'who does this serve and who carries the costs'. This is where a liberation orientation comes through (Lee et al. 2023), a refusal to treat research as separate from the conditions communities are trying to survive and transform. In this framing, me-search is not only introspection but a way of clarifying what kind of work we are willing to be responsible for and what we are unwilling to reproduce.

Armchair criticism can become unproductive when scholars fight on papers, critiquing each other's work, while remaining distant from the community realities on the ground. This does not mean theory and critique do not matter. It means critique has to be tethered to practice and to relationships. It asks what we build, with whom and what we leave behind once a project finishes, including whether we return the learning back to communities in ways that they consider beneficial. Refusing disengagement, then, is not simply about being 'active' for its own sake. It is about staying oriented to collective benefit, maintaining long-term commitments and using research as one tool among many in the wider work of solidarity, survival and transformation (Rata et al. 2021; Smith 2012).

A key tension we reflected on was how researchers position ourselves in relation to 'community' and how this positioning shapes the relational dynamics of our work. While some sharings emphasise being in service to community initiatives, this raises fundamental questions about who is being referred to as 'community' and whether it is a clearly bounded or internally coherent entity. In practice, researchers are sometimes simultaneously part of, and apart from, the communities they engage with, occupying positions shaped by shared identities, institutional affiliations, existing relationships and differing forms of knowledge and authority. This complicates interpretations in which 'community' is assumed to hold complete knowledge while the researcher remains a passive recipient. Attending to this tension strengthens the argument that 'me-search' is not solely grounded in the pre-existing grassroots knowledge of either entity (which may not be readily separable) but is instead engendered through ongoing, relational engagement involving reflexivity, accountability and co-construction.

Trust building was described as labour. It is ongoing, it is not guaranteed and it cannot be replaced by identity claims or good intentions. Importantly, the kōrero affirmed that trust work is required irrespective of whether a researcher is positioned as an insider or not (Yip 2024). Insiderhood can be partial and situational. It can open doors, but it does not remove responsibility to build, maintain and remain accountable to trust. This is where cultural responsibility becomes more than a principle. It becomes a daily practice of how we show up, how we listen, how we manage power and how we respond when communities set boundaries (Curtis et al. 2019).

Relational responsibilities to Te Tiriti were not framed as a compliance task but as an ethical orientation that shapes what we do and how we relate (Rae et al. 2025). For Asian researchers, this includes resisting the comfort of being included as 'diversity' yet not spoken to as Tiriti-responsible people (Ngata and Dutta 2023). It also includes learning to form solidarity in ways that do not default to white proximity or a desire to be seen as the 'good migrant' (Ngata and Dutta 2023). When the principle of 'relationships first' is taken seriously, Te Tiriti engagement becomes less about proving virtue and more about building mana-enhancing relationships, listening carefully to tangata whenua and refusing the divide-and-rule logics that position Māori and Asian communities as separate, competing groups with no obligations to one another (Dam 2024; Rata and Al-Asaad 2019).

At the heart of race-centred research is the decentring of whiteness in knowledge production, the challenging of white assumptions and the questioning of the discipline-level pull toward neutrality, objectivity and positivism (Dam 2024; Tan and Tan 2025). These norms can make whiteness feel ordinary and unmarked, while racialised scholars are expected to justify ourselves or to carry cultural labour without structural change. This is where conscientisation was described as a longer term practice (Smith 2017). Conscientisation here is not simply learning a new language. It is learning how to notice colour-silence (Tatum 2017), including within ourselves and our research teams, and then acting differently.

To envisage a different way of challenging the current status quo, we chose to refuse Western philosophies as the sole intellectual home and, instead, building from our cultural selves, drawing on the wisdom of our ancestors and recognising Asian philosophies as legitimate resources for research practice. This invitation also required naming how our ways of knowing have been silenced through colonisation, assimilation and racism; not fully erased but pushed to the margins and treated as less credible within Eurocentric institutions. Cultural grounding, in this sense, was described as methodological and ethical, shaping how we understand responsibility, care and the limits of individualism in research. Cultural resources gain their force when they are paired with accountability in Te Tiriti contexts rather than used to bypass them. Here, Indigenous scholarship was described as offering a form of ethical proximity for Asian researchers: a closeness that enables learning and guidance while leaving space for difference in histories, struggles and authority (Dam 2024). This orientation also opens transnational pathways for learning through relational ties with communities across the regions.

