

## Decolonizing the Queer Project of Aotearoa New Zealand: Weaving Takatāpui Identity into Queer Spaces

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Most recent research in queer studies focuses on White queer cultures, with other representations of queer identities overlooked or excluded, leaving rich Indigenous knowledge outside of the queer framework. The current study applies queer humanism to analyze the narratives recorded during semistructured interviews with trans and nonbinary individuals in Aotearoa New Zealand, focusing on communication of meanings of *takatāpui*, the Indigenous Māori queer identity. The discourse analysis of their narratives suggests that queer Māori participants have embraced this identity and expanded its meaning from same-sex relationships to all gender- and sexually diverse people. The word *takatāpui*, as an umbrella term for all queer Māori identities, was also discussed by some Pākehā (non-Māori/European) participants, indicating the trend for weaving the Indigenous knowledge into wider queer spaces. This deeper understanding of the meaning and value of *takatāpui* identity in queer cultures provides valuable resources for decolonizing queer spaces in Aotearoa and other Indigenous contexts.

*Keywords: takatāpui Māori identity, queer humanism, decolonizing methodology, narrative inquiry, violence of heteronormativity*

The decolonizing projects of Aotearoa New Zealand appear to be under threat because of the actions of the current government made up of the coalition of the New Zealand National Party, ACT, and NZ First. These political decisions, unfortunately, follow the past transgressions that Māori, the Indigenous people of Aotearoa, have sustained as part of colonization by Pākehā (a Māori word for European settlers), in the form of political, economic, cultural, and religious oppression (Smith, 2021). These attempts of a rollback on the decolonizing initiatives in Aotearoa are in sync with the current global pushback against human rights of minority groups, including gender- and sexually diverse communities (see Butler, 2021).

Many Māori scholars, including Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021), argue that the cultural imperialism that Māori sustained because of the imposition of Eurocentric cultural norms resulted in formal and informal

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bans of the Indigenous traditions and practices across all economic, legal, political, and social domains. The colonial settler ideology in Aotearoa, as well as in other cultures colonized by Europeans, rested on the sanctity of Christian beliefs, defined as the only moral and righteous way of life (Morgensen, 2012). Across colonized societies, Christian values professed by evangelical missionaries have demanded strict adherence to the Bible and viewed local traditions as sinful and savage, especially in relation to gender and sexuality (Asante & Hanchey, 2021). As European missionaries endorsed only heterosexual relationships, heteronormativity became the dominant doctrine in settler colonial societies that prohibited any other gender or sexuality expressions (Tompkins, 2015). In Aotearoa too, anything outside the heteronormative binary was deemed abnormal and illegal (Kerekere, 2017).

Conversely, Māori culture has a much wider understanding of intimate relationships, with individuals in same-sex relationships accepted as part of family structures for centuries (Murray, 2003). A Māori term *takatāpui* that originally meant individuals in same-sex relationships has been recently reclaimed by Māori (Te Awakōtuku, 1991), in resistance to the repression of the Indigenous history and knowledge (Kerekere, 2017). Although these efforts coincide with global trends toward a wider acceptance of gender and sexual diversity, the intersectionality of race and gender embodied by Indigenous queer minorities has not been fully embraced as a theoretical and discursive resource by communication and media studies (Eguchi, 2021). Given the predominant Whiteness of the communication discipline and cultural industries (Ng, White, & Saha, 2020; Yep, 2014), academic scholarship and social justice movements for equal rights of gender- and sexually diverse communities have mainly focused on Western, mostly White, populations (Morgensen, 2012), with the Indigenous knowledge still confined to its own niche mediums. Hence, there is a need in developing alternative ways of theorizing and challenging colonial-gendered histories, to close this gap and weave Indigenous knowledge into the existing scholarship on queer imaginaries (Driskill, 2010). Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to investigate the identity constructions that queer participants grounded in the Indigenous knowledge of gender and sexual diversity in Aotearoa New Zealand.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

