

Indigenous-Washing and Colonial Amnesia: How New Zealand's Nation Brand Depoliticizes Climate Change

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New Zealand's nation brand has drawn ever louder accusations of "greenwashing" the country's image in recent years. Through a visual discourse analysis of Air New Zealand's *Tiaki & The Guardians* safety briefing video, this article shows that brand managers have responded with a strategy of "Indigenous-washing," appropriating the Māori worldview to deflect attention from intensive farming's carbon footprint and other environmentally unfriendly activities. More broadly, this article makes an important contribution to the growing critical-cultural literature on nation branding by revealing how New Zealand's latest marketing initiative contributes to the depoliticization of climate change. The "Tiaki" campaign not only positions New Zealand as an "untouched land," but also closes the space for democratic debate about climate change by obscuring the role of colonialism in causing the planet's ecological crisis and by silencing alternative socioecological futures proposed by Indigenous peoples.

Keywords: nation branding, climate change, colonialism, Indigenous perspectives, de/politicization, New Zealand

It has been well understood for some time that countries and corporations "greenwash" their ongoing pollution of the planet (e.g., de Freitas Netto, Sobral, Ribeiro, & Soares, 2020; Yang, Nguyen, Nguyen, Nguyen, & Cao, 2020). However, as public concern about climate change is rising and consumers are beginning to see through disingenuous "green" claims, marketing tactics have become increasingly sophisticated and have changed to subtler forms of appropriating environmentalist discourses, including "youthwashing" and "democracywashing" (Munshi & Kurian, 2020, p. 16). New Zealand's nation brand has taken a similar path in recent years: When the "100% pure" campaign attracted growing global criticism for covering up the country's poor environmental record, brand managers responded with a number of strategic adjustments. The latest refinement is the "Tiaki Promise" campaign, first rolled out in late 2018. The campaign seeks to convince global audiences that the Māori philosophy of *kaitiakitanga*—which prescribes a reciprocal set of duties and responsibilities between humans and the rest of the natural world—is an essential part of New Zealand's identity. As I will show through an analysis of Air New Zealand's *Tiaki & The Guardians* safety briefing video (*Guardians* hereafter; Air New Zealand [AirNZ], 2022a), this nation branding

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update conveys a false sense of environmental friendliness through what can be called “Indigenous-washing.”

The safety video invokes the Māori worldview merely to provide moral authenticity to the claim that New Zealand is a “green, untouched” land and thus silences rather than amplifies Indigenous voices in global debates on climate change. For decades, based on a distinct diagnosis that highlights the environmentally damaging effects of colonialism and capitalism, organized Indigenous movements have called for “transformative change” to address the escalating ecological crisis (McGregor, 2021; Norgaard & Fenelon, 2021). This approach, which calls into question the legitimacy of the international political and economic order, finds no expression in the video. Instead, the video frames the struggle against climate change as the ethical responsibility of cosmopolitan individuals. The burden to tackle the climatic crisis is placed not on corporations and political collectives but on consumers and citizens, encouraging them to take small actions to save the planet—actions that stay within the structures of the neoliberal capitalist paradigm.

As critical research on climate change communication argues (e.g., Carvalho, Russill, & Doyle, 2021; Hammond, 2021; Pepermans & Maesele, 2016), concealing alternative socioecological futures articulated by various social actors—including Indigenous peoples—is problematic because it “precludes democratic debate about the kind of nature we would like to inhabit and how this can be achieved” (Maesele, 2015, p. 391). Closing the space for debate about the multiple possibilities for a different human-nature relationship naturalizes those political and economic institutions that drive anthropogenic climate change and reduces the politics of the environment to a negotiation about techno-managerial fixes at our disposal to “save” nature from current “unsustainable” paths. Simultaneously, the values and interests that underpin this depoliticized framing of climate change as a consensual issue remain invisible.

By revealing how New Zealand’s latest nation branding campaign obscures Indigenous socioecological imaginaries and thus fosters the depoliticization of climate change, my article makes an original and significant contribution to scholarship that approaches the phenomenon of nation branding from a *critical-cultural* rather than an instrumentalist perspective. This growing body of research is primarily concerned with how—in the process of commodifying national identities for global consumption—nation branding disregards political conflicts over how national identity should be defined and instead privileges certain voices over others (e.g., Aronczyk, 2013; Dolea, 2016; Kaneva, 2011). For example, studies have shown how the construction of brand images favors the interests and identities of economic elites (Miño, 2022) and ethnic majority groups (Edwards & Ramamurthy, 2017). My article builds on these studies by highlighting that the depoliticizing effect of nation branding goes beyond the production of national identities. Rather, as nation brands position themselves as the “cure” or the “solution” for global problems (e.g., Kaneva, 2023; Phillips, Taylor, Narain, & Chandler, 2021), the depoliticizing effect of nation branding can extend to the public sphere at the international level.

