A Māori Approach to Starting Research from Where You Are

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In the summer of 2020, a plastic pollution advocacy group in Aotearoa (New Zealand) emailed me (Max) to inquire about anticolonial methods for working with plastic pollution. They said the approach was new to them. I thought that was odd, since Aotearoa-based researcher Tina Ngata (Ngāti Porou) was leading investigations and approaches to plastic pollution from an Indigenous, specifically Māori, perspective. It was clear that the NGO did not know Ngata's work, so was not learning from it or building alongside it. This special series in *Catalyst* about citational politics and the power relations was an ideal time to showcase Ngata's work.

But to be clear, Ngata's erasure as an expert does *not* stem from a lack of citable work—ignorance of local, Indigenous people and their expertise is because of colonial relationships to place, knowledge, and genocide. In the *Journal of Radical Librarianship*, settler authors Jane Anderson and Kimberly Christen write that, "authorship [is] both a site of colonial power and as one of settler colonialism's flexible legal devices for maintaining control and possession of knowledge upon Indigenous lands, even as those lands are subjected to projects of expropriation" (2019, 123). They urge readers to "pay closer attention to the property that research [and attribution of that research] makes, who benefits from this property, and how colonial proprietary relations are normalized through the various lives that this property goes on to have in social memory, as well as in libraries and archives," and Google scholar (2019, 136).

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From these open access pages in *Catalyst*, we hope this interview: 1) is cited; 2) helps dissolve alibis for ignorance by being findable, attributed, and citable in dominant academic spaces; 3) steers conversations about epistemological pathways towards place-based, right relations; 4) clearly shows that knowing things and citing things is lovely, but the real work is in the doing.

Max Liboiron (ML): Tina, how would you start thinking about plastic pollution from where you are in a good way?

Tina Ngata (TN): From a Māori worldview, “starting where you are,” as a principle, is encapsulated in the concept of *whakapapa*. This highlights the primacy of relationships in everything we do. It means that every concept has distinctive relationships that define it, relationships that extend out to place and time. As an underpinning principle for the Māori worldview, *whakapapa*, the acknowledgment and building of relationships is an extremely sacred concept. Starting where you are is therefore pivotal for both understanding your distinct colonial context, as well as the basis upon which to grow relationships of integrity in other contexts.

Working within Aotearoa means that whatever region or township you are working in requires you to start with understanding the distinct relationships for that place and building out from there. It can also mean exploring the genealogy of your issue for that local community. Take plastics for example – has anyone come along before you to do research in this area and if so, what was that experience like for the people of that community? Is the very issue of plastics loaded with trauma for them? Researchers tend to treat each new project as if it’s a fresh experience for everyone involved, when the very experience of being researched has a *whakapapa* – a timeline and genealogy – of its own for most Indigenous communities and we remember poor practice. If you are taking an anti-colonial approach this also means understanding your own positionality within these relationships – how did you come to be where you are? What power relationships are present? All of these things can be considered good practice for “starting where you are.”

ML: So, what is happening in different parts of Aotearoa? Who would you start those conversations to build relationships with? Where are some starting places?

TN: There has been and continues to be some pretty amazing work going on around decolonizing plastic pollution in Aotearoa. Some of the key initiatives and groups are:

- [Para Kore](#), a Māori-led “zero waste organization with a kaupapa based on *whakapapa* to Papatūānuku and expressed through an experienced and skilled team who are passionate about, and committed to, achieving a zero waste Aotearoa.” They have been decolonizing perspectives on waste and plastic pollution since 2011 now, work with

423 Māori communities around the country and won the 2016 Energy Globe award for their efforts.

- The [PURE 2018 tour](#), which was a collaboration between scientists, Māori and Pacific peoples, universities, and Māori/Pacific NGOs that wove together education, youth and Indigenous leadership, [Western science](#), and discussion of solutions.
- [Waka hourua](#) (ocean canoes) are working with local schools and communities to learn about plastic pollution from a Māori cultural basis as Tāngata Moana (Ocean Peoples). This includes cleanup efforts, habitat impact assessments and trawls.
- [Toimata Foundation](#) is a sustainability education organization that works with mainstream and Māori immersion schools to foster connections between people and place, and responsiveness to the environment. Their guiding principles lead all of their education, including that of plastics pollution, to take a decolonial (Māori centered) approach.
- [Aotearoa Impacts and Mitigation of Microplastics \(AIM2\)](#) is a national research program to determine the impacts of microplastics in New Zealand. This includes work with Iwi Māori around the impacts of microplastic contamination upon taonga and ecosystems.
- And all of the many, many Māori communities around the country who incorporate zero waste into their food sovereignty programs.