The research into identity formation stems from the ideas of humanism that prioritizes human experiences and aims at empowering a "human subject" by giving them voice and refashioning them as a fully autonomous and self-actualizing agent (Plummer, 2013). However, Plummer (2013) points out that such a universal claim would "result in overt individualism strongly connected to the Enlightenment project (Western, patriarchal, racist, colonialist, etc.)" (p. 417). He proposes a more critical, self-reflexive, and queered approach of critical humanism, which "champions those values that give dignity to the person, reduce human sufferings, and enhance human well-being" (Plummer, 2013, p. 413). Additionally, Ciszek, Place, and Logan (2022) offer to enrich such an approach with the perspective of queer humanism that focuses on gendered experiences of individuals explored through queer theories.

Accordingly, this research is located at the intersection of critical humanism, queer theories (Ciszek et al., 2022; Plummer, 2013; Yep, 2014), and decolonizing framework (Smith, 2021), with a particular focus on identity construction and performance (Butler, 2006). Following Butler's (2006) conceptualization of gender as performative and negotiable, queer theories regard sexuality and gender as socially constructed and as integral parts of cultural identity (Calafell & Nakayama, 2016; Eguchi, 2021). Queer theories

deconstruct the logic of binary heteronormativity, destabilize denaturalized identity categories of gender and sexuality (Yep, 2014), and provide multiple resources for understanding new variations of gender construction and performance (McCann & Monaghan, 2020). However, queer studies have been criticized for investigating only White queer perspectives, while obfuscating or ignoring those queer identities that fall outside Western and mostly White representations (Asante & Hanchey, 2021; Eguchi, 2021; Yep, 2014). As argued by Smith (2010), "in the move to go 'postidentity,' queer theory often reinstates a White supremacist, settler colonialism by disappearing the Indigenous peoples colonized in this land who become the foils for the emergence of postcolonial, postmodern, diasporic, and queer subjects" (p. 41). Queer people of color are currently fighting for their visibility and representation across different cultural contexts (Asante & Hanchey, 2021; Pipkin & Clarke, 2023), but even less is acknowledged about the Indigenous manifestations of queer identities (Driskill, 2010).

Therefore, this research aims to contribute to the decolonizing projects of Aotearoa (Smith, 2021), by applying the ideas of queer humanism as the foundation for human rights and social justice (Ciszek et al., 2022). Herein, Ciszek et al. (2022) draw on the ideas of critical race humanism, which "is a response to the Eurocentrism embedded in Enlightenment humanism that positioned human beings as White, and to be non-White was to be sub-human, less than, and of an inferior order" (p. 4). The concept of identity, as performative and dynamic, is at the center of queer inquiry and at the intersection of race, gender, class, sexuality, and disability, as well as grounded in history, geography, society, and culture (Ciszek, 2018). Approaching "social identities as mutually and historically constitutive" (Ciszek, 2018, p. 140) informs the queer-of-color critique that reveals a lacuna in current queer studies, mostly concentrated on a default invisibility of a White race as a queer representation of gender identities (Ferguson, 2004). One of the recent developments that bridges the queer-of-color critique and critical race theories, by challenging implicit Whiteness and heteronormativity as the foundations of oppression of Indigenous identities, is the decolonizing project of Aotearoa (Smith, 2021).

### **Decolonizing Gender and Sexuality**

The Indigenous people of the land in Aotearoa, Māori, have experienced political, economic, and cultural injustices following European colonization (Smith, 2021). The colonization of lands intertwined with the colonization of minds, with European missionaries enforcing Christian values and Eurocentric norms on Indigenous people, not only in Aotearoa but across the world (Driskill, 2010; Ravulo, Hollier, Waqa, Vulavou, & Dina, 2024). Any spiritual beliefs deviating from the Christian prescriptions were considered "pagan," and any traditions outside heteronormativity were deemed sinful (Tortorici, 2018). Hence, queer Indigenous individuals have to continue decolonizing efforts on two fronts: against White dominance and racism, as well as against homophobia and transphobia.

