They Were Not Mine, But I Lived Them

Land Alienation, Inherited Shame and the Hidden Home: A Kaupapa Māori Autoethnographic Reflection

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Abstract

This kaupapa Māori autoethnographic reflection examines how historical land alienation and the suppression of te reo Māori were lived, a generation or two later, as childhood poverty, shame and silence. Prompted by coursework readings on the alienation of Māori land (Belich, 1996; James, 1999), the author revisits childhood memories from Kaiti, Gisborne: comparison with Pākehā friends who lived on the hill above her home, a rule that friends could not visit, a surname she was taught to be ashamed of, and an upbringing in which discipline meant being hit. Historical trauma theory (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998), whakamā (Metge, 1986) and Bowen's (1978) account of multigenerational transmission are used as interpretive lenses rather than as proof of causation, and Belich's distinction between nominal and substantive alienation is borrowed by analogy to describe how a loss completed on paper generations earlier can arrive later in a family as poverty, shame and silence. The article proposes a three-part distinction — what was taken, what was lived, and what can still be built — as a practical frame for holding historical loss and personal experience apart without denying the connections between them. It positions the account between two earlier papers in the series: Te Hā e Honoa Ai, on the throat as the site where silencing registers, and The Closed Circle, on a declaration that violence and poverty would end in one generation. It closes with the kāinga as reclaimed inheritance and an open question about setting down a burden that was never chosen.

Keywords: land alienation, historical trauma, whakamā, intergenerational shame, kaupapa Māori research, autoethnography, Te Poutama Ora

1. Introduction

This article began with a sentence the author wrote while reading religious coursework on the alienation of Māori land: when she sees Pākehā families with land, security and success, she feels cheated. After months of examining colonisation through Te Poutama Ora (TPO), the readings — a teaching timeline of land dealings, legislation and schooling compiled by James (1999) and Belich's (1996) chapters on land, law and the wars of the 1860s — moved the inquiry from the historical to the personal. The question was no longer only what happened to Māori, but what those events may have meant for one Māori childhood.

The article sits between two earlier papers in the Whakapapa of Colonisation series. Te Hā e Honoa Ai (I'Anson, 2026a) argued that the throat is where silencing registers in the body and where its reversal is practised. The Closed Circle (I'Anson, 2026b) examined the author's declaration that violence and

poverty would stop with her. This article examines the childhood between those two claims: where the silencing was learned, and where the declaration began.

It asks three questions. How was historical loss lived as personal experience? How did a rule about visitors become a belief about the self? And how can historical loss, personal experience and present agency be held apart without denying the connections between them?

2. Historical and Social Context

2.1 Land, Language and Inequality

James (1999) traces the legislative machinery through which Māori land passed out of Māori control: the Native Lands Acts of 1862 and 1865 and the Native Land Court, whose survey charges, court fees and ten-owner system drew owners into debt and individual sales; confiscation under the New Zealand Settlements Act 1863; and, within the lifetime of the author's parents, the Maori Affairs Act 1953 and its 1967 amendment, which permitted compulsory acquisition of 'uneconomic' shares and was experienced by many Māori as 'the last land grab'. Belich (1996) describes how the wars of the 1860s, which reached Tūranga (Poverty Bay) in 1868, were followed by demographic and economic 'swamping', until 'real empire finally marched, flooded or crept into even the innermost sanctums of independent Aotearoa' (p. 246).

Belich's (1996) distinction between nominal and substantive alienation is particularly useful here. Nominal alienation 'took place the day the deed was signed; substantive alienation took place the day Maori customary use ceased, and the gap between the two could be decades long' (p. 226). This article borrows the distinction by analogy. A loss can be nominally complete generations before it becomes substantive in a particular family's life, arriving as poverty, shame or silence long after the deed. Land provides more than a place to live. It carries security, assets for descendants and a foundation on which later generations build, and its loss shaped the conditions within which those generations made their own choices.

Alongside land loss, te reo Māori was actively suppressed in schools. James (1999) records that from 1886 English was the only language used in both Native and general schools, under a policy 'to encourage children to talk English on the playground'. In a survey in the 1970s, more than half the adults interviewed reported having been punished at school for speaking Māori, and many Māori parents supported the policy, believing it essential for their children's future (James, 1999; see also Simon & Smith, 2001). The author's whānau history follows this pattern closely: her mother was strapped at school for speaking Māori, and her grandfather prohibited te reo in the home, so that her mother grew up without the language. The same timeline records the Tohunga Suppression Act 1907, under which the role of tohunga as healers and spiritual experts was 'seen as a barrier to Maori assimilation' (James, 1999) — a further strand of suppression running through the author's own healing lineage, explored in The Closed Circle.

