

Matapihi Kirihou: The Embodied Origins of Te Poutama o te Ora

In the development of Indigenous health frameworks, the relationship between lived experience and theoretical construct is often obscured by academic convention. Matapihi Kirihou (Plastic Windows) emerges as a critical counter-narrative to this tradition, situating Te Poutama o te Ora firmly within the embodied reality of intergenerational trauma, colonial violence, and material deprivation that continues to shape Māori health outcomes today.

This backstory represents more than autobiographical context; it is methodological testimony. Where Mason Durie's *Te Whare Tapa Whā* (1984) provided the architectural metaphor that revolutionised Māori health discourse in the 1980s, Matapihi Kirihou reveals the lived structures beneath the theory—the actual homes with plastic windows, the bodies carrying stress in the Puku, the children denied te Reo, the intergenerational patterns of poverty and violence that become encoded not just socially but somatically, through mechanisms we now understand as epigenetic inheritance.

The framework emerging from this narrative—Te Poutama o te Ora—is thus grounded in what Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) identifies as the "painful, troubling, and traumatic" archive of colonization, while simultaneously offering what she terms "survivance": the active presence of resistance, recovery, and revitalization. The plastic windows are both literal and metaphorical—makeshift barriers against a hostile environment that nevertheless could not protect against the cold, the shame, the violence that seeped through.

What distinguishes Matapihi Kirihou as a foundational text is its explicit acknowledgment that wellness frameworks born from colonial trauma must be understood through that trauma, not despite it. The author's experiences—childhood responsibility at age eight, *H. pylori* infection at thirty, multiple infectious diseases, breast cancer—are not presented as individual pathology but as predictable outcomes of what Margaret Mutu (2019) describes as "structural violence": the systematic denial of resources, culture, language, and dignity that manifests physically in Māori bodies across generations.

The narrative arc from Matapihi Kirihiou to te Ao Mārama (from plastic windows to enlightenment) is not one of simple transcendence but of what Leonie Pihama (2015) terms "transformative praxis"—the deliberate work of breaking cycles while honoring the resilience that enabled survival. The inclusion of the author's daughter's poem transforms shame into whakapapa, recasting poverty and struggle as the difficult ground from which cultural reclamation grows.

Methodologically, Matapihi Kirihiou employs Kaupapa Māori research principles by centering Māori experience as legitimate knowledge production, positioning the author as both researcher and research subject, and explicitly linking individual wellness to collective liberation. The text refuses what Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015) critiques as "patriarchal white sovereignty"—the expectation that Indigenous knowledge must present itself as universal or objective to be valid. Instead, it offers particularity: one Māori woman's journey from childhood poverty to breaking intergenerational cycles, which paradoxically becomes universally applicable precisely through its specificity.

The framework that emerges—Te Poutama o te Ora—integrates this lived foundation with contemporary scientific understanding of trauma, epigenetics, gut health, and metabolic wellness, while remaining grounded in Mātauranga Māori concepts of mauri, wairua, and whakapapa. This integration is not assimilationist; rather, it reflects what Graham Hingangaroa Smith (1997) describes as "conscientization"—the critical consciousness that enables Indigenous peoples to use Western knowledge without being subsumed by Western epistemology.

Matapihi Kirihiou thus serves multiple functions within the broader Te Poutama o te Ora project. It is origin story, methodological foundation, and ethical commitment. It ensures that readers understand this framework emerges not from academic abstraction but from the bodies, homes, and lives of Māori people navigating the ongoing reality of colonisation. It positions the nine-element wellness framework not as aspirational theory but as practical necessity for survival and healing. Most critically, it demonstrates that genuine decolonisation in health must begin with truth-telling about how colonisation lives in our bodies, our relationships, and our daily practices of eating, moving, and being in the world.

The plastic windows remain transparent markers of structural inequality. The story of removing them, replacing them, eventually moving beyond them into homes with proper glass—this is the physical manifestation of what Te Poutama o te Ora offers: not the erasure of difficult history, but its transformation into foundation for different futures. As the author notes, the plastic windows taught resourcefulness, resilience, and the understanding that what is broken can be mended, even if imperfectly. These lessons become the bedrock upon which a comprehensive wellness framework is built.

In positioning Matapihi Kirihou as essential reading alongside Te Poutama o te Ora's theoretical and practical materials, this work follows the example of other Indigenous scholars who refuse the separation of theory from lived experience. It stands with Audre Lorde's insistence that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (1984), and with bell hooks' assertion that theory emerges from pain and must serve healing. The plastic windows are not footnotes to the framework; they are its foundation—visible, acknowledged, and transformed into the very structure that enables others to find shelter, warmth, and ultimately, wellness.

References

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