The literature in queer Indigenous studies indicates the widespread and violent suppression of the Indigenous expressions of gender and sexuality across different cultures and locations (Tompkins, 2015). Yep (2014) notes that heterosexuality is a relatively recent invention even in Western cultures and points to Foucault's (1990) example of ancient Greece with its acceptance of diverse sexualities. Any variations from heterosexual relationships were banned and considered sinful only with the advent of Christianity, which was deployed as one of the methods of European domination during colonization. The violence of

heteronormativity (Yep, 2014) had harmful effects on all gender- and sexually diverse individuals in Western countries, but it was especially destructive across colonized societies, where it was aimed to annihilate Indigenous traditions and practices, including precolonial manifestations of gender and sexuality (Tortorici, 2018). As part of recent decolonizing efforts, activists have started to revive the Indigenous knowledge of gender and sexuality, drawing on rich discursive resources that exist in North and South America, in the Pacific region, and other places.

For instance, the Indigenous Native people in North America refer to nonheteronormative individuals as *Two-Spirit* people, as those who embrace both masculine and feminine “spirits” or characteristics (Jacobs, Thomas, & Lang, 1997). At the same time, Driskill (2010) warns that the use of Two-Spirit as an umbrella term for all Native LGBTQ+ people faces the same issues as using the term “queer” in White spaces: by obfuscating the diversity and differences between multiple representations of gender and sexuality, and especially across various Indigenous cultures of the United States and Canada. Driskill (2010) argues, however, that “while our traditional understandings of gender and sexuality are as diverse as our nations, Native Two-Spirit/GLBTQ people share experiences under heteropatriarchal, gender-polarized colonial regimes that attempt to control Native nations” (p. 69).

The Indigenous peoples of Australia and Torres Straight Islands also practiced and celebrated different gender roles and sexualities (Moon, 2020). Since colonization, the Indigenous trans and queer individuals have faced annihilation (symbolic and real) and racism not only within wider Australian society (Watson, 2014) but also within White queer communities, which led Indigenous activists to adopt their own queer terms *sistergirl* and *brotherboy* to reclaim the precolonial acceptance of gender and sexual diversity (Kerry, 2014). Although these terms are derived from the language of the British colonizers, Kerry (2014) argues that “by coalescing around terms as “sistergirl” and “brotherboy,” Indigenous transgender Australians are better equipped to face the dual issues of racism and social exclusion” (p. 185).

Many Pacific cultures, in contrast, have kept the words from their native languages to label nonconforming gender identities. Pacific sexualities have traditionally embraced individuals of the “third gender,” including those identified as *vakasalewalewa* in Fiji (Ravulo et al., 2024), *fa’afafine* in Samoa, and *fakaleiti* in Tonga (Farran, 2010). For example, *fa’afafine* is a Samoan term for a different gender, traditionally representing a person considered to be born as a male but embracing a female identity (Farran, 2010), also used in Aotearoa to represent a trans woman of the Samoan origin (GMA, 2024). The term *fa’afafine* has been used since precolonial times, as Samoan has stayed an official language in Samoa, in comparison to the Māori language, subdued by English as the language of colonizers, until just a few decades ago (Murray, 2003). However, although European colonizers in Samoa have failed to quash the Indigenous language, Christian missionaries have demonized the *fa’afafine* identity, which has been marginalized and stigmatized since the beginning of European colonization (Farran, 2010).

Although European colonization has engaged in repressing different manifestations of gender and sexuality across the region, the diversity and fluidity of Pacific-Indigenous sexualities and genders are being reclaimed through “the sharing of diverse stories that profile resilience and celebrate difference” (Ravulo et al., 2024, p. 222). In Māori culture, the revival of the word *takatāpui*, signifying an authentic cultural identity of Indigeneity and sexuality, has stemmed from both the political struggle for gay rights in Aotearoa New

Zealand since 1970s and the “renaissance” of Māori culture and language following Māori activism and Waitangi Tribunal settlements (Murray, 2003).