To develop the argument that New Zealand’s nation brand promotes the depoliticization of climate change, the article relies on the method of visual discourse analysis. Generally speaking, visual discourse analysis focuses on the rhetorical organization of images, with the aim to reveal how images construct specific accounts of the social world as truthful or natural, and how these claims to truth produce power relations and hierarchies (Rose, 2016, chapter 8). In particular, my analysis discloses the visual metaphors

and dichotomies through which the safety video creates discursive knowledge about the causes and solutions of climate change. Metaphors and dichotomies, generally speaking, shape ways of seeing and knowing by reducing the world's complexities into simplistic "truths" (e.g., Bleiker, 2018, p. 22; Hall, 1997). Moreover, the analysis will carefully scrutinize what is *not* shown in the video. As Rose (2016) explains, "invisibility can have just as powerful effects as visibility" (p. 213).

The New Zealand Brand: From "100% Pure" to the "Tiaki Promise"

Throughout the 20th century, New Zealand tourism advertising centered on the country's picturesque landscapes and natural wonders. Representations of Māori culture—such as carvings or girls dressed in traditional costumes (see Figure 1)—were integrated into marketing communications to create an overall "exotic" appeal and a differentiated image in consumers' minds (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2002). In 1999, to strengthen the brand's value proposition in an increasingly competitive international market, Tourism New Zealand launched the globally coordinated "100% pure" campaign. Designed by the advertising agency M&C Saatchi and building on the established "scenic wonderland" myth, the campaign positioned New Zealand as "a relatively undiscovered, untouched land" (Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2002, p. 347). Similar to previous marketing practices, Māori culture was incorporated as a marker of authenticity—specifically, to support the connotations of "undiluted" and "inimitable" inherent in the brand's "purity" promise (Dürr, 2008, pp. 63–64).



Figure 1. Māori in 1960 and 2000 tourism advertising.
Sources: AirNZ (2000); Tourist and Publicity Department (1960).

The "100% pure" branding campaign has been an incredible commercial success. Not only has it positioned New Zealand as an appealing niche player in the global tourism industry, but the notion of "purity"

has also improved the country's "high quality" reputation in other economic sectors, such as agricultural and horticultural exports (True, 2005). However, perhaps partly because of its success, the "100% pure" campaign has attracted ever-louder accusations of greenwashing. Both national and international news media have, with increasing frequency, drawn attention to the fact that New Zealand's poor environmental record falls way short of the "100% pure" promise.² Moreover, at the domestic level, the government's nation branding efforts are embedded in public debates over how to balance the competing demands of economic development and environmental protection. In other words, political and social actors have been discussing the extent to which the "100% pure" promise is practically feasible and normatively desirable. For reasons that will become clear below, it is important to highlight that in these debates Māori communities have—by advocating the *sustainable* use of natural resources—repeatedly clashed with environmentalist groups promoting a strict *preservationist* agenda (Mills, 2009).

To avoid allegations of greenwashing, New Zealand's brand managers have implemented a number of modifications in recent years. In 2011 the slogan was temporarily changed to "100% pure you," while in 2012 Tourism New Zealand harnessed *The Hobbit* movie to strengthen the brand as "an imagined place of rural, idyllic lifestyles and unspoiled landscapes," captured in the updated slogan "100% Middle Earth" (Ferrer-Roca, 2021, p. 115).

The "Tiaki Promise" initiative—activated in November 2018—is the latest significant adjustment to New Zealand's nation branding. This campaign is the result of close strategic collaboration between Tourism New Zealand and six partner organizations: Air New Zealand, the Department of Conservation, Tourism Industry Aotearoa, Local Government New Zealand, New Zealand Māori Tourism, and Tourism Holdings. The "Tiaki Promise" has been promoted through various communication channels, including through websites (e.g., tiakinewzealand.com), resources made available to tourism operators, and physical tourism facilities (e.g., the i-SITE network). Air New Zealand—which was renationalized in 2001—has also played a key role in disseminating the "Tiaki Promise" message to international audiences, adding a dedicated "Tiaki" channel to its inflight entertainment system in 2019 and releasing a new safety briefing video titled *Tiaki & The Guardians* in May 2022.

The "Tiaki Promise" campaign revolves around a sustainability and responsibility pledge that asks visitors to be good stewards of the environment. A number of tourism destinations, ranging from Iceland to Hawai'i, have introduced such pledges in the recent past. What sets the "Tiaki Promise" apart from tourist pledges in other parts of the world is the framing in Māori words and concepts. For example, the campaign's main website states:

In New Zealand we welcome manuhiri (guests) in the spirit of manaakitanga (respect, kindness and hospitality). Hear our call. Feel welcome.

We also present our visitors with a wero (challenge). This wero is a challenge and commitment to care for New Zealand. This wero is the Tiaki Promise.

We encourage all visitors to pick up this wero. To follow the Tiaki Promise. To act as a guardian, protecting and preserving our home. ("Te wero our challenge," n.d.)

² For a comprehensive summary of these greenwashing accusations, see Desmarais (2015).

