Te Repo o te Mātauranga

The Colonisation of Knowing: Positioning Te Poutama Ora in Relation to Holman's Critique of Elsdon Best

A Positioning Statement for Te Poutama Ora

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He kupenga kaharoa tana e hao ana i ngā momo ika katoa,

His is a drag-net fishing in all types of fish,

mā ngā wāhine i uta e wehewehe.

for the women on shore to separate.

— Apirana Ngata on Elsdon Best, 1930

This piece draws substantially on the doctoral research of Jeffrey Paparoa Holman — Best of Both Worlds: Elsdon Best and the Metamorphosis of Māori Spirituality (University of Canterbury, 2007) — which was brought to the author's attention by a PhD student working within Mātauranga Māori frameworks. Holman's archival work on Elsdon Best and Tutakangahau provides the historical and epistemological scaffolding for the argument developed here. Full reference appears at the end of the document.

I. The Man Behind the Myth

A Pūrākau to Begin

In the Urewera, around 1896, two men sit together. One is a Tuhoe rangatira — a war leader, a commissioner in his people's government, a man who has navigated Te Kooti's Ringatū faith, written letters to the Premier of New Zealand, argued the case for Tuhoe land sovereignty in official correspondence that would sit for a century in government archives, mostly unread. His name is Tutakangahau of Maungapohatu.

The other man is Elsdon Best, Pākehā ethnographer. He has come to record the last traces of an ancient Māori world — a world he believes is vanishing, a world he has decided, before his pencil touches paper, that Tutakangahau inhabits. Best calls him "Old Tu." He calls him "the old-time Māori." He calls him "the tattooed neolith."

Tutakangahau, for his part, calls Best "Te Peehi." And he talks to him. He shares stories, teachings, the deep kōrero of Tuhoe cosmology and spiritual life. He is, by every account, generous with his knowledge. What he perhaps does not know — what he cannot know — is what Best will do with those words once they leave the room.

Because Best will take those words and pass them through a filter. The filter has a name: Victorian evolutionary anthropology. It believes in a hierarchy of civilisations, in which Māori sit near the bottom, relics of a primitive stage that European humanity has long since outgrown. Through this filter, the complex political man who wrote to Seddon about land rights becomes a living fossil. The Ringatū faith that shaped his spirituality disappears from the record. The letters to government agents — evidence of a rangatira fully engaged with colonial modernity — go unread in the archives. What remains, what Best publishes and what enters the national bloodstream, is the mythopoetic Māori: pure, pre-contact, primitive, and — crucially — safely in the past.

The kōrero left the room. But it did not arrive unchanged.

> **The Poison Ivy did not only grow through the land. It grew through the words.**

This is the fourth companion layer of the Whakapapa of Colonisation — and in some ways the most difficult to see, precisely because it hides inside what appears to be recovery. The previous layers named what colonisation took: land, law, language, sobriety, creative voice, economic ground. This layer names something more subtle. It names what colonisation gave back — in altered form — and called it tradition.

It names te repo o te mātauranga: the contamination of the knowing itself.

II. The Archive and the Wound

How a Pākehā Pen Became the Keeper of Māori Being

Jeffrey Paparoa Holman's 2007 doctoral thesis, Best of Both Worlds: Elsdon Best and the Metamorphosis of Māori Spirituality, is not comfortable reading for anyone working in kaupapa Māori. Holman mounts a forensic and unsettling argument: that the foundational concepts now widely deployed in kaupapa Māori methodology — including mauri, hau, wairua, and the broader architecture of 'authentic Māori being' — were substantially constructed, expanded, and reinscribed through the writings of Best. Holman spent years in the archives — letters, notebooks, official correspondence, multiple editions of Williams' Dictionary of the Māori Language — tracing what happened to key Māori spiritual concepts as they passed through Best's writings and into the permanent record.

What he found was this: those definitions, embedded in the dictionary, taught in schools, cited in the Māori renaissance, absorbed into kaupapa Māori methodology from Māori Marsden to Cleve Barlow to Hirini Moko Mead, are now so thoroughly part of the furniture that very few stop to ask where they actually came from. It traces the etymological transformation of key spiritual terms across successive editions of Williams' Dictionary, demonstrating how Best's Tuhoe fieldwork material entered the dictionary's fifth edition (1917) and subsequently became the definitional substrate for modern Māori theological and wellness writing.

