

Journal of Global Indigeneity

50 reasons why there are no Māori in your science department

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Journal of Global Indigeneity

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Vol.6, Issue 2, 2022

1-10

<https://www.journalofglobalindigeneity.com>

Abstract

This article aims to provide insight into the reasons why there are very few Māori in science departments in New Zealand's universities. It is a personal, somewhat cheeky, reflection of my own time in science departments. It is also part of my contribution to the debate surrounding the "Listener Letter" and was inspired by reading Professor Alice Te Punga Somerville's *Two Hundred and Fifty Ways to Start an Essay about Captain Cook* and Jack Remiel Cottrell's *Reasons why I called in sick rather than go to the mihi whakatau for new employees last Friday*.

Keywords

racism, science, Indigenous, higher education

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Introduction

"Why are there no Māori in our science department?" is a question I often get asked by well-meaning non-Māori scientists. I often try to coax them towards some inward reflection, but the reality is that there is a very long list of reasons. This list touches on some of those reasons. Professor Chelsea Watego, in reference to a tweet about the lack of Black people in certain university departments, said that "Those absences tell a story, and it isn't one of Black lack but white violence" (Watego, 2020). The reasons I present here are also not about our lack of ability to be scientists, we did navigate across Te Moana nui a Kiwa after all. Instead, here I encourage people to think about the workplace environment they are expecting us to exist in.

My list is written, in part, as a reflection of my first postdoctoral fellowship in the School of Biological Sciences at the University of Auckland. I finished my PhD as a slightly naïve, young Māori scientist in 2018 and then left the School of Biological Sciences in 2021 with my eyes wide open. I was relieved that I was no longer in the same department as two senior professors, who authored the ‘Listener Letter’, which I discuss below and who subsequently used the privacy act and lawyers to gain access to my emails.

Several formative things happened during my first postdoctoral fellowship; I finally had the opportunity to work with other Indigenous scholars. I met a wonderful Fijian higher education scholar Dr Sereana Naepi and through her I was beginning to have the language to describe and understand my own experiences. My first postdoctoral fellowship gave me space to engage in deeper, more critical thinking rather than focusing on the environmental factors which enhance the growth of a very specific type of algae (which was my PhD topic). For me, it was the beginning of unlearning, questioning and critiquing everything that I had learnt in my very white and colonial education in New Zealand universities.

During my first postdoctoral fellowship, six senior Māori academics laid a complaint with the Ministry of Education about institutional racism at Waikato University. Then there were calls for racism to be addressed at other institutions including, Unitec Institute of Technology and the University of Otago. An open letter was then penned by 37 Māori professors calling for a national review of racism at all universities. I was targeted by white supremacists within and outside of the university system. Vexatious complaints were made against me to my employer and I had to file a harassment order with the police.

Organising a response to complaints about institutional racism at Waikato University was one of my first forays into the world of academic activism. I along with my colleagues Professor Joanna Kidman, Associate Professor Reremoana Theodore and Dr Sereana Naepi, organised an open letter in support of the six Māori academics who penned the complaint to the Ministry of Education. In only three days, the letter was signed by nearly 7000 academics, scholars, and community members from both Aotearoa and overseas. I painstakingly worked with a team of volunteers to manually transfer every individual signatory’s name to the open letter. I had a three-month-old baby at the time, and I barely slept for a few days. I felt like I had drifted into an alternative state; barely functioning, unable to think but also, felt close to my tīpuna (ancestors). I was inspired by both an outpouring of global support and that so many people were standing collectively in the fight against racism in higher education.

And then there was the ‘Listener Letter’ (see, Clements et al. 2021). This was a letter to the editor published in the New Zealand Listener, written by seven professors from the University of Auckland. In their letter they expressed their outrage and perhaps their white fragility about the government’s suggested changes to the New Zealand’s National Certificates of Educational Achievement (NCEA) curriculum. Their short, un-peer-reviewed and ill-informed letter attempted to “defend” science from suggested parity with mātauranga Māori. They suggested that “science itself does not colonise” and

“Indigenous knowledge [...] falls short of what we can define as science itself” (Clements et al. 2021).

