

Karanga Mai te Pō: Calling on Darkness as Protection Amidst (En)light(ened) Pollution

Teah Carlson¹ | Rachel Jane Liebert² | Tia Reihana³

¹Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand

²University of East London, London, UK

³The University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

Correspondence

Rachel Jane Liebert.

Email: r.liebert@uel.ac.uk

Abstract

The Tīpuna Project is a creative community-based collaboration between Tangata Whenua (Indigenous) and Pākehā (White settler) researchers, artists and activists in Aotearoa to experiment with the decolonial possibilities of communing with our Indigenous and settler ancestors. In this performative piece we, the co-leads of The Tīpuna Project, attempt to tell our stories of how we arrived here, honouring our ancestors as co-researchers in our 'participatory action research' (PAR) process, considering and enacting our emerging relationship with each other and with darkness and te pō.

Darkness and te pō help us to exist both because and in spite of a colonial episteme that is violently inhospitable to the more-than-human. With them, we move into the cracks, into spaces of entanglement where our senses are heightened and where we are less able to be commanded by binaries, urgency and mastery. And with them, those of us who are Tangata Whenua also move into the caves, into spaces of rest, rhythm, story and breath. These cracks and caves protect us from an (En)light(ened) pollution that otherwise stops us from seeing the stars, enabling us to be (with) our shimmering otherworldly guides – our ancestors, our tīpuna.

In turn, both our project and our collaborative relationship are also (more) sheltered from a colonial hierarchy of

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Knowing, Knowledge, Knower that structures the colonial episteme. Calling on darkness and te pō, then, is how we struggle for freedom within the colonial academy – an academy within which Indigenous scholars in particular are both disappearing and Still Here.

PREFACE

Like our project, this piece is also an experiment with form and vibration. For this reason it was unable to be published in this academic space and can instead be found in the Supporting Information S1, in the journal's cracks – itself sitting, writhing, dancing in the dark. To accompany the 'abstract' above, what follows is a slightly edited reprint of our concluding section, our 'concrete' where we reflect on the messy materiality of our piece and thus on our entangled decision to prioritise the *how* of this piece as much as the *what* (Liebert, Lara, and Carlson 2021).

Our piece emerged through an iterative, spiralling process of dreaming, talking, writing, practicing, making, both by ourselves and between some of us, in drawing, ceremony, pounamu, wānanga, ritual, soil, nappies, poetry, song, prayer, burnout, no-thing, sometimes with intention and sometimes by accident or refusal. Our two groups – one Tangata Whenua (Indigenous), one Pākehā (White settler) – have never met altogether; some of us have never met at all. We have not finished as a 'we'.

Yet here we are. Typing on black and at night, through fragments, multiple voices and contradictions, we have tried for a dark process and form to make a performative piece that disrupts our own Knowing, Knowledge, Knower and invites readers to practice the same – including through decisions to not always explain and translate te ao Māori, tikanga or te reo Māori. In doing so, we have tried to both protect and centre Tangata Whenua, cracking our 'we' with a refrain-*cum*-cave to the ordinary/Māori, respecting and embodying Indigenous sovereignty.

Our process and form are also dark as a response to the colonial episteme within which our piece – and our project – sits, writhes, dances. Black Brazilian academic and artist Denise Ferreira Da Silva (2007) shows us how this episteme believes in, demands and manufactures the transparency of everything (except itself). If this work is a commitment to decolonisation, to tino rangatiratanga, then we must also take care in our reporting. Calling on darkness, the holder of mysteries, protects us from saying too much, from exposing our project to the colonial glare, to (En)light(ened) pollution, making a hospitable space for our tīpuna, ancestors and other shimmering, otherworldly guides.

But mysteries aren't simply about evading light. Following Glissant (1990), our move towards darkness is not to be obscure or exclusive so much as to also welcome a more relational interpretation, helping our piece to be relevant to whoever is receiving it, to 'speak to' different times and spaces and bodies, including our own. Entangled, lively. We, as The Tīpuna Project, also refuse to be caught dead in a think-net (or to be crushed dead by a vulva).

Even – especially – if sold to the metropole as an 'equitable collaboration' and 'decolonising methodology'. For as decolonisation trends, Māori academics (like some of us) are both disappearing (McAllister et al. 2019) and Still Here (Watego 2021). Ghosts (Ahmed 2021), protected by darkness. As Mikaere (2024) argues, the logic of genocide that underpins a settler colonial state can only be eliminated if, "those who believe that they stand to benefit from our [Indigenous] disappearance no longer have the power to bring it about" (n.p.).

Calling on darkness allows us to at least not 'lighten' the load for the colonial project. It is a reclamation to cave, to spiral long enough to know it's a love dance. As Tangata Whenua, people of the land, and as Pākehā committed to breaching the aggressive legacy of our Mancestors, to breathing the transgressive legacy of our trancestors. Refusing the annihilating impulse of that 'we' in 'all New Zealanders', we may not be able to see where 'we' are

going, we may not want to be seen where 'we' are going, yet in this darkness we can hear our breathing, we can sense our grandmothers and we can keep going.

We declare justice, peace, fair trade and the wellbeing of the ocean and land.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.