Holman's central provocation is blunt: there is 'no possibility of a late 19th century Māori epistemology unmediated by Pākehā influence' (Holman, 2007, p. 4). Not because Māori knowledge did not exist — it did, richly, in the living transmission of oral culture, in whakapapa, in the body, in karakia and in the maramataka. But because the archive through which that knowledge was captured, preserved, and returned to Māori was not a neutral vessel. It was a colonial instrument, shaped by the theoretical assumptions of its time, and Best's post-mortem rejection by the academy has paradoxically obscured the depth of his ongoing influence in the very literature that sought to supplant him.

> *"Such definitions and other terms influenced by his work — now found in essentialist texts of the Māori identity movement — are often considered to be purely Māori and deployed as part of a kaupapa Māori*

> *methodology... Syncretisms, as always, are omnipresent in colonial literary sources."*
>
> *— Holman, 2007, p. 331*

The case Holman makes is not that Māori spiritual concepts are false or invented. It is more precise and more disturbing than that. He tracks the word mauri from its earliest appearances in the written record — a concrete, object-bound force, embedded in fishing sinkers, eel weirs, and the karakia that linked material need to the spiritual order of the world — through successive editions of Williams' Dictionary, tracing how each edition expanded the term's meaning as Best's Tuhoe field notes entered the scholarly record. By the time those meanings were absorbed into post-1970s Māori theological writing, mauri had become something considerably more abstract, more metaphysical, more resonant with Western comparative religion than with the mauri of the eel weir.

Holman names this dynamic elsewhere as a kind of epistemic layering — the way colonial mediation deposits itself invisibly within indigenous frameworks, such that subsequent generations receive a partially reconstructed tradition and mistake it for an unbroken one:

> *"Endangered or obsolescent rituals became increasingly metaphysical in their application over time... old words gaining new meanings as the ground of their original creation, existence, and usage disappeared."*
>
> *— Holman, 2007, p. 332*

This is not a small thing. Mauri is foundational to wellness frameworks across the kaupapa Māori landscape. If its contemporary meaning carries the fingerprints of Victorian anthropology, then the tools of recovery may carry traces of the wound.

And yet — and this is the move Holman himself makes, and which matters for our work — the answer is not to throw the word away. The answer is whakapapa awareness: the willingness to trace where a concept came from, who shaped it in transmission, what was altered in the telling, and whether it continues to serve the hauora of those who use it. The question is not purity. The question is provenance and purpose.

III. The Poison Ivy That Grew Through the Roots

Te Repo o te Mātauranga — The Third Layer of Colonial Injury

Through this series we have used the image of Poison Ivy to name what colonisation does: it grows unseen, its roots entangled with the roots of what you would protect, until one day you reach toward what you thought was yours and find it has become something else. The image holds because colonisation was rarely a single violent event. It was — and is — a creeping process.

The first layer the Poison Ivy crept through was land. The second was law. The third was language — te reo marginalised, suppressed, shamed out of the mouths of children. The fourth was the body's relationship with wai — water displaced by waipiro, the colonial chemical. The fifth was creative voice. The sixth was economic ground.

This realisation is the hardest to see because it does not look like loss. It looks like recovery.

What Holman's work names is the moment the Poison Ivy grew through the roots of the words themselves — through mauri, through wairua, through the very concepts Māori reached toward to understand who they were and to heal what had been broken. The ethnographic archive was not only a record of Māori culture. It was a remaking of it. And that remaking was returned to Māori, generation by generation, as if it had always been so.

We might call this te repo o te mātauranga: the swamp of the knowing. Not the silencing of Māori knowledge, but its partial preservation through the colonial apparatus — received back in subtly altered form, the ecological grounded in the abstract, the relational dissolved into the metaphysical, the living mauri of the eel weir elevated into a universal life-force concept legible to European comparative religion.

For TPO's clinical work — and particularly for the Whakapapa Dimensional Autophagy work and this companion series — this means naming a third layer of colonial injury beneath the overt registers of land and law: the contamination of the epistemological ground itself. The clinical implications of this are real, and worth naming honestly.