ML: And of course, you! Your work on plastic pollution and colonialism has been crucial to—even foundational to—how we think about plastic and colonialism in CLEAR. I first “met” you when you were previously blogging as [“The Non-plastic Māori”](#) and I know you have led or been involved in many of the initiatives you just mentioned, like leading the PURE 2018 tour. I think both the content of what you do, talking about pollution and waste as an issue of ongoing colonialism, as well as the way you do it—in partnership and with boots on the ground, is a model we strive for—that I strive for, anyhow. And you’ve been doing it a long time. I’ve been watching your work for years and it’s been interesting to see how your path is building, nuancing, branching.

TN: That’s quite mutual! It was our friend Anna Cummins from 5Gyres who introduced us right? I’ve followed your work since then and have been a big fan.

ML: Yes! Likewise. What are some of the lessons you’ve learned between when you started and how about the relationships between plastics, colonialism, consumption, state pollution laws, and other relationships?

TN: Oh, that's been an interesting journey and one that can be tracked through [my blog](#) content. I started off very practical and focused on one thing – getting the weight of my plastic waste down, and picking up as much as I could from the beach to grow my “negative waste count.” My blog, in the early days, was full of reflections on divesting plastics, shopping tips and recipes for plastic-free living. It was very much focused on my personal waste prevention and management.

You often hear the term “we have to turn the problem off at the tap” – which means preventing it at the source. So, whether it's because you want to scale up your impact, or whether you are looking for the “tap”, you inevitably wind up looking at the role of policies – who is making them, who is influencing them, and who is benefitting/suffering from them. At the time we had a lot of issues with oil companies along our coastline and it was easy to identify the same players, using the same tricks, and utilizing the same dynamics for their own gain.

I came to realize very early on that plastic pollution, like climate change, was just another form of colonization upon our bodies and territories: an uninvited intrusion driven by people with a supreme sense of entitlement. This meant, for me, that “turning it off at the tap” didn't mean changing policy as it does for most, it meant exposing, and dismantling, the racist and imperialist nature of plastics pollution, just as we must expose and dismantle racist and imperialist structures in general. So, my blog has, for years now, been focused upon these issues.

ML: Do you have a sense of what some of the anti-colonial or decolonial understandings of plastic pollution coming out of these projects?

TN: I should probably start by clarifying what I see to the different between those two terms. When I speak to decolonial (and reindigenizing) practice I'm referring to analysis that seeks to understand the influence of colonialism and then reframes it from an Indigenous perspective. When I re-indigenize the framing of plastic pollution, it leads me to understanding plastic as a disruptor of whakapapa – which is huge in Te Ao Māori (the Māori world). Being an endocrine disruptor, plastic pollution has the power to affect hormones and reproductive cycles. As the core binding concept of our world, starting the conversation from the point of whakapapa (genealogical relationships) is much more meaningful.

Plastic is also a disruptor of mahinga kai (natural food systems). We love our kai (food), and we love growing families. So, these two points really make our people sit up and pay attention.

Some of the really important discussions Para Kore have driven revolve around what it means to really manaaki (host) visitors at gatherings. Hosting people is a

point of pride for Māori, and so recentring the discussion around waste to whether we are using localized, unprocessed, quality food as a mark of love for our guests and pride in our hosting skills. Jacqui Forbes (CE and founder of Para Kore) has been an incredible leader in this field of growing relevant discussions and approaches to waste pollution from a Maori perspective.

These are all powerful understandings that resonate a lot more for our own communities, but importantly, when these approaches are taken, and the relationships are grown with integrity, then the culturally centered solutions start to flow.

From an anti-colonial perspective, plastic pollution demands us to analyze and dismantle the harmful systems and perspectives that allow it to proliferate. This requires a focus on the international, trans-national, regional and domestic systems of colonial power that not only inform the problem, but also shape our responses to the problem. Anti-colonial science demands that we understand the coloniality of the economy that drives plastic waste, as well as the coloniality that drives science and the NGO sector that responds to the problem of plastic waste.

ML: How does research, including academic research, fit into this? I know we've had discussions about how research is often not the answer. It's simply not needed. Can you expand on the complexities of research, colonialism, accountability, and anticolonialism. Super easy, right?

