

tino rangatiratanga
 utu
 whanaungatanga

Māori self-determination
 revenge; reciprocity
 the interrelationship
 of Māori with their
 ancestors, their family,
 subtribe and tribe,
 as well as the natural
 resources within their
 tribal boundaries such as
 mountains, rivers, streams
 and forests

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Indigeneity: A politics of potential. O’Sullivan, Dominic. (2017). Bristol, England: Policy Press. 216 pp. ISBN: 978-1447339427. Book review DOI: 10.20507/MAIJournal.2018.7.1.10

Waikawa is a small island off the coast of the Mahia peninsula. Shortly after the Takitimu waka landed on the peninsula, the tohunga Ruawharo established a whare wānanga on the island and for centuries it was the hub of advanced learning for Ngāti Kahungunu.

Each time the wānanga was held, the students would land at a little inlet named Whaiwhakaaro (“to follow the thought”). Their first task was to light fires at the natural gas vents along the foreshore, both as a signal that the wānanga was in session and as a symbol of the fact that, like a flame, knowledge could be illuminating yet dangerous unless it was treated with respect. Early each day they would then walk to a rocky outcrop called Te Tīmatanga (“the starting”) and back again as a reminder that any learning had to start by going back to the beginning. Knowledge and the veracity or logic of the philosophies and theories and presumptions that went with it depended upon where they started from.

Stories are like that too. The way in which their plot or argument advances depends upon their beginnings, the papa or the “once upon a time” from which the storyteller constructs a theory or fantasy. Books are really just stories, and Dominic O’Sullivan’s *Indigeneity: A*

Politics of Potential is a carefully, sometimes densely, argued story about the “intersection of ideas about the terms of indigenous peoples’ belonging to the state, and the nature of their citizenship and participation in public life” (p. 1). It is also a story that is broad in its scope. It not only considers the ways in which Australia, Fiji and New Zealand may develop “indigeneity as potential” to transcend what he unfortunately calls “neo-colonial victimhood”, but it also discusses the fraught intersection between Indigenous rights and neoliberal globalisation.

There is certainly value in considering the place of indigeneity as a site of political and constitutional possibility in countries that have been colonised by Great Britain. Indeed there is a very real need to explore the notion of indigeneity beyond the vexed parameters of ethnic classification or the simplistic assumption that anyone born in a place is Indigenous. It is also timely to consider how the effective constitutional authority of the tangata whenua in Australia, Fiji and New Zealand has been denied or warped in colonisation, and how that might now be remedied in a meaningful way.

The issues raised in the book touch on important constitutional, political, social and even

moral questions that each country faces as it grapples with its history and its identity. In the New Zealand context it may therefore be read as part of the ongoing debate about the nature and costs of colonisation, the meaning and current applicability of the Treaty of Waitangi, and the troubling question about what really needs to be settled when Māori are still dealing with the trauma that ensues whenever a people are dispossessed of their lands, lives and power.

I recently took O'Sullivan's book with me on a visit to Waikawa and thought it might perhaps be helpful to apply what might be called a "wānanga test". That is, how well does it "follow the thought" from the violent dispossession of colonisation to the potential of a truly non-colonising future? Like much of the author's work, it is a considered and empathetic attempt to address contemporary political relationships between the colonisers and Indigenous peoples by recognising the prior occupancy of the latter through a theory of "differentiated liberal citizenship". Regrettably this emphasis on "liberal citizenship" and "belonging" to the (colonising) State necessarily limits the discourse to a consideration of how Indigenous peoples might now be "substantively equal members of an inclusive nation state" (p. 175). In doing so it decontextualises the important issue of Indigenous disempowerment in colonisation and seeks to address it from a "misplaced beginning".

This is particularly the case in the sections on New Zealand. For rather like those who argue that "history came alive" only when the colonisers arrived in this land, the author does not follow the thought about the nature of Indigenous authority or self-determination back to its real origins within Indigenous polities. Neither does it follow it forward to what might be a postcolonial future based on the settlement of all that colonisation was and is, including the power dynamics that it has sustained. Instead it accepts as its starting and its end point the very basis of colonisation itself.