Some of those who carry Colonisation PTSD — who have done the work of returning to te ao Māori, of reclaiming reo and tikanga and wairua — may find a particular kind of grief waiting here. Not only the grief of what was taken, but the grief of discovering that some of what was recovered was itself partially shaped by the taking. That the frameworks they reached toward for healing were not untouched by the wounding system. This is a double grief, and it deserves to be met with honesty rather than managed away.

It is also, in a different light, a cause not for despair but for discernment. Because not everything was captured. Not everything passed through the archive.

IV. What the Net Could Not Reach

The Unarchived Transmission

Return to the image from Apirana Ngata's letter — that extraordinary whakataukī he wrote about Best in 1930, the year before the old ethnographer died: a drag-net fishing in all types of fish, for the women on shore to separate. It is generous, as Ngata was generous. But notice what the net does not catch. A drag-net does not catch everything. It misses what is too deep, too still, too close to the bed of the river to be swept up in the pass.

Best's net was comprehensive and committed, and we should honour the scale of his effort without being naive about its distortions. But there was knowledge it could not reach. The Tohunga Suppression Act 1907 severed the formal institutional transmission of healing knowledge — but it could not reach what was held in the body, in the whakapapa line, in the dream state, in the relational field of whānau living close to the land. What was never offered to the ethnographer was never available for ethnographic capture. What persisted through those lines did so, paradoxically, because it was not written down.

This is the epistemological ground on which Te Poutama Ora stands. Not in opposition to the archive, not in denial of what Holman's work reveals, but in a different location entirely. TPO's healing knowledge is not reconstructed from Best's record of Tuhoe

cosmology. It is recovered from the body, from the maramataka, from the lived-experience teaching story of those who have moved through the dimensions of hauora from within, from the accumulating evidence of clinical practice, and from the lineage transmission of healing gifts that formal suppression could interrupt but not extinguish.

TPO's nine-dimensional architecture — with its explicit grounding in taha tinana (body), taha kai (food sovereignty and Maramataka-aligned eating), and te aho Maramataka (the lunar calendar as therapeutic infrastructure) — re-embeds wellness in exactly the kind of relational, ecological, and temporally-specific ground that Best's ethnography abstracted away from. This is not coincidental. It reflects TPO's foundational epistemological commitment: that healing knowledge must be recovered from the body, the whenua, the seasonal and lunar rhythms of te ao Māori, rather than reconstructed from the literary archive.

The net went out. The net came back in. But not everything was in it.

The mauri that TPO's Wairua dimension works with is not the etherealised, literary mauri of the post-Best archive. It is the mauri of the eel weir: concrete, relational, embedded in the rhythms of the natural world, dependent on karakia and tikanga and right relationship with the whenua. The maramataka that anchors TPO's therapeutic infrastructure is not a romantic reconstruction of pre-contact Māori life — it is a living temporal intelligence, tested against the body, against the seasons, against the clinical evidence of what heals people and what does not.

Holman's thesis closes with a call for what he terms ‘hermeneutic ontology’ — not the adjudication of the ‘true’ nature of Māori existence, but the careful, humble interpretation of being through the written record. This is an important and honourable scholarly position. But TPO's epistemological claim is of a different order. Its authority does not rest primarily in the written record at all. TPO does not reach backward toward an uncontested pre-contact authenticity — the very project Holman shows Best to have distorted and Māori essentialism to have too often uncritically inherited. TPO begins in the present body, in the present wound, in the present maramataka cycle, and asks: what is available, right now, for the work of recognition, reclamation, restoration, and return?

> **The gifts continued. They continued through the body, the lineage, the dream, the whenua — through everything the net could not reach.**

V. The Invisible Rangatira

Tutakangahau, the Double Exile, and the Framework That Had No Category

There is something else in the story of Tutakangahau that matters for our clinical work. It is this: Best's romantic frame had no category for who Tutakangahau actually was.

Here was a man who had navigated Te Kooti's Ringatū faith, who had fought in the wars of the 1860s, who had written letters to the Premier of New Zealand in his own hand, who served as a Commissioner in the Urewera District Native Reserve — a man whose father Tapui had greeted the missionary Colenso with kōrero “spiced by scriptural allusions” as far back as 1841. Tutakangahau was, by the time Best arrived, a fully modern man navigating a colonial world with intelligence and mana. He was neither the ‘old-time Māori’ of Best's romantic imagination nor a Brown Pākehā who had abandoned his people. He was something the colonial framework had no box for: a Tuhoe rangatira, fully himself, fully engaged with the present, holding his own complexity with apparent ease.