2.2 Physical Punishment as a Social Norm

The author grew up when physical punishment of children was widely accepted, a norm often summarised in the saying “spare the rod and spoil the child”, commonly linked to Proverbs 13:24. Corporal punishment in New Zealand schools was not abolished until 1990, following the Education Amendment Act 1989, and the statutory defence of reasonable force for parents was not repealed until the Crimes (Substituted Section 59) Amendment Act 2007. In the author’s childhood, discipline meaning being hit was an ordinary expectation at home and at school rather than an exception. The account that follows describes that norm and its effects on her, rather than the conduct of any individual.

3. Interpretive Lenses

3.1 Historical Trauma

Brave Heart and DeBruyn (1998) describe historical trauma as cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across the lifespan and across generations, arising from a group’s experience of colonisation. Duran and Duran (1995) describe a ‘soul wound’ to spiritual and cultural identity. These frameworks help explain how losses that occurred before a person was born can still shape the conditions of her childhood. They do not establish why any particular family lived in poverty.

3.2 Whakamā

Metge (1986) describes whakamā as a state that can include shame, embarrassment, a sense of inadequacy and withdrawal, often expressed through silence and avoidance rather than words. Whakamā offers a culturally grounded lens for the patterns in this account: hiding the home, avoiding talk of home at school, and becoming the quiet child.

3.3 Multigenerational Transmission

Bowen’s (1978) account of the multigenerational transmission process describes how anxiety and unresolved material move through a family system without conscious intent. Here it is used to consider how shame attached to language, poverty and Māori identity might pass from one generation to the next, and how a rule given to a child can become a rule the child keeps for herself.

4. Methodology

This is a single-case autoethnography (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) situated within kaupapa Māori research praxis (Smith, 2021). The memories examined here surfaced in a recorded reflective dialogue in October 2026, prompted by coursework reading. The interpretations are the author’s own; where the dialogue offered a framing, only what the author recognised as true to her experience is retained. Family members are not identified in relation to physical punishment. Historical sources provide context; they are not used to establish the causes of the author’s family circumstances.

5. Analysis

5.1 Snobs Hill: Comparison Without Context

The author grew up at the bottom of Kaiti Hill in Gisborne, among Māori cousins and relations. Her friends were Pākehā and lived in the settlement on the hill, known among local children as Snobs Hill. At seven or eight she befriended a girl from a wealthy family and remembers being grateful to be chosen. The significance lies less in the admiration than in the gratitude: by that age she already understood herself as someone who needed to be chosen. She was comparing two childhoods without knowing how differently their foundations had been laid. The present reading of land history does not depend on knowing how any particular family acquired its land; it depends on recognising that families did not begin from the same place.

The comparison was also made without history. Belich (1996) observes that until the 1980s New Zealanders showed little interest in the wars of the 1860s, and that children played ‘Cowboys and Indians’ rather than ‘Maori and Colonists’ (p. 241). The author grew up within that silence. The history that shaped the conditions of her childhood was not taught to her; she is encountering it in her sixties, as adult study.

5.2 The Rule: From Instruction to Belief

The author was not permitted to bring friends home, and kept to that rule through childhood and adolescence, avoiding talk of home at school and declining to socialise, while her siblings had friends to visit. The author does not read this as her siblings carrying less shame. Living in the same circumstances, they carried it differently: because the whole family shared the same conditions, it mattered less to them who saw. For her it mattered greatly. This is consistent with Bowen’s (1978) observation that children in the same family can absorb its anxiety to differing degrees. Over time the rule no longer needed enforcing. In Bowen’s (1978) terms, an instruction had become part of the self; in Metge’s (1986) terms, it took the form of whakamā expressed as concealment. The instruction concerned visitors. The belief absorbed was broader: there are parts of my life that other people must not see.

5.3 Te Momo: Shame Attached to a Name

The author was the only one of the first three children with a Māori given name, and was told that the family surname, Te Momo, meant waste. As children, she and her siblings had no means of verifying that meaning and no one of whom to ask, so it could not be questioned; the belief itself did the work. Within a generation of the language’s removal from the home, a family name had become a source of shame. The sequence across three generations — a mother punished at school for speaking Māori, a grandfather who banned te reo in the home, a daughter who learned to hide her name — illustrates how language suppression can move from public policy into family life and then into a child’s sense of self.