### **Takatāpui**

According to Murray (2003), who cites the 1997 New Zealand Aids Foundation report, the term *takatāpui* historically meant “an intimate companion of the same sex” (p. 237). Murray (2003) notes that this term has been used by gay and queer Māori men, while sometimes referring to lesbian women and transgender individuals. Pointing to the “performativity of linguistic practice” (p. 241), he argues that the meaning behind *takatāpui* is not only sexual and cultural; it is also highly political. The political nature of *takatāpui* manifests in deconstructing the harmful effects of colonization that oppress sexual and gender expressions of Māori people, as “it reflects desire for the expression of a ‘silenced’ sexual objectivity” (p. 241).

Similarly, Ngahuia Te Awekōtuku (2001) refers to the definition provided by Williams (1971), with *hoa takatāpui* translated as “intimate companion of the same sex,” noting that gay and lesbian Māori had been using this word “as our word for us” (p. 2). In the transgender glossary of terms used by trans and nonbinary people in Aotearoa, Gender Minorities Aotearoa (GMA, 2024) includes the definition of *takatāpui* as “an umbrella term similar to rainbow person, ‘rainbow community, or LGBTQI+” (p. 18). The glossary notes the original meaning of the word as an intimate companion of the same gender, as well as the contemporary reference to rainbow Māori people as a group.

Elizabeth Kerekere’s (2017) research on the history of *takatāpui* initiated many resources for the *takatāpui* community in Aotearoa. The online resource *Takatāpui: A Resource Hub* extends the historical meaning of *takatāpui* to incorporate “all Māori who identify with diverse genders, sexualities and sex characteristics” (Rainbow Youth, Inc. & Tīwhanawhana Trust, 2024, para. 1). It states that the term was reclaimed by Māori rainbow community in 1980s, and currently, “the use of ‘*takatāpui*’ as an identity is a response to western ideas of sex, sexuality and gender, and emphasizes one’s identity as Māori as inextricably linked to their gender identity, sexuality or variation of sex characteristics” (Rainbow Youth, Inc. & Tīwhanawhana Trust, 2024, para. 2).

Since earlier research on the historical, political, and linguistic meanings of *takatāpui* (e.g., Murray, 2003), there have been some academic publications that incorporate the term *takatāpui* in their research. However, a brief look at research articles on Google Scholar and other academic databases indicates the domination of the medicalization perspective on *takatāpui*. This tendency is the relic of stereotypical constructions of gender diversity and sexual orientation as deviations from normalized heteronormativity, hence, requiring the psychiatric interference to “fix” them as medical and/or psychological problems (Foucault, 1990). Although there are quite a few studies involving *takatāpui*, most peer-reviewed articles in top academic journals focus on such topics as mental health and well-being (Roy, Greaves, Fenaughty, Fleming, & Clark, 2023), homelessness and sex work (Fraser, Chisholm, & Pierse, 2023), mental health support (Fraser, Brady, & Wilson, 2022), secondary school bullying (Lucassen & Burford, 2015), assisted reproduction (Glover, McKree, & Dyal, 2009), and others. These issues are undeniably important to investigate; yet most of them are ultimately rooted in the ongoing intergenerational trauma of colonization

(Meek, 2013) that keeps eroding the personal sense of self of those on the receivers' end and must not be ignored. Hence, understanding the meanings assigned to takatāpui identity should start from the position of decolonizing methodologies (Smith, 2021). Accordingly, to promote a positive view on takatāpui identity and to engage with decolonizing the queer project of Aotearoa, this study poses the following research question: What are the meanings of takatāpui identities as understood and constructed by trans and nonbinary individuals in Aotearoa New Zealand?

### Method

This study is part of a larger research project investigating gender identities of trans and nonbinary individuals in Aotearoa New Zealand. The participants were recruited via Wellington-based national transgender organization Gender Minorities Aotearoa (GMA, 2024) that provides information and support for transgender people including trans binary, nonbinary, intersex, and takatāpui. Thirty semistructured interviews were audio-recorded, with 21 participants' interviews conducted face-to-face and nine over Zoom. The participants' ages ranged from 21 to 50+ years. Three participants identified as Māori and one as Asian, with all others being Pākehā. It is important to note that the author identifies as a queer Pākehā researcher, who had sought cultural consultations from senior Māori scholars and was encouraged to proceed, while acknowledging a privileged White position and respecting and honoring all other cultural identities.