4.1 | Ongoing Development of the 4R Framework

The 4R framework is offered in a spirit of usefulness and sharing. It is not presented as a complete theory of me-search, nor as a checklist that can be 'completed' and set aside for Asian researchers. Instead, our intention is to offer an adaptable tool that can

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help researchers find direction, name what is often left implicit and return to reflexive questions as relationships, responsibilities and contexts shift over time. For that reason, we see 4R as a tool of its time: useful for current conversations on race-centred positionality in Aotearoa, including those shaped by Vision Mātauranga and Tiriti accountability, but neither comprehensive nor complete.

The 4R tool builds on existing 'me-search' frameworks (Milner et al. 2025; Yip 2024) by foregrounding the interrelated dimensions of racialisation, restructuring, relationality and reflexivity, which may resonate with the experiences of Asian diaspora in other settler-colonial contexts. The unique context of being an Asian researcher in Aotearoa and of responding to the call to build whakawhanaungatanga with Indigenous peoples (Rata and Al-Asaad 2019) are integrated into our 'me-searching' as we consider our responsibilities within Indigenous–tauiwi relationships. This adds an important layer to existing reflexivity frameworks that tend to prioritise introspection on the self and one's relationship with communities to which one belongs, by situating these reflections within ongoing colonial influences, complicities and our responsibilities to resist them. We invite further dialogue with Asian, Indigenous and other racialised researchers overseas engaged in 'me-search' to explore the applicability of the 4R framework across different contexts and to consider how it might be expanded to more fully account for the conditions of colonialism, racialisation and oppression that influence how we conduct ethical research.

Although 4R as a me-search tool is informed by comprehensive literature research, including academic and community outputs (Aquino et al. 2025), this paper remains primarily an academic conversation among university-based researchers. That location shapes both what the 4R tool can currently offer and what it cannot yet do. Naming this distance between researchers and communities matters because a framework can critique extractive research while still remaining at some distance from the struggles it hopes to support. The value of 4R should not be settled through academic peer review alone; its relevance to Asian researchers working outside academia needs to be further validated through community-led conversations involving a wide range of citizens, including grassroots activists, migrant workers, service providers, faith communities and community members. We invite communities to evaluate the extent to which the framework is applicable to their research, identify any limitations, consider areas where it risks becoming performative and suggest ways it could better account for on-the-ground realities.

Community accountability would ask more than whether researchers can answer questions about Vision Mātauranga or the 4R Appendix (A) well on paper. It would ask whether 4R helps shift research relationships, build trust, redistribute attention and resources and support research that communities recognise as useful, mana-enhancing and accountable to Māori and to the diverse Asian communities the framework seeks to speak with. The framework is not the end-goal, and we expect that some researchers will need to go beyond its boundaries depending on their disciplinary location, community relationships and transnational or intra-Asian dynamics that the umbrella category 'Asian' can flatten. Future research could, therefore, invite critique and iterative refinement of the questions, including what needs to be added, removed or reframed when 4R is used in different contexts.

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Ethics Statement

The study received ethics approval from the Faculty of Māori and Indigenous Studies at the University of Waikato (FMIS_7/07_12).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

[1] Five categories of research set out by MBIE include research with no specific Māori component; research specifically relevant to Māori; research involving Māori; Māori-centred research; and Kaupapa Māori research.

[2] Vision mātauranga themes include Indigenous innovation (economic growth); Taiao (environmental sustainability); Hauora/Oranga (health and social wellbeing); and Mātauranga (Indigenous knowledge).

[3] 鷸蚌相爭，漁翁得利

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Appendix A

Racialisation: Centring Race, Racism and Racialisation

- How can we embrace subjectivity while challenging the notion that our identities can and should be separated from research?
- How does whiteness operate in academia, including its obsession with 'equality', 'objectivity' and 'colour-blindness' in research?
- How are we consciously resisting white racial framing in our understanding of the social world? How does our work challenge the status quo of Asians as model minorities?
- What is our racial position as Asians within the Pākehā–Māori racial hierarchy in Aotearoa? How does our research contribute to transforming this hierarchy?
- How does Asian racialisation function within the broader context of historical and ongoing settler colonialism? How do we address the racism that perpetuates inequities for both Māori and Asian communities?

Restructuring: Beyond Diversity and Multiculturalism

- How are Asians racialised through contemporary discourses like 'diversity' and 'multiculturalism'? How do these frameworks impede meaningful relationship-building with Māori?
- How do governmental organisational policies that proclaim to promote diversity and inclusion inadvertently downplay systemic racism?
- How do we fit within the discourse of diversity and democratic equality?
- How do we unpack the colonial lies about our belonging in Te Tiriti? (That Te Tiriit is irrelevant to us)
- What are we learning about the contextual and historical background of Te Tiriti?
- If the government shows no interest in building mechanisms to enhance cross-cultural learning and Te Tiriti understanding, can we afford to remain apathetic?
- What are the guiding values of Matike Mai for our research?