More fundamentally, *tiaki* is the Māori word for “caring” or “protecting,” and a reference to the socio-environmental ethic of *kaitiakitanga*. While the literal translation is “guardianship,” *kaitiakitanga*—as Kawharu (2000) explains—“is more than managing relations between environmental resources and humans;” it also provides principles for ensuring the sustainability of human communities (p. 352). Put differently, *kaitiakitanga* requires that two sets of responsibilities are kept in balance: *manaaki whenua* (caring for the land) and *manaaki tāngata* (caring for people).

The ethics of *kaitiakitanga* are rooted in the *whakapapa* worldview. Similar to other Indigenous peoples around the world (e.g., Cajete, 2000; Kimmerer, 2013), Māori believe that humans are not elevated above or separated from nature (Hēnare, 2017, p. 130). Instead, humans are considered an integral part of nature and are members of the same big family as animals and plants—a perspective that is sometimes referred to as *kincentricity* (Salmón, 2000).

According to the Māori creation story, it was nonhuman relatives who helped humans enter the world.³ In the beginning, Rangiūi (the sky father) and Papatūānuku (the earth mother) were joined together. Their children—who lived between them in eternal darkness—conspired to separate their parents, which allowed light to flow and established the children as *atua* (spiritual guardians) over various domains of the natural world. For example, Tāne Mahuta became the *atua* of the forests and Tangaroa the *atua* of the sea. The first human was created when Tāne used soil from his mother, Papatūānuku, to mold a woman.

This genealogical sequence places Māori in an extended network of life that relies on upholding responsibilities to both human and “more than human” relatives (Harmsworth & Awatere, 2013, p. 275). That is to say, the obligations that humans feel toward their close family members are extended to all life. Thus, in contrast to the Western view of nature as a commodity to be exploited, Māori consider “Earth’s bounty ... to be a gift necessitating reciprocity on the part of human users in order to maintain sustainability” (Roberts, Norman, Minhinnick, Wihongi, & Kirkwood, 1995, p. 14).

In the next section, I will argue that the “*Tiaki Promise*” campaign goes beyond minimizing the negative environmental impacts of tourism. Instead, the campaign has to be understood primarily as a tool of nation branding, appropriating the Māori ethics of *kaitiakitanga* to strengthen New Zealand’s global image as a “green, untouched” land. While the “100% pure” strategy merely references Māori culture to add a sense of “exoticism,” the “*Tiaki Promise*” moves Māori epistemology into the center of the marketing message—in particular, to bat away accusations of greenwashing and to reinforce the core values of the New Zealand brand.

Air New Zealand’s *Tiaki* & The Guardians Safety Video

Since returning to government control in 2001, Air New Zealand has been an important player in the communication of New Zealand’s nation brand message. Safety briefing videos, in particular, have been used as a key branding tool. For example, to support the “100% Middle Earth” slogan, Air New Zealand created two *Hobbit*-themed briefing videos (one in 2012, another one in 2014). These high-production value videos are not only shown onboard aircraft before take-off, but they are also widely disseminated to non-flying audiences

³ It is important to note that there are different tribal variations of this story.

through global news outlets and social media (Light, 2021, p. 51). Similarly, *Guardians* (AirNZ, 2022a) is fully integrated into the “Tiaki Promise” campaign and its roll-out was timed to coincide with the re-opening of New Zealand’s international borders in mid-2022, following more than two years of COVID-19 isolation (1News, 2022). The video has been prominently placed on the “Tiaki Promise” website and, at the time of writing, had generated over five million views on YouTube alone.

Guardians (AirNZ, 2022a) takes the form of a traditional Māori oral narrative (kōrero). Many of such narratives document the actions that ancestors took in the past to manage the balance between human and nonhuman life, and thus serve as important “storerooms” of ecological knowledge and models for kaitiakitanga practices in the present (Kawharu, 2010; Patterson, 2006). That is to say, Māori storytelling sits in a collapsed space-time framework: “The past (personified as ancestors) is still present and continues to impact on events today” (Roberts, 2013, p. 97). Or as Winter (2020) eloquently puts it, “The creators of knowledge are at once ancestors and living in current thought and will continue to vibrate in the lives of future generations” (p. 283).

The video opens with a shot of a marae, a Māori meeting ground. We enter the whareniui (meeting house) where a group of children are gathered around an older man with a traditional facial tā moko (tattoo). He begins to speak:

Tihei mauri ora. Welcome to our world. I’m going to tell you the story of Tiaki. Tiaki connects us to care for our people, our place and our culture. And it’s also where the hero of our story gets his name. Tiaki knew that we don’t inherit the Earth from our ancestors, we only borrow it from our children. (AirNZ, 2022a, 0:01)⁴

The camera leaves the whareniui and follows a red-tailed tropicbird (amokura) as it soars into the sky. The bird takes us along a river that meanders through a lush mountainous landscape and the narrator continues: “So to show us how important it is to care for our beautiful country, Tiaki set out to visit the guardians of this world” (AirNZ, 2022a, 0:24). We meet Tiaki on a simple wooden pier that sits in a crystal blue lake surrounded by snow-capped mountains. Tiaki—who wears a traditional Māori cloak—climbs into an elaborately carved waka (canoe), and the scene cuts to two flight attendants in contemporary uniforms: “Kia ora (hello) and welcome aboard this Air New Zealand flight. Just like Tiaki, Air New Zealand has made a promise to help care for our people, places and culture. So we’ll be joining him on his quest” (AirNZ, 2022a, 0:32).