This blatantly racist attack on mātauranga felt very close to home for me and continues to impact me on a very visceral level. This was in part because these professors were my “colleagues”. They were all employed by the same university as me, two were in my department and one of them was my dean at the time. As a Māori scientist, they were attacking my very existence. They were erasing the rich depth of scientific knowledge Māori hold and they were ignoring the colonial history of science. There have been many powerful and clinical dissections of the fallacies, violence and arrogance contained in the letter (see Ngata, 2021; Stewart, 2021; Waitoki, 2022), which I take immense pleasure in quoting at length when I use the ‘Listener Letter’ to teach about racism in science. The present article is one of my contributions to the “debate”. It was inspired by reading Professor Alice Te Punga Somerville’s *Two Hundred and Fifty Ways to Start an Essay about Captain Cook* (Te Punga Somerville, 2020) and Jack Remiel Cottrell’s *Reasons why I called in sick rather than go to the mihi whakatau for new employees last Friday* (Cottrell, 2020).

50 reasons why there are no Māori in your science department

1. Because of Kendall, Garth, Michael, Douglas, Robert, Elizabeth, and John.
2. Because of racism.
3. Because your department is full of dusty dinosaurs who don’t believe our tīpuna knew science. Like we navigated across the biggest ocean without science.
4. Because how would you like to be the token Māori, a space-invader, an immediate outsider, in a department full of people who don’t think like you or value the same things you do. We aren’t on the same page, let alone the same waka.
5. Because you have no understanding of the true history of science. Science as a tool of colonisation. Science as a weapon used to displace, oppress, and murder Indigenous people.
6. Because we don’t want to help you superficially gain access to Māori communities and knowledge when your intentions are ambiguous at best. Have you heard of the Tohunga Suppression Act (1907)? Do you know whose stolen land you are standing on? Have you read Decolonising methodologies?
7. Because we don’t want to teach the one token maowrie lecture in BIOL101, BIOL111, BIOL113, BIOL114, BIOL132, BIOL219, BIOL222, BIOL227, BIOL228, BIOL234, BIOL236, BIOL241, BIOL243, BIOL244, BIOL252, BIOL253, BIOL265, BIOL271, BIOL314, BIOL325, BIOL327, BIOL329, BIOL336, BIOL340, BIOL370, BIOL371, BIOL372, BIOL373, BIOL373, BIOL401, BIOL402, BIOL403, BIOL404, BIOL405, BIOL410, BIOL411, BIOL412, BIOL413, BIOL413, BIOL414, BIOL416, BIOL417, BIOL420, BIOL422, BIOL423, BIOL424, BIOL425, BIOL428, BIOL430, BIOL431, BIOL432, BIOL435, BIOL436, BIOL437, BIOL439, BIOL440, BIOL489.
8. Because we are tired.

- Tired of trying.
 Tired of fighting.
 Tired of Indigenising.
 Tired of banging our heads against brick walls.
 Tired of being overlooked, underpaid, and undervalued.
 Tired of being labelled the angry Māori for doing anything other than smiling and nodding to appease the Great White Sharks.
9. Because our whakapapa and bodies will not be used superficially to tick your Vision Mātauranga box¹. Only to have our ideas and bodies swiftly discarded and disregarded when the cash money comes in.
 10. Because we don't want to be complicit in the ongoing colonisation of our own people and knowledge systems.
 11. Because our simple presence in your department is disruptive. Our presence challenges the small minds of some staff and students. Their misconceptions are challenged by our occupation of spaces that were always reserved for the white, bespectacled, balding scientist wearing socks and sandals. In their minds, we aren't capable of being intelligent, of having expertise or having something useful to teach them. Our mere presence destroys their preconceived ideas about who we are meant to be and where we belong in society.
 12. Because every single day is a constant battle. We are swimming upstream, the trout are nipping at our heels, the farmers are draining our habitat, and algae are stealing our oxygen. It's hard to survive, let alone thrive in your white, science department.
 13. Because the settler scientists in your department are fucking annoying.
 Stop joking about colonising Māori scientists.
 Stop making racist remarks in the tearoom.
 Stop emailing us the night before your funding application is due asking for our CV.
 Stop being complicit in our continued silencing.
 Stop ticking yes to Vision Mātauranga when you have no connection to Māori or understanding of te ao Māori.
 Stop using our values and knowledge superficially when you are a racist clown.
 14. Because we deserve to work in an environment where we are respected. We deserve to not carry the colonial burden of being the first and the only in a space that was never designed for us.
 15. Because to be the lonely only in the School of Unwelcoming of Whiteness, means death by a million cuts. Cuts which manifest in daily attacks on our wairua, where our continued presence disturbs and unsettles the white hegemony.
 16. Because you expect too much. You expect us to be a unicorn Māori scientist. To enter the School of Unwelcoming Whiteness you must: speak te reo like Tā Timoti Karetu, understand tikanga like Professor Pou Temara, be an expert in mātauranga Māori like Professor Rangi