Best could not see this. His theoretical framework — built on the idea of Māori as primitive survivals of a pre-contact world — had no room for a man this complex and this contemporary. So Best made him simpler. He made him earlier. He wrote the political engagement out, the Ringatū faith out, the letters to Seddon out, and what remained was “Old Tu” — the tattooed neolith, the last keeper of authentic Māori being.

The rendering invisible of Tutakangahau's actual life is, in miniature, the same violence that the double exile framework names. The double bind this created — to be seen, one must be misrepresented; to be misrepresented is to be made invisible — maps precisely onto what TPO names the double exile: neither white enough nor Māori enough, caught between two sets of expectations that the actual person's complexity cannot satisfy. We might summarise it this way: if you are too complex for the available

frame, the frame will simplify you. If you are too modern to fit the category of ‘authentic Māori,’ you will be written into the category anyway — as its ideal — and your modernity will disappear from the record.

For clients who carry the double exile — urban Māori, ‘Brown Pākehā,’ those whose connection to marae and reo was severed by pepper-potting, migration, or the accumulated trauma of urban displacement — this pattern is intimate and familiar. The only Māori identity the dominant framework offers them may be one constructed for an imagined pre-contact being they have never been and cannot become. And in reaching toward it, they may find not homecoming but a fresh form of exile: the realisation that the very identity they were reaching toward was also, in part, shaped by the wounding system.

TPO's response to this is not to offer a purer, more authentic version of Māori identity in its place. It is to refuse the authenticity test altogether. Identity, in TPO's framework, is not a historical reconstruction. It is a living present-tense act — grounded in whakapapa, expressed through wairua, enacted through the body and the maramataka and the ongoing practice of hauora. You do not have to be “old-time Māori” to be Māori. You do not have to pass a test that was designed by a Victorian anthropologist to serve his own theoretical project. You only have to do the work of recognising, reclaiming, and restoring what is yours — at whatever depth, or form, with whatever resources are available to you right now.

VI. Positioning Statement for Academic Contexts

The following paragraph is offered as a formal positioning statement, suitable for use in TPO's overarching academic framework paper, or any publication situating TPO within contemporary kaupapa Māori epistemological debate:

> *Te Poutama Ora (TPO) is developed in full awareness of the epistemological critique mounted by scholars such as Holman (2007), who demonstrates that the foundational conceptual vocabulary of modern kaupapa Māori — including mauri, hau, and the construct of an ‘authentic Māori being’ — was substantially mediated through the colonial*

> *ethnographic project of Elsdon Best and subsequently absorbed, often uncritically, into both Māori renaissance writing and academic methodology. TPO's response to this critique is not to disavow kaupapa Māori as a framework, but to ground its epistemological authority in sources that the colonial archive could not access: the embodied transmission of healing knowledge through whakapapa lines, the ecological and temporal intelligence of te Maramataka, the clinical accumulation of lived-experience practice, and the te pūrākau (teaching story) of those who have moved through the dimensions of hauora from within. TPO does not reconstruct a pre-contact Māori being from the literary archive; it begins in the present body, in the present wound, and in the present Maramataka cycle, asking what is available now for the work of Te Tūāhuatanga (Recognition), Kāwhatitanga (Reclamation), Whakahuatanga (Restoration), and Tuku (Release and Return). In this sense, TPO represents not an essentialist return to a past mediated by Best's pen, but a living, lineage-grounded, clinically-tested framework for hauora that holds the contaminated archive with critical humility while drawing its healing authority from what survived, precisely, because it was never written down.*

VII. Where TPO Stands

Critical Humility and Rooted Confidence

There is a posture this companion layer requires of us, and it is worth naming directly. It is not the posture of disillusionment — the discovery that the archive is compromised does not mean the work is futile. It is not the posture of paralysis — we cannot spend our clinical hours tracing the whakapapa of every concept before we use it. And it is not the posture of denial — it is no longer possible, after Holman's work, to simply claim the unmediated purity of a kaupapa Māori methodology without accounting for where its vocabulary came from.