The two flight attendants and a young White female passenger—carrying a modern backpack and wearing casual outdoor clothing—take their seats behind Tiaki (see Figure 2). The waka sets off and is soon lifted into the sky by a flock of seabirds. Together with the main characters, we embark on a journey through majestic, pristine landscapes—including dense forests, seemingly endless coastlines, towering mountains, and glistening glaciers. The journey connects four Māori guardians and their realms: Tāne Mahuta, Tangaroa, Papatūānuku, and Ranginui. Each stop provides an opportunity not only for the crew to brief viewers about safety equipment and emergency procedures, but also to reference kaitiakitanga ethics. For example, when

⁴ “Tihei mauri ora” is a common expression in the Māori language and often used to signal that someone wants to speak.

visiting Tangaroa, Tiaki throws a line and hook into the ocean, prompting the narrator to say: “Remember Tiaki that it’s important to only take what you need” (AirNZ, 2022a, 3:05). Along the way, the female passenger expands her knowledge of kaitiakitanga and even acquires a basic grasp of the Māori language—enough to thank Tāne for giving us “the wonders of the forest, including the very air we breathe” (AirNZ, 2022a, 2:02).



**Figure 2. Image to promote the safety briefing video.
Source: AirNZ (2022b).**

As the journey nears its end, the narrator quotes a Māori proverb: “If the land is well and the sea is well, the people will thrive” (Toitū te marae a Tāne Mahuta, toitū te marae a Tangaroa, toitū te tangata; AirNZ, 2022a, 4:17). One of the flight attendants again asks viewers “to join Tiaki’s quest to care for the people, places and culture of Aotearoa” (AirNZ, 2022a, 4:31).⁵ The scene then cuts back to the marae, where the narrator tells the children that “Tiaki is still out there. Caring for our guardians. Showing us the way” (AirNZ, 2022a, 4:42).

Much like the “100% pure” branding strategy, *Guardians* (AirNZ, 2022a) relies heavily on landscape imagery to position New Zealand as “a relatively undiscovered, untouched land.” However, the safety briefing video goes beyond the “100% pure” campaign by creating a new brand message bolstered by the Māori worldview: New Zealand is unspoiled and green because its people strive to live by the ethical principles of kaitiakitanga. Predicated on the common understanding that—in any culture or social group—there is always a gap between the ideal and reality, the campaign thus avoids repeating the impossible-to-achieve “100% clean” promise. What is more, through the character of the female passenger, the video communicates that non-Māori, too, can live their lives in conformity with kaitiakitanga ethics. Hence, similar to what other nation brands have done to maintain their relevance in consumers’ minds (e.g., Kaneva, 2023; Phillips et al., 2021), brand New Zealand presents itself as the “cure” that humanity needs to tackle its problems. In particular, by couching its

⁵ Aotearoa is the Māori name for New Zealand.

“green” proposition in the language of kaitiakitanga ethics, brand New Zealand positions itself as a model to emulate in the fight against climate change and creates an illusion of agency that audiences may feel they had lost due the overwhelming scale of the planet’s ecological crisis.

Seen from the angle of the instrumentalist approach to nation branding, *Guardians* (AirNZ, 2022a) may be considered an effective strategy to strengthen New Zealand’s “green and untouched” brand image amid mounting accusations of greenwashing. However, in the remainder of the article, I will apply a critical-cultural lens to reveal that, despite making heavy references to Māori epistemology, the video silences rather than amplifies Indigenous voices in global debates on climate change and thus closes the space for the mobilization of eco-social alternatives to the liberal-capitalist order. In other words, while the “100% pure” campaign has drawn criticism of greenwashing, New Zealand’s latest branding update can be accused of Indigenous-washing, which I define as the unjustified appropriation of an Indigenous worldview to create a pro-environmental image for a brand, without properly communicating what this worldview actually entails.⁶

Concealing the Impact of Colonialism and Ongoing Coloniality

Over the last decades, Indigenous movements have increasingly articulated their diagnosis of climate change in the arena of global politics—codified in numerous international environmental declarations, such as Kari-Oca (1992), Kimberley (2002), and Kari-Oca II (2012). From the Indigenous perspective, climate change is “inevitably tied to, and symptomatic of, ongoing processes of colonialism, dispossession, capitalism, imperialism/globalization and patriarchy” (McGregor, Whitaker, & Sritharan, 2020, p. 36). As Native American philosopher Kyle Whyte (2017) argues, human-caused climate change in the 21st century is merely “an *intensified repetition* of anthropogenic environmental change inflicted on Indigenous peoples via colonial practices that facilitated capitalist industrial expansion” (p. 156; emphasis added).