¹ Vision Mātauranga is a government policy which is incorporated throughout the research sector. It aims to “unlock the innovation potential of Māori knowledge and people”.

Mātaamua and of course sing as well as Moana Maniapoto in case they need a waiata. Oh, and be an expert in western science. Also never cause any trouble. Never disrupt whiteness. Be a good maowrie. Nod and smile. No troublemakers allowed.

17. Because why would we want to work our arses off in your department, tick all your white boxes, do unpaid cultural labour at the flick of a wrist, speak on behalf of all the maowries and sacrifice our own hauora when Nigel, who is the epitome of white, male meritocracy still gets promoted and paid more than us. Nigel hasn't published a paper in two years and students fall asleep as he monotonically lectures them with outdated material that like Nigel, is way past its used-by date.
18. Because your white discipline attempts to
control us
contain us
limit us
discipline us.
19. Because we have different priorities. You want us to publish in Nature, get a high PBRF grade and help everyone else "Māorify" their funding applications. We want to do research that is driven by mana whenua aspirations. You don't even know who mana whenua are, yet you still write "We are committed to the Treaty of Waitangi" in every, single job advertisement. We want to do research that benefits our communities. Not just academic communities. Our actual communities, our whānau, hapū and iwi.
20. Because you still unashamedly purport to be "objective". Whereas we know our values and are acutely aware how they shape every single decision we make.
21. Your department is haunted. Haunted by the tīpuna of the only other Māori scientist you employed, who left after five long months of hell. Haunted by white men whose paintings line the hallways of the Vice Chancellor's office.
22. Because we don't want the dreams and aspirations of our tīpuna and mokopuna to be suffocated by your whiteness and colonial binaries.
23. Because your department has never had a Māori HOD, your faculty has never had a Māori Dean and your university has never Māori Vice Chancellor. How's that for cultural responsiveness?
24. Your department is not worthy of everything and everyone we bring along with us.
25. You expect us to be happy and excited when your scientific "discovery" uncovers something that Māori have known generations.
26. Why would we want to be in a department where our worth is measured by the number of papers we publish in inaccessible journals, rather than our transformational research or the minds that are changed and expanded through our teaching or the service we do for our communities.
27. Because you are a liar. In the job description you said you valued mātauranga Māori and the Treaty. But you are harbouring "science defenders" in your department who are racist and violent and will