The posture it requires is whakapapa awareness: the ongoing, honest practice of tracing where knowledge comes from, who was in the room when it was recorded, what was altered in the telling, and whether it continues to serve the hauora of the people for whom it was recovered.

This is, perhaps, a posture uniquely suited to a framework built on the whakapapa metaphor. We do not trace whakapapa to prove purity — we trace it to understand relationship, influence, continuity, and change. A whakapapa that shows colonial mediation in one branch does not thereby become invalid. It becomes more honest. And a practice grounded in honesty about its own lineage is a practice that can be trusted.

Te Poutama Ora holds itself to this standard. It draws on concepts that carry layers of colonial and post-colonial reinscription — mauri, wairua, whakapapa itself — but does so with the awareness that these concepts are working clinical and spiritual tools whose depth is continually tested against lived experience, against the body's response, against the evidence of the maramataka, and against the outcomes of those who have moved through the framework's dimensions.

Holman ends his own thesis with a call for scholarship that holds the written record with ‘careful scholarship, a sympathetic imagination — and rueful acknowledgment of the visa limitations restricting entry to the past.’ TPO holds this same disposition toward the archive. Where TPO draws on concepts such as mauri, it does so not as appeal to an uncontested traditional authority, but as working clinical and spiritual tools whose depth is continually tested — never as certainty about the purity of its sources, but as confidence in the integrity of its methodology.

And it grounds its primary epistemological authority not in the literary archive but in what the archive could not reach: the embodied transmission of healing knowledge through whakapapa lines, the ecological intelligence of te maramataka, the clinical accumulation of te pūrākau — the lived-experience teaching story of those who have made the journey — and the healing gifts that formal suppression could interrupt but never extinguish.

> **The standard to which Te Poutama Ora holds itself is not the purity of its sources. It is the integrity of its methodology — and the hauora of the people.**

VIII. The Question That Holds Everything

The Poison Ivy grew through the land. It grew through the law. It grew through the language, the body's relationship with wai, the voice, the economic ground. Then, quietly, persistently, it grew through the roots of the words themselves — through the concepts Māori reached toward for recovery, through the archives Māori drew on to rebuild identity, through the very vocabulary of healing.

This is not a reason to stop reaching. It is a reason to reach with your eyes open.

Tutakangahau wrote letters to the Premier of New Zealand while Best was recording him as a pre-contact relic. He navigated Ringatū faith, land politics, missionary influence, and colonial governance simultaneously, with apparent wholeness. He was not broken by the complexity. He held it. He was not the mythopoetic Māori of Best's imagination. He was something better: a man, fully present in his own time, doing the work of his people with whatever was available to him.

That is, in the end, the image this framework offers. Not a return to a pre-contact purity that was never uncontested, never unmediated, never fully available. But a present-tense practice of hauora: grounded in whakapapa, held in the body, aligned with the maramataka, honest about its own lineage, and always — above all else — accountable to a single question.

Does this serve the hauora of the people?

That question is not naive. It is not innocent of the history this series has traced. It is asked with the full weight of what colonisation did — to the land, to the law, to the language, to the body, to the voice, to the economic ground, and now to the knowing itself.

It is asked anyway. Because the people are here. The wounds are real. The work is now.

And because some of what was given to us — through whakapapa, through body, through dream, through the quiet persistence of healing gifts across generations of suppression — arrived unaltered. Arrived whole. Arrived waiting.

The net went out. But it did not catch everything.

For Your Own Reflection

As you sit with the kōrero in this piece, you might gently hold these questions:

- Where in your own understanding of Māori identity have you encountered a version of 'authentic Māori being' that felt unreachable — that seemed designed for someone else, someone earlier, someone simpler than you are?
- What knowledge do you carry that was never written down — that came through the body, the dream, the relationship, the whenua? How do you trust it?
- If you have done the work of cultural reclamation — returning to reo, to tikanga, to wairua — is there a grief present in discovering that some of what you reached toward was also, in part, shaped by the wounding system? What does that grief need?
- What is the question that holds your hauora work accountable? What would Tutakangahau — the real one, the political one, the complex and fully modern one — ask of you?

For further information or to view published articles related to Te Poutama Ora, please see https://www.iantemo.com/publications

Reference

Holman, J. P. (2007). Best of both worlds: Elsdon Best and the metamorphosis of Māori spirituality [Doctoral thesis, University of Canterbury].