Relationality: Relational Positionality

- How do we practice whakawhanaungatanga with each other?
- How can we embrace whakawhanaungatanga and become comfortable sharing our pepeha?
- How can we use radical love to guide our efforts in connecting, educating and researching with our communities?
- What can we learn from different generations of Asian communities?
- How do we conscientise our communities to recognise and respect the place of tangata whenua?
- How can we engage our communities in this process of conscientisation? (Note to move away from individualism or protecting self-interest)
- How can our research contribute to empowering communities to critically engage with and deconstruct colonial mentality?
- How do we build ongoing relationships with communities even after the research project ends?
- How can we identify and confront the racial prejudices within our communities toward tangata whenua?
- What is our positionality in relation to the other researchers on the project team and the communities being studied?
- How is our positionality constructed in a relational way?
- How might I be 'read' by others within research interactions?
- How does your research offer relational care? What contribution can your research offer to participants and communities, particularly to Indigenous and minoritised groups?
- What necessary learning is required to enhance your relational positioning?
- What relational strategies could we utilise to conscientise our communities? (link to radical love)
- How does our research increase capacity for Māori and Asians across all phases of research (design, analysis and dissemination)?
- What is our relationship with tangata whenua?
- If we understand that Te Tiriti provides the basis for our safe residence in Aotearoa, what are our obligations in recognising Māori sovereignty and honouring the Treaty?

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- Where can we locate meaningful connections between Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Asian aspirations within research?
- Where can we find intersections between Māori and ourselves through colonial history
- How do we connect our whakapapa with the colonial history that our ancestors faced?
- What are our interconnected struggles? This is not a suggestion to flatten our differences.
- How do we resist colonial narratives that drive competition and polarisation between Māori and Asian communities?
- How does our research address instances of lateral violence between our communities and other Indigenous and ethnic groups?
- As we reflect on the similarities between the shared values of Asian and Māori communities, as well as their colonial and racial struggles, how can we commit to decolonial solidarity despite differences in cultural, political and historical lived experiences?
- In what instances are our communities weaponised against Māori to prevent us from building meaningful relationships? What are the solutions to this zero-sum game?
- How can we foster solidarity by speaking out with, rather than for, Māori?
- How does your research create mutual benefits for Māori and Asian communities?

Reflexivity and Decolonisasian

- What is our whakapapa, and in what ways does it guide our ways of knowing and our approach to research?
- What do Asian philosophies inform us about relationality and ethical responsibility to our communities?
- How can we cultivate a secure sense of cultural identity and transparently acknowledge our positionality in the work we do?
- What steps are we taking to decolonise our research and conscientise our minds?
- Are we actively drawing from the knowledge of our cultures and Global South epistemologies in our understanding of the social world?
- Are we reading and citing scholarly work from Māori and Asian scholars, the often less heard voices in academia? See citational practice
- What role does 'power' play in your research?
- What can we do to discern and unpack the white racial frame within ourselves, our communities and our institutions?
- How can we avoid falling into the trap of adopting a positionality that becomes essentialist or static?
- How do our demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, class and LGBTQ + identity), political and ideological stances, and worldviews shaped by our social experiences influence how we interpret our positionality? (Intersectionality)
- Who are we before we are tangata Tiriti? Who are we in kāwanatanga sphere? Questions remain to be explored in Matike Mai vision.
- What is the history of Asian migration to Aotearoa?
- What steps are we taking to ensure our histories, as Asian New Zealanders, are remembered in Aotearoa?
- What steps are we taking to amplify counter-stories to those who erase Asian narratives?
- How do we, as Asians, engage in decolonial research? (to understand the mechanism of racialisation; to become familiar with our own knowledge)
- How does our research engage with the political goals of decolonisation?
- How do we resist assimilation?
- How do we 'practice in the presence of history'?

Appendix B

Reflexivity

Pātai 1: Ko wai mātou? Who are we, and how do we position ourselves in research with Asian communities?

Racialisation

Pātai 2: How do we come to understand our racialised selves and communities? How do we challenge the epistemologies of whiteness such as 'objectivity' and 'colour-blindness' and embrace 'subjectivity' in research?

Restructuring

Pātai 3: How are Asians racialised through contemporary discourses like 'diversity' and 'multiculturalism'? How do these frameworks impede meaningful relationship-building with Māori? What are the guiding values of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Matike Mai for our research?

Relationality

Pātai 4: How do we practice whakawhanaungatanga with each other including with Māori and Asians? How does our research create mutual benefits for Māori and Asian communities?

Reflexivity

Pātai 5: How do we, as Asians, engage in decolonial and anti-racist research? How can we engage our communities in the process of conscientisation to resolve colonial mentality and lateral violence?

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