The data analysis followed the principles of queer inquiry (Ciszek, 2018) within the wider narrative framework (Bamberg, 2012; De Fina, 2015). There were several interview questions offered to the participants to guide them in their narratives, for example: How would you describe/introduce yourself in terms of your gender identity? How do you see your gender identity reflected upon by others in society and media? This study discusses the constructions of Indigenous identity reflected in the Māori term takatāpui. The participants' gender labels and pronouns included below follow those indicated by them.

### Findings and Discussion

The focus of this research was on trans and nonbinary identities and the interview questions did not include any identity labels apart from "gender," to allow the participants to choose what they wanted to say about their identification. Several participants spontaneously referred to the term takatāpui and explained what it meant to them. Two Māori participants clearly identified with this concept, and several non-Māori participants also signaled their knowledge of this term. For example, one Māori participant explained how he came to know the term takatāpui and its meaning:

I feel quite lucky being born in New Zealand and having a lot of accepting people around me . . . when I went to *Project Youth*, they'd tell us about how in the Pacific cultures being gender diverse was more accepted before colonization . . . so, since finding out about that . . . and especially for me being Māori and having my culture and everything . . . that a lot of Māori people that I've met are quite accepting of it, because it was just something that was normal . . . before the colonization. When we first learned about takatāpui, I

found it really interesting, 'coz before I'd been told about it, I didn't know anything, and they explained takatāpui and fa'afafine and all the other terms.

It was cool to see that even back, way back, it was accepted to be . . . just diverse . . . I think it was like, the people who were takatāpui were special people from the rest of the people because, they said, it was like they were more spiritually in touch . . . it touches the soul, in a way . . . But yeah, it was actually really good to see that they've started using terms like that in the media.

It's not a term I use with myself much, but if someone asked me, I would say that I do identify as takatāpui. Yeah. In terms of introducing myself to people, if I were to say I am takatāpui, a lot of people won't know. So, for the sake of self-identity, I would say I do identify as takatāpui, but to most other people I would just clarify I'm a transgender male. (P#10 Takatāpui/transgender male, previously nonbinary, in their 20s)

For this Māori participant, the Western concept "transgender male" was an identity construction he would use when he did not expect the knowledge of takatāpui from others. The story of his learning about this term indicates that without decolonizing projects aimed at reclaiming cultural knowledge and heritage (Kerekere, 2017; Smith, 2021), many Māori customs and traditions would not be passed to younger generations, especially if these young Māori grow up in predominantly Pākehā/Western environments.

The participant's point about takatāpui as spiritual and "touching the soul" resonates with similar meanings of the North American Indigenous Two-Spirits identity (Jacobs et al., 1997). However, Driskill (2010) warns that the reference to spirituality does not exclude other, nonqueer, Indigenous identities, emphasizing that "Indigenous gender and sexual identities are intimately connected to land, community, and history" (p. 73). The connection to the land and heritage is one of the most important values across Indigenous cultures, also reflected in the Māori concept of *whakapapa*, which Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) defines as "genealogies of tribes traced back to ancestors who arrived in Aotearoa by canoe and even further back to the creation of the universe" (p. 237). For another Māori participant (in their 50s), the meaning of takatāpui was rooted in their whakapapa, as they narrated their difficult journey to find roots and embrace their cultural identity, which became the reflection of both Indigeneity and gender:

My biggest motivation is my siblings. We're all takatāpui, and takatāpui as in transgender. All of us are . . . I think it's rare to have an entire whānau (Māori: family) who are takatāpui to start with. Well, in terms of Pākehā in the Pākehā world, I'm considered transgender. It's not a word that I use for myself. I've never used it. My sisters have, and they're happy to, but it's not me, because there's no whakapapa to the word transgender and . . . full stop. I'm all about whakapapa and being able to find my way home through whakapapa.