5.4 The Quiet One: Obedience, Worth and Sin

Within a norm in which discipline meant being hit, the author made it her task to be obedient, quiet and no trouble. The motivation was more than avoiding pain. She wanted her parents to be proud of her, and being hit meant being a bad child — a sinner. Obedience became evidence of goodness, and goodness

the condition of worth. When she overheard herself described to a neighbour as ‘the quiet one, the one who did what was expected’, she felt both vindicated and trapped.

This connects directly to Te Hā e Honoa Ai. That paper argued that a person who has learned that vocalising carries risk does not simply speak less; the voice itself changes. This account shows one way the lesson is learned: a child keeps her voice small because using it costs too much. The theological framing of punishment, in which being hit marks the child as sinful, also connects this account to the author’s earlier work on faith trauma and on Imago Dei, where worth is located before and beneath behaviour rather than earned through it.

5.5 Where the Declaration Began

At around ten or twelve, the author recognised that her family’s poverty arose from decisions that were not hers and that she was powerless to change. When the children spoke of being poor, they were teased about what their own homes would be like. Her response was determination to do differently. The Closed Circle (I’Anson, 2026b) presents the adult declaration that violence and poverty would stop with her; this account locates its beginning in childhood.

Two explanations of that poverty now sit together. The child attributed it to her parents’ choices. The adult also recognises the historical and structural conditions within which those choices were made. Neither cancels the other. Her parents had agency and responsibility; they also lived within circumstances shaped by their own histories and by colonisation. Holding both avoids a false choice between blaming family and blaming history.

6. Discussion: Taken, Lived, Built

The central sentence of this account is the author’s own: the choices and the shame she experienced because of what was absent were not hers, but she lived them. Both halves carry weight. ‘Not mine’ locates the origin of the shame outside the self, which allows it to be set down. ‘I lived them’ refuses to minimise its effects, which allows grief. Holding only the first risks bypassing grief; holding only the second risks owning a shame that was never deserved.

From this, the article proposes a three-part distinction for practice:

What was taken: whenua, reo, rangatiratanga and the foundations earlier generations could not pass forward. This cannot be undone by the individual.

What was lived: the poverty, shame, concealment and silence of a particular childhood. This can be understood and grieved.

What can be built: the life, home and inheritance still within the person’s agency. This remains open.

Within TPO, this distinction sits naturally within Te Ngāhau Kiri (Dimensional Autophagy), which asks what belongs to whakapapa as strength and what has been carried forward as pain, obligation or shame.

It offers clients a way to grieve historical loss without being defined by comparison, and to recognise personal experience without collapsing it into either individual blame or structural determinism.

The account closes on the kāinga. Belich's (1996) image of empire creeping 'into even the innermost sanctums of independent Aotearoa' (p. 246) can be read at the scale of a household: the hidden house and the shamed name were among the places it reached. The author's home is now a sanctuary, 'packed with love and beautiful things', and she is securing the land for her children. The historical loss of whenua cannot be restored by one person, but the inheritance passed forward can be chosen. The home is not framed as proof of escape. It is a sanctuary in which the door is no longer closed out of shame, and in which solitude, once a refuge from being seen, is now chosen. What remains is to set down a burden that was never hers to carry.

7. Limitations

This is a single-subject account based on memory and adult interpretation. It does not establish the causes of the author's family circumstances, the histories of other families named only by location, or the motivations of family members. The historical literature provides context and is not used as evidence about specific individuals. The reflective dialogue that prompted the account may have shaped which memories surfaced and how they were framed; the author has retained only the interpretations she recognises as her own.

8. Conclusion

Land alienation and the suppression of te reo Māori were not abstract events for the author. They arrived as a poor house at the bottom of a hill, a rule about visitors, a name taught as shameful, and a quietness learned for safety. Historical trauma theory, whakamā and multigenerational transmission help explain how such losses can move into a childhood without any one generation intending it. The distinction between what was taken, what was lived and what can still be built offers a way forward that neither denies the history nor surrenders the future to it. The account ends where the author's own reflection ended, with a question addressed across the years to the child she was: how does she tell that little girl that she can put down the burden, that she no longer has to hide, that there is no more shame or poverty, and that she is safe?

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