Notwithstanding that Indigenous peoples continue to reiterate the role of colonialism and unchecked capitalism in accelerating the planetary ecological crisis, *Guardians* (AirNZ, 2022a) erases all traces of colonial violence and ongoing “climate coloniality” (Sultana, 2022). We see untouched, pristine landscapes, but we do *not* see how European settler colonialism separated Māori communities from their ancestral land and how subsequently “ecological imperialism” (Crosby, 2004)—by transforming the natural landscape to open it for capitalist exploitation—accelerated global climate change.⁷

⁶ This understanding of Indigenous-washing differs from other uses of the term, such as the practice of companies to convey a false impression that their environmentally damaging activities are necessary for Indigenous economic development and poverty alleviation (McCool & Lewton, 2022). Similar to what scholars of greenwashing have argued (e.g., de Freitas Netto et al., 2020), I believe that there are different forms of Indigenous-washing.

⁷ It is interesting to note that state-sponsored narratives that are targeted at domestic audiences to construct a national identity do emphasize the environmental transformations brought about by European colonization. In particular, the conversion of “wild untamed nature” into “productive land” by European settlers in the 1800s is celebrated as a testament to core New Zealand attributes, such as ingenuity and hard work (e.g., Hellmann, 2022a).

By making several longer stops in scenic places, Tiaki's journey in the flying waka implies free movement and access to land. This storytelling structure references the traditional Māori understanding of land tenure, whereby people did not own land, but merely owned the right to use a particular resource in a particular way (Rout, Awatere, Mika, Reid, & Roskrug, 2021, para. 20). Yet, as the video gives Tiaki and his passengers the freedom to endlessly explore and roam the landscape, it hides the fact that vast areas of Māori land were confiscated (and privatized) after the end of the New Zealand Wars (Gilling, 2001)—a series of conflicts between the 1840s and 1870s through which the British sought to impose political sovereignty over the colony. Moreover, Māori were separated from their land through what Bacon (2019) calls "slow violence." In particular, the introduction of private property law—most importantly, the 1869 Native Lands Act, upheld by the Land Court—contributed to a steady erosion of communal Māori landholding (Anderson, Binney, & Harris, 2015, p. 256). Meanwhile, colonial practices of renaming places meant that the newly named land became disconnected from songs, stories, and other cultural expressions of Māori's spiritual connection with nature (Smith, 2012, pp. 53–54).

Once the land had been pried away from collective Māori tenure, colonial settlers set out to create a "neo-Europe"—that is, they sought to devise "a world that looked and felt more like the one from whence they came from" (King, 2003, p. 195). In this process, European colonialists not only polluted waterways and introduced harmful alien animal species, but they also advanced global warming by destroying carbon sinks and ramping up greenhouse gas emissions. Around eight million hectares of native forest were cleared by the sawmilling and timber industry as well as to make space for grassland to graze sheep and cattle (Wynn, 2013). Today, animal farming is New Zealand's single largest source of greenhouse gas pollution—accounting for almost 45% of total emissions (Ministry for the Environment, 2022).

It is worth highlighting that, while *Guardians* (AirNZ, 2022a) makes invisible any physical evidence of ecological imperialism in the landscape, it still replicates colonial forms of discourse. In particular, by deploying what Echtner and Prasad (2003) call the "myth of the unchanged," the video implies that tourists can relive the journeys and experiences of colonial explorers. Because New Zealand's landscapes are visualized as timeless spaces, "the tourist expects to find legendary lands—to uncover their mystical secrets, to marvel at their exotic people, and to wonder at their opulence" (p. 669).

The invisibility of colonial violence and colonially imposed environmental change is not the only "strategy of persuasion" (Rose, 2016, p. 193) that helps to conceal the role of colonialism in propelling global climate change. The knowledgeable/uninformed dichotomy constructed through the characters of Tiaki and the White female passenger also works to mask colonialism's responsibility for the planetary ecological crisis. While Tiaki acts with purpose and determination, the female passenger ends up being a part of the story only by coincidence: As she hikes through the New Zealand bush on her own, she hears the narrator say that "caring for Aotearoa isn't something that [Tiaki] can do alone" and spontaneously volunteers "to come along" (AirNZ, 2022a, 0:45). While Tiaki—with his eyes firmly fixed on the horizon in front of him—confidently steers the waka across the landscape, the female passenger gazes at the world around her with childlike wonder and seems almost overwhelmed by the new experiences.