- hold onto their white privilege and meritocracy with their last dying, unbrushed, breaths.
28. Because you suck the life out of us.
 29. Because you gaslight us so much that we become institutionalised to the point where other Māori question whether we are “Māori enough” anymore.
 30. Because your department, with a co-opted Māori name that no one can or bothers to pronounce properly is not a fun place.
 31. Because James, the white professor, is still sitting on tables. Despite being told multiple times that it is culturally insensitive, and that Māori don't mix tero and tēpu. Professor James DGAF.
 32. Because there are more academic staff called John than Māori employed in your department.
 33. Because your department still thinks that “equity” lies simply in better supporting the white women.
 34. Because your department is an
anxious,
bullying,
colonial,
dangerous,
ego-driven,
fucked up,
gloomy,
hurtful,
isolating,
juvenile,
knavish,
lonely,
monstrous,
nauseating,
offensive,
painful,
questionable,
racist,
sexist,
tiresome,
unbalanced,
venomous,
warlike,
xenophobic,
yucky,
zoo
 35. Because even though you espouse that you value “manaakitanga, whanaungatanga, and kaitiakitanga”, you wouldn't recognise real manaakitanga if it was slapping you in the face. He waka eke NO.
 36. Because of the misplaced assumptions and assertions.
Assumptions about our identity, presence, and expertise. Assertions that we are only there because of our whakapapa. Not like we have any useful perspectives or ideas to contribute or anything. Or that we

- could help change negative outcomes for our own people. The colonisers always know us better than we know ourselves.
37. Because our perspectives on “ethics” are antithetical. You think it is ethical to do research on people's land, without talking to those people. We are relational.
 38. Because we don't want to be your “dial a Māori”. We don't want to be in every marketing video, photoshoot, and media campaign to represent the department's “diversity”. You value our presence in outward-facing diversity campaigns but not at the decision-making tables behind closed doors and behind brick walls.
 39. Because the whisper network told us that your department was toxic. They told us that the only other Māori only lasted five months before quitting. They told us about Dave, the racist and sexist Professor and who everyone avoids like the coronavirus. But who the department also praises, protects, and promotes because he brings in lots of money.
 40. Because we can't be ourselves in your department. We must be silent. We must be docile. We must be complicit in our own continued colonisation. We must leave our Māoritanga at the door. Assimilate or get out.
 41. You don't support and foster Māori excellence, instead, you expect us to break our own bones so that we may contort our bodies and our work into a form which is unrecognisable- all to ensure that we are not an Indigenous speed bump to the colonial project (Watego, 2021).
 42. Because you value international experience and international scientists over research which is meaningful and grounded here on this stolen whenua we stand on.
 43. Because of the labour. Unpaid labour. Excess labour. Unwanted labour. So much labour. The cultural double tax.
 44. Because the HOD thinks the department is “bicultural”, despite 99.9% of the academic staff being white.
 45. Because you want “inclusion”, and we want rangatiratanga.
 46. Because of the hyper surveillance. Do all academics in your department have their social media watched? Do they all have every receipt they submit randomly audited by HR? Does everyone have to submit a doctor's certificate every single time they take sick leave or are you just keeping tabs on the unruly native?
 47. Because we are constantly reminded that we don't belong. Because colonialism is so deeply embedded in science. Because of James Cook Fellowships and the Endeavour Fund. Because all the buildings are named after problematic white men. How long will we be waiting for a building to be named after a Māori scientist?
 48. Because now there is a Centre for Indigenous Science at the University of Otago lead by Associate Professor Anne-Marie Jackson (University of Otago, 2022) so why would we want to work in your department? Why would we want to work alongside you when we could land our waka on a safe island, with an abundance of resources, likeminded people, a place where we could not only

survive but thrive, a respite from the Great White Sharks and a centre that celebrates Māori excellence?

49. Because we are not welcome, and we deserve better.
50. Because you won't change, and we are sick of waiting.

Glossary

Hapū- subtribe

Hauora- health

Iwi- tribe

Kaitiakitanga- stewardship

Manaakitanga- process of showing respect, generosity and care for others

Māoritanga- Māoriness

Mātauranga Māori- Māori knowledge

Mokopuna- grandchildren

Te ao Māori- the Māori world

Tēpu- table

Tero- anus

Rangatiratanga- self-determination, sovereignty

Tipuna- ancestors

Tohunga- a skilled person, expert, priest, healer - a person chosen by the agent of an atua (gods) and the tribe as a leader in a particular field because of signs indicating talent for a particular vocation

Wairua- spirit

Waka- boat

Whānau- family

Whanaungatanga- a process of developing relationships through shared experiences and working collectively

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