Indigeneity thus promotes a sense of Indigenous authority as something that exists

only within the constitutional and political order which the colonisers imposed. The fact that that imposition usurped the legitimate and independent polities of Iwi and Hapū that were already in place in this country prior to 1840 is ignored or redefined to fit within some confusing notion of neo- or postcoloniality. This in turn leads to a presumption that "indigenous political status is a function of how postcolonial societies conceptualise and articulate prevailing liberal concepts of justice and political organisation" (p. 2).

Yet colonisation is an inherently illiberal as well as an unjust process, and to presume that some notion of Māori self-determination can be exercised within the systems it privileged is to follow the same strange and colonising thought that, contrary to all the evidence about the inalienability of mana, Iwi and Hapū nevertheless gladly surrendered it to the Crown. Indeed, even though the Waitangi Tribunal report on the Paparahi o Te Raki claim, which rejected that view, is referenced in some detail in the book, it proceeds as if the colonising constitutional order is now some unchallengeable given within which any expression of indigeneity must be expressed.

There is a perplexing illogic in that approach that leads, among other things, to an argument that any future reconciliation between Iwi and the Crown requires an acceptance that "Māori are not 'subjects' of the Crown but equal participants in the definition of political relationships" (p. 25). However, by positioning those relationships within the overarching Crown authority imposed after 1840, the book implies in effect that Māori have to reconcile to a kind of "equality" that in the end continues to be dependent upon the base inequality of colonisation. It confines us still as "subjects" even as it suggests otherwise.

The book also contains a similarly worrying redefinition of the right of indigenous self-determination as articulated in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. For while the book does reference

the universally accepted Indigenous view that self-determination is the fundamental right from which all others flow, its acceptance of a colonising status quo recontextualises that right as merely a “practice of differentiated citizenship” that is associated with the “political and constitutional implications of ethnic diversity” (p. 67). Apart from treading dangerously close to the idea of self-determination as a race-based rather than a human right, such an approach further limits Indigenous authority by framing it as part of a discrete kind of citizenship within a colonising state when in fact it inheres in Indigenous peoples as a pre-existing right that is independent of any colonising subjugation. Just as the Treaty reaffirmed the pre-existing status of Iwi and Hapū, so self-determination is much more than the “corporate indigenous membership of the polity” that is suggested by O’Sullivan (p. 61). It involves accepting what the Waitangi Tribunal (2014, p. xxii) called distinct “spheres of influence”, consisting not of one colonising State subsuming Māori “citizens” but independent yet interdependent polities forming a new type of constitutional relationship.

The concerns expressed above apply in a similar way to the sections in the book discussing how an understanding of “indigeneity as potential” might be implemented in Fiji and Australia. They too unfortunately proceed from the “misplaced beginning” of an unchallengeable status quo embedded in a colonising dialectic. No doubt some may argue that that is simply the reality, and certainly as Māori we are used to having our arguments and perceptions dismissed as “unrealistic” by the Crown and others. But reality is made by humans and can be unmade if humans have the will and the courageous imagination to do so.

The idea of indigeneity as a site of potential change is an exciting one, and O’Sullivan’s book offers some valuable historical and contemporary insights. A greater reckoning with the past and present of colonisation, plus a more imaginative questioning of the current “reality”, may

have provided something more—a courageous hope for the type of constitutional transformation from which a true non-colonising future will be possible.

Glossary

Hapū	kinship group, clan, tribe, subtribe; section of a large kinship group and the primary political unit in traditional Māori society
Iwi	extended kinship group, tribe, nation
mana	prestige, authority, control, power, influence, status, spiritual power, charisma
Ngāti Kahungunu	tribal group of the southern North Island east of the ranges from the area of Nūhaka and Wairoa to southern Wairarapa
papa	beginning or starting point
tangata whenua	local people, hosts, Indigenous people; people born of the land
tohunga	skilled person, chosen expert, priest, healer
waka	canoe
wānanga	tribal knowledge, lore, learning; important traditional cultural, religious, historical, genealogical and philosophical knowledge
whare wānanga	traditionally, places where tohunga taught the sons of chiefs their people’s knowledge of history, genealogy and religious practices

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Waitangi Tribunal. (2014). *He Whakaputanga me te Tiriti/The Declaration and the Treaty: The report on Stage 1 of the Te Paparahi o te Raki Inquiry*. Wellington, New Zealand: Author.

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