From the perspective of post-colonial theory, the knowledgeable/uninformed dichotomy may seem positive—in the sense that it challenges colonial stereotypes of Indigenous people as "backward" and

“inferior” (e.g., Hall, 1992). However, in the context of New Zealand’s nation branding, the juxtaposition of Tiaki (as the guide) and the White female passenger (as the learner) obscures the fact that the institutions of settler colonialism have suppressed Indigenous ecological knowledge and continue to do so not just in New Zealand (e.g., Wehi, Whaanga, Watene, & Steeves, 2020, p. 190) but also in other parts of the world (Turner, Gregory, Brooks, Failing, & Satterfield, 2008). Even though it has to be stressed that Indigenous forms of knowledge are inherently dynamic and constantly adapting to changing political and ecological circumstances (Berkes, 2012, pp. 236–236), much knowledge has been lost due to the effects of colonization. Native Canadian writer Leanne Simpson (2004) verbalizes how many Indigenous people around the world feel:

The colonial powers attacked virtually every aspect of our knowledge systems during the most violent periods of the past five centuries by rendering our spirituality and ceremonial life illegal, attempting to assimilate our children and destroy our languages through the residential school system, outlawing traditional governance, and destroying the lands and waters to which we are intrinsically tied. (p. 377)

In short, *Guardians* (AirNZ, 2022a) implies that we can learn from Indigenous worldviews how to slow or even reverse climate change, but the innocent, childlike curiosity with which the White female passenger approaches kaitiakitanga covers up how colonialism has intensified climate change by violently eroding the very same ecological knowledge systems that the video sells as the solution to the current ecological crisis.

Moreover, the video also obfuscates the role of colonialism in exacerbating climate change through the flying waka as a metaphor for modern-day aircrafts. This metaphorical reading is encouraged in a number of ways. To begin with, the video is filled with scenes that show the waka gliding through the sky, powered only by a simple wooden paddle. Moreover, the waka repeatedly serves to visualize different parts of the safety briefing, such as the use of seat belts, the storage of luggage, and the location of life jackets. Spoken text supports these metaphorical visuals. For example, the video makes frequent use of the Māori word for aircraft (waka rererangi), which translates literally as “canoe of the sky.” Similarly, at the end of the video, as we return to the marae, one of the children asks, “Are flying waka real?” The storyteller responds: “Of course they are. They’re just a bit more flash these days” (AirNZ, 2022a: 4:47).

As a strategy of persuasion, the waka/aircraft metaphor does two things. First, it helps to gloss over the fact that civil aviation played an important part in holding together the British Empire in the earlier decades of the 20th century (Pirie, 2009). Air New Zealand was originally established as TEAL (Tasman Empire Airways Limited) in 1940, providing a connection between Auckland and Sydney, from where passengers could take the so-called “kangaroo route” all the way to London. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the waka/aircraft metaphor draws attention away from the role of the aviation industry and international mass tourism in contributing to the colonization of the atmosphere (Malm & Warlenius, 2019). The waka—which flies without burning fossil fuels—hides the fact that “luxury” emissions from Northern air travel tourism not only accelerate global warming, but also block countries in the Global South from claiming a similar portion of the atmosphere’s sink capacity for “subsistence” emissions.

By unpacking the discursive organization of the *Guardians* (AirNZ, 2022a) video, the preceding analysis demonstrates how New Zealand's nation branding cloaks the unequal responsibilities for the global climate crisis. What is particularly problematic is that the video mutes Indigenous narratives that highlight the environmental harms of colonialism and capitalism, while at the same time appropriating Māori ecological knowledge and the accompanying cosmology for marketing purposes.

Marginalizing Indigenous Socioecological Alternatives

Critical scholars of environmental communication have highlighted a paradox: Notwithstanding the fact that the issue of climate change has shot up the political agenda in recent years, the mediated public discourse about climate change has been characterized by a simultaneous decrease of contestation and disagreement over the social, political, and economic structures that caused the crisis in the first place. As a result, the politics of the environment have been reduced to a negotiation about potential techno-managerial fixes within the framework of the global neoliberal market economy, thereby concealing more transformative socioecological imaginations (Carvalho et al., 2021; Maesele, 2015).

Indigenous groups are among those social actors that continue to challenge depoliticizing and neoliberal discourses on climate change. Based on a distinct diagnosis that foregrounds the role of Western colonialism and capitalism in accelerating the world's climate crisis, Indigenous movements and activists question the effectiveness of market-oriented eco-fixes within the existing liberal-capitalist order. Instead, they have called for holistic, transformative change to address the threat of climate change. These plans are rooted in Indigenous epistemologies and knowledges, and demonstrate the possibility of alternative socioecological futures beyond the failing model of profit-driven individualism (Fenelon & Hall, 2008; McGregor, 2021). As Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013)—a member of the Potawatomi Nation—gracefully puts it in her best-selling book *Braiding Sweetgrass*,

What is the alternative? And how do we get there? I don't know for certain, but I believe the answer is contained within our teachings of "One Bowl and One Spoon," which holds that the gifts of the earth are all in one bowl, all to be shared from a single spoon. This is the vision of the economy of the commons, wherein resources fundamental to our well-being, like water and land and forests, are commonly held rather than commodified. Properly managed, the commons approach maintains abundance, not scarcity. These contemporary economic alternatives strongly echo the indigenous worldview in which the earth exists not as private property, but as a commons, to be tended with respect and reciprocity for the benefit of all. (p. 376)