This participant rejects the Western term "transgender" that they do not find relevant to their identity. Grounding takatāpui in the concept of whakapapa, they indicate that their identity is first and

foremost a Māori identity, hence their gender identity is also rooted in Māori worldview and system of meanings, which help explain the term Takatāpuitanga:

Takatāpuitanga is that I have whakapapa and I'm very fortunate that I am one of at least three iwi Māori who have whakapapa directly back to people or ancestors who we now think of as takatāpui. I mean, I use the more modern definition for the word takatāpui to describe myself now. In terms of sexual identity, I've got no idea where I'm at and I'm not that bothered about it. So, the traditional definition of takatāpui, I do not think it's me, but in terms of gender, definitely fits me to a tee.

The participant refers to the traditional definition of takatāpui, as "an intimate companion of the same sex" (Murray, 2003, p. 237), and explains that they draw on the contemporary meaning defining all rainbow Māori (GMA, 2021). Hence, the term takatāpui is a cultural representation of the participant's Indigenous and trans identity in combination. And although takatāpui is also an identity in and of itself (Kerekere, 2017), it becomes one of the cultural resources that some Māori use as the decolonizing strategy to construct their identities. The participant also tells the story of their journey back to the roots that has allowed them to embrace their cultural identity, fusing both the Indigeneity and gender into one concept of takatāpui:

I was displaced at birth; I have a very long story. I was legally adopted and was raised by British people who came here from England. And, several years ago I decided that it was time for me to find my way back home. I applied for my original birth certificate, and it blew me away because it actually had my mother's hapū. I left Auckland and moved to a different region knowing nobody. About three years later, I made the decision to start looking for my whānau. I knew that we'd only come from that region. Fast forward a lot of years. I met my mum, met my sisters, my brothers.

And at one event, Elizabeth Kerekere spoke to me and told me in front of everybody that Takatāpuitanga is an issue for decolonization, it's a Treaty issue, and she's the first person that I have ever heard say something like that, that I've felt like I've been screaming since I was a teenager. So, it was through Elizabeth that I learned that my iwi have the ancient whakapapa back to ancestors who were takatāpui. So, I eventually found the courage to speak to elders at my marae and asked them if they knew the haka, the Karakia, the waiata, the whakapapa to anybody takatāpui. They asked a few more people who asked a few more people, and it started to drip back, back to me that it's my own line as well . . . Which grew me. It grew me from the inside out, I could be in the world for over 50 years, but never connected to anyone or anything, and learning or receiving that information was my first experience of what it would be like to have an umbilical cord attached to somebody of my own. It's so emotional. And I wish that journey for every, every Māori. Takatāpui or not, there's so many of us who don't know, don't know how to find our way home. (P#24 Takatāpui in their 50s)

The dispossession and dislocation this Māori participant has suffered through Pākehā adoption is a common example of colonial violence aimed at annihilating the Indigenous culture and language (Smith, 2021; Watson, 2014). The disconnection manifests in the loss of knowledge about the ancestral grounds, not only through the blood lines, but also the particular places in Aotearoa, sacred for different Māori iwi and hapū (Māori: tribes and clans), such as rivers, mountains, ocean shore, and islands. Reconnecting back transpires to this participant in feeling as if being reattached by an umbilical cord, or *whenua* in Māori language. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) notes that “Most Indigenous peoples regard blood, the placenta and afterbirth as something ‘special.’ The afterbirth used to be buried in the land. The Māori term for land and afterbirth are the same word, *whenua*” (p. 115).

This participant’s traumatic and, at the same time, empowering narrative of their journey “back home to themselves, to who they are” is a familiar story of many Māori people who are currently embracing their cultural identity as rooted in their Indigeneity and rich heritage that was previously taken away from them through colonizing practices (Smith, 2021). A similar journey toward discovering her Indigenous queer identity is constructed by an Australian Indigenous scholar Mandy Henningham via *murū*—“an Aboriginal word from Dharug language meaning ‘roads/path’” (Troy, 2019, as cited in Henningham, 2021, p. 8). Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) points that there were “those who identify as Māori but cannot speak Māori language, those who are Māori but do not know their whakapapa, or those who are Māori but have lived away from their iwi or whānau territories” (p. 251). Such individuals often get marginalized and blamed for not being “Māori enough,” although this is a direct effect of colonization and cultural imperialism resulting in violence of enforced assimilation and intergenerational trauma (Meek, 2013).