TN: Haha – sure, not complex at all. Coloniality sits in the default space of science and policy, and there are pervasive assumptions about their legitimacy and authority. In an echo of the Doctrine of Discovery, which denied our rights, our humanity and our intelligence, Indigenous peoples are constantly hearing of “new discoveries” about the nature of the universe and even about ourselves that we have always known to be true, but were always told that we were wrong. Racist perspectives have generally framed our arts as “crafts”, our genealogical narratives as “myths”, our science as “mystical wisdom” and in none of these cases was a lack of knowledge the problem, but rather it was racist beliefs within the science – or scientism - that never respected our ways, and a lot of that is still present.

An anticolonial approach requires science that takes into account the role that imperialism and racism has played in the science sector as we know it today. The Enlightenment was framed by racists and imperialists, and their philosophies continue to underpin modern western scientific theory. Science has functioned to legitimize imperial expansion (James Cook is an excellent example of this, both in Canada and here in Aotearoa). Racist, imperial science has been used to legitimize the genocidal logic of colonial governments around the world. So, science and

colonialism are very much intertwined, and we have only just started the journey of de-colonizing and de-imperializing the dominant science regimes.

Entitlement and extraction mentality are foundational to colonial thinking – and when that manifests in science it looks like researchers assuming their questions are valid, assuming a level of intellectual authority, assuming their practice is safe, and assuming the right to take from Indigenous knowledge and science for the “betterment of humanity.” There are common colonial fictions such as colonialism is beneficial, and necessary, and provides equal benefits for all citizens – but we know this isn’t true in general, and similarly, in the context of science, we can’t assume these things. These presumptions are so deeply embedded in dominant science practice that it requires intentionality to avoid extracting further from communities, even by Indigenous scholars. We need to constantly check whether the research is necessary, whose questions are we seeking to answer, and how we might continually center communities in our practice.

That’s why I’ve been working with various United Nations (UN) agencies to secure our rights not only in regard to plastic pollution, but also in regards to the science and solutions surrounding plastic pollution. Addressing scientism is not always something fixed with “more research” or even “better research” – it can be as simple as getting out of the way of Indigenous scientists and communities who already have the answers but have just experienced colonial barriers to implementing them.

ML: Wow. It’s like you’re singing my song. Even though we face different forms of colonialism, that really resonates here in Canada, and I bet Indigenous people in other places in the world are nodding their heads, too. How has the specific kind of colonialism in Aotearoa impacted plastic pollution and research there? What is different there that, say, wouldn’t work in Newfoundland and Labrador, where I work?

TN: Without knowing too much about Newfoundland and Labrador’s Indigenous political history, I think I can just say that our Treaty, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, is a very distinct agreement that created a space for Non-Māori to be here in Aotearoa. It’s often related to as the “first immigration document.” I like to consider it as the Pākehā (European) tenancy agreement. Pākehā wrote it, and Pākehā breached it before the ink was dry, and they continue to breach it to this day – we have to be the most forgiving landlords ever. That document also affirms our pre-existing rights to abundant lands and territories and outlines a power relationship for how these things would be managed. It is *meant* to be observed and understood by all Crown employees (which includes researchers for Crown Research Institutes and University research centers). Unfortunately, however, it has rarely been understood or recognized. That is changing now though – there is a lot of good work underway that makes Treaty responsiveness, and authentic approaches to

working with Māori a measurable and accountable requirement in order to get research funding. That's a good thing for all involved – when our Treaty partners understand the Treaty as the source of their rights in Aotearoa, everything becomes easier.

ML: Right. That's part of "starting where you are." So, what are you working on now? What can we look forward to next?

TN: I'm working on the AIM² study, addressing microplastics in Aotearoa – and I'm specifically looking at frameworks for understanding the roles of Imperialism, Indigenous rights and our Treaty history in the context of that research. I'm also working on a trawling project for waka hourua (ocean voyaging canoes) and am embarking on work around the Doctrine of Discovery as it manifests in environmental racism in Aotearoa. I recently published a book on the Doctrine of Discovery in Aotearoa and am busy turning that into a podcast series.

ML: Oooh. Give us the sites!

TN: You can find me on www.tinangata.com. My podcast is available on Spotify and most other podcast sites under the title, "What a Load of Colony." I have a couple of papers on waste colonialism out for peer review at the moment so hopefully they'll be out soon and a few more by the end of the year. Busy times!

Author Bios

Tina Ngata is a Ngati Porou mother of two from the East Coast of Te Ika a Maui. Her work involves advocacy for environmental, Indigenous and human rights. This includes local, national and international initiatives that highlight the role of settler colonialism in issues such as climate change and waste pollution, and promote Indigenous conservation as best practice for a globally sustainable future.

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