As I will discuss in the following paragraphs, the *Guardians* video (AirNZ, 2022a)—despite borrowing heavily from the Māori concept of *kaitiakitanga*—forecloses the space for democratic debate about alternative sustainable futures beyond the framework of the global neoliberal market economy and thus marginalizes Indigenous voices. Specifically, the video sponsors depoliticizing discourses on climate change by framing the struggle against climate change as the ethical responsibility of cosmopolitan individuals. Individualizing the responsibility for climate change narrows the space for disagreement on how to avert planetary collapse—and thus contributes to the naturalization of the global neoliberal capitalist order—

because individuals are differentiated as either ethically “good” or “bad,” depending on whether they support or oppose the moral consensus that climate change requires not a transformation of political and economic institutions, but merely a transformation of our ethical values (Carvalho, Van Wessel, & Maesele, 2017, p. 128; Machin, 2013, chapter 2).

The video individualizes the responsibility to care for nature through various strategies of persuasion. First, the waka/aircraft metaphor helps to distract from the fact that corporations, such as Air New Zealand, are much worse climate polluters than individuals. The waka, as a metaphorical device, thus allows Air New Zealand to promote the idea that “we must all do our bit” to fight climate change: Viewers are told that the airline has already made a promise “to help care” for the natural environment and are later encouraged “to join Tiaki’s quest” themselves (AirNZ, 2022a, 4:31). What the (carbon neutral) flying waka disguises is that Air New Zealand is in fact *not* doing its bit to slow down global warming. For example, its emissions in 2018 were 700,000 tonnes (the equivalent annual carbon footprint of around 90,000 New Zealanders) higher than they were in 2011 (Mitchell, 2019) and, in 2022, the company revealed that it will add sleeping pods to its long-haul fleet, which is projected to significantly increase emissions per passenger (Wannan, 2022).

Second, *Guardians* (AirNZ, 2022a) individualizes the responsibility to care for nature by rendering invisible the social dimension of kaitiakitanga. As explained earlier, kaitiakitanga is a *socio*-environmental ethic that provides principles for achieving a balance between “caring for people” and “caring for the land” responsibilities. However, in the video, kaitiakitanga has been removed from its social context. The pristine landscapes show no signs of human activity geared toward ensuring the sustainability of people and communities; apart from the brief scene in which Tiaki is seen fishing, we do not encounter any people exploiting food resources provided by nature.

By stripping kaitiakitanga of its social dimension, the video reproduces the “ecologically noble savage” stereotype, a common feature of which is the idea that Indigenous people “live in harmony with nature and have an environmentally neutral impact on local ecologies” (Smithers, 2015, p. 92). This romanticized archetype is problematic because it denies Indigenous people their ecological agency and insists that they perform a certain prescribed role toward nature, characterized by nurturing and conserving qualities (e.g., Braun, 2007; Ray, 2013, pp. 83–92). Māori certainly do not conform to the “ecological savage” stereotype, as is evidenced by the frequent clashes between Māori communities and environmental movements in recent years. While the latter often take a strictly conservationist position, Māori groups have typically sought to balance their kaitiaki obligations toward nature with social concerns, including economic advancement, cultural survival, and justice for past wrongs (Mills, 2009).

Moreover, what we also do not see in the video are the social institutions that regulate kaitiakitanga practices. The knowledgeable/uninformed dichotomy that is constructed through Tiaki and the White female passenger suggests that, after learning the basics of kaitiakitanga, the responsibility to carry out kaitiaki obligations is merely underpinned by personal conscience, leaving it entirely up to the individual to comply (or not). What this obscures is that kaitiakitanga has been—and continues to be—embedded in Māori governance structures and practices. Even before the arrival of European colonialism, the exercise of kaitiakitanga was governed by clearly defined territorial boundaries between kinship groups, authoritative power to enforce rules

on behalf of the community, and processes of dispute resolution (Kahui & Richards, 2014). At the level of the hapū (sub-tribe), which is considered the main unit of Māori society, it was rangatira (chiefs), tohunga (knowledge experts), and kaumatua (elders) who were entrusted with the responsibility to ensure a balanced equilibrium between people and the natural world—for example, by placing rāhui (restrictions or prohibitions) over resources that had become depleted through carelessness or overuse. Kaitiakitanga “entailed a fundamental responsibility of accountability,” as Kawharu (2000) explains: “Tohunga, rangatira and kaumatua were accountable to, and kept in check by, the wider kin group ... Should rangatira or kaumatua become unduly autocratic, their leadership could soon be put in jeopardy” (p. 359).

To sum up, the *Guardians* video (AirNZ, 2022a)—through its discursive organization—individualizes the responsibility for climate change. The burden to address the planetary ecological crisis is placed on individuals and their lifestyle choices, not on political collectives and corporations. Even though the video is framed in the language of kaitiakitanga, it silences Indigenous alternatives to neoliberal capitalism. *Guardians* (AirNZ, 2022a) thus contributes to “cognitive coloniality” and the Western hegemonization of climate narratives. To put it in Sultana’s (2022) words, the video “limits the terms of global debate, hegemonizes knowledge of and about climate change, and what actions are possible, thereby destroying other epistemologies” (p. 6).

Conclusion

Despite successfully positioning the country as a niche tourism destination, New Zealand’s “100% pure” nation branding has attracted ever more frequent accusations of greenwashing. Brand managers have responded with a number of refinements, most recently adding the “Tiaki Promise” adjustment. Unlike the “100% pure” slogan, the “Tiaki Promise” tweak does not make any claims about environmental performance, but instead seeks to convince global audiences that New Zealand is greener than other countries because its people strive to live by the principles of kaitiakitanga. A key element of this new campaign is the Air New Zealand *Guardians* safety briefing video (AirNZ, 2022a), which has generated millions of views on social media. Seen through a critical-cultural lens, the video can be described as a case of Indigenous-washing in that it appropriates the Māori worldview to mislead audiences into adopting positive beliefs about New Zealand’s greenness.

The video takes the form of a traditional Māori narrative, in which Tiaki—as the personification of the past—instructs people living in the present how to apply the principles of kaitiakitanga to maintain the balance between human and nonhuman life. Viewers are explicitly invited “to join Tiaki’s quest,” which creates the sense of an imagined brand community among those who can identify with the objective of achieving a harmonious relationship between humans and nature. The video thus promotes two brand propositions. First, the kaitiakitanga ethic is ever-present in New Zealand life and ensures that New Zealanders have a uniquely nurturing relationship with nature. Second, anyone in the world can incorporate kaitiakitanga into their individual value systems and become a more sustainable global citizen.

As the critical analysis revealed, these two brand propositions rest on a particular discursive construction that relies heavily on invisibilities, dichotomies, and visual metaphors. For one, to claim that kaitiakitanga is an essential part of what defines New Zealand as a nation, the video renders invisible the

disruptions to Māori eco-social relations caused by settler colonialism. What viewers do not see is how Māori were separated from their ancestral land—and prevented from fully performing their role as kaitiaki—both by military force and various forms of slow violence, including environmental degradation and pollution. Moreover, while the knowledgeable/uninformed dichotomy (acted out by Tiaki and the White female passenger) masks how colonialism has eroded Māori ecological knowledge, the visual waka/aircraft metaphor deflects from the ongoing colonization of the atmosphere by New Zealand's mass tourism industry.

The claim that Māori ecological ethics can be learned and applied by anyone in the world is premised on a misrepresentation of kaitiakitanga. In particular, the video wrenches the kaitiakitanga ethic out of its social context by narrating the story of Tiaki against the backdrop of unspoiled landscapes that bear no signs of kaitiakitanga's "caring for people" imperative. The video communicates an overly idyllic understanding of kaitiakitanga and portrays Māori in a primitive affinity with nature. In addition, what viewers do not see are the governance structures into which kaitiakitanga is embedded. These institutions provide various mechanisms to ensure that individuals participate in a coordinated effort to care for the relations between humans and their nonhuman kin. Instead, the knowledgeable/uninformed relationship between Tiaki and the female passenger implies that kaitiakitanga principles can be implemented through enlightened, uncoordinated consumer choices alone.

More broadly, I have argued that the particular discursive organization of the video contributes to the depoliticization of climate change. For decades, Indigenous movements and activists have put forward a distinct analysis of the planetary ecological crisis that lays the blame on settler colonialism and capitalism, and calls for transformative change informed by kincentric epistemologies. Despite placing the Māori worldview at the center of its "Tiaki Promise" campaign, New Zealand's nation brand marginalizes Indigenous voices in global debates on climate change—not only by obscuring the link between colonialism and climate change, but also by individualizing the responsibility for climate change, which closes the space for the articulation of alternative eco-social imaginaries. The safety video supports the naturalization of capitalism and neoliberal globalization by framing climate change as a matter of individual ethics: Audiences are addressed as atomized consumers and encouraged to take small actions to save the planet.

The argument that New Zealand's nation brand supports depoliticizing discourses of climate change constitutes a significant contribution to critical-cultural scholarship on nation branding. While previous studies have primarily examined how country promotion efforts disregard domestic identity conflicts to create an apolitical image of the nation, my article shows that the depoliticizing effect of nation branding also extends to the global public sphere. What is more, based on the arguments presented in this article, it seems reasonable to conclude that nation branding is unlikely to ever offer solutions to the escalating climate crisis that go beyond "business as usual." As theoretical eco-criticism scholarship (e.g., Kelz & Knappe, 2021) and empirical memory research (e.g., Hellmann, 2022b) have emphasized, deconstructing the human-nature dichotomy and overcoming the prevailing idea of nature as an exploitable commodity may require that we face up to the environmental degradation that we have caused in the past. This is not something that sits well with nation branding, which—because of its central aim to cultivate a favorable image for the nation state—has a tendency to repress the memory of historical wrongdoings.

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