The third Māori participant, a trans woman in her late 30s, did not mention takatāpui and talked about her experiences as a trans woman from a seemingly Pākehā perspective, explaining the challenges she encountered as a gender-nonconforming person. However, referring to her Māori name, she pointed to racism that Māori and Pacific people face in Aotearoa:

When I was growing up, I was always quite feminine for a boy. I came from a small town . . . very small-minded people . . . it’s hard to be transgendered or gay in a small community, in small towns, so I had issues through primary school, and then intermediate, and then at high school, of people picking on me and bullying me because I was always very feminine. I didn’t try, didn’t feel the need to hide my femininity. ‘Cuz it’s just part of who I was, and I come from a Māori family, and my mother was always very supportive, that I should be myself, for me to be who I am, so I guess in that sense I had an environment where I was nurtured to just be myself in whatever way or shape.

Being Māori, as opposed to having a European name, people would definitely make assumptions about me. “Oh, they’re Māori, or they’re Pacific Islander.” They might not know that it’s a specifically Māori name, they would just assume that I’m in the Pacific Island group, and, yeah, it’s . . . definitely harder for Māori people to get jobs, or to rent houses and that sort of thing. (P#4 Māori trans woman in early 40s)

This trans woman talked about issues that many gender nonconforming individuals face in Aotearoa, as well as in other countries: bullying at school (Day & Brömdal, 2024), prejudice, and conservative attitudes of small rural communities (Courtney, 2013). She did not use any Māori words in her narrative, sticking to English, which may indicate that she would not be comfortable discussing takatāpui, if questioned by the Pākehā researcher. Her experience is somewhat mirrored by other transgender Māori individuals, who, as cited by Murray (2003), “were too busy ‘trying to get by’ and didn’t have time or the resources to get involved” (p. 238). Because of the colonial suppression of the Māori language, takatāpui has come into public discourse only recently (Kerekere, 2017); therefore, some queer Māori people might not have been exposed to it yet. The first two Māori participants indicated that they had just recently learned about takatāpui and started using it for their self-identification not long ago. The third Māori participant may not have fully embraced the meaning of it to start using it or, on this specific occasion, to share it with the Pākehā researcher, whom she could have considered not versed enough in Māori cultural customs and language.

Additionally, several Pākehā participants also reflected on the concept of takatāpui in their narratives. Linking it to other Indigenous cultural codes and labels, they explicitly criticized the Western approach of seeing trans and nonbinary genders as different from a normalized heteronormative identity:

The thing that’s quite comforting to me is that the whole suppression of any kind of alternative identity is a very Western thing. So many other cultures have, like, third gender or non-conforming roles, and the fact that these other unrelated cultures have it makes me quite comforted that it’s an innate human thing. It’s not just like a trend or whatever . . . I know that Native Americans have Two-Spirit, and I know there’s a Māori one, but I forget the word for it, it’s like, starts with T? [Interviewer: Takatāpui?] Yeah, that’s the one. And I don’t really know much about it, but just the fact that it exists is kind of nice knowledge. (P#9 Pākehā trans woman in late 20s)

This young Pākehā trans woman indicates having heard of the word takatāpui and the Indigenous Native American Term Two-Spirit. The knowledge that these Indigenous genders existed before Western influence reassures her that her experience is “normal” as it is “an innate human thing.” This also resonates what the first Māori participant mentioned about takatāpui “touching the soul” and “spiritually in touch,” pointing to similar meanings in the Native North American concept of Two-Spirit (Driskill, 2010). Thus, the decolonizing efforts aimed at reclaiming the precolonial Indigenous genders and sexualities are liberating not only to Indigenous peoples, but to all queer Pākehā/White individuals, freeing them from the violence of Western heteronormativity (Yep, 2014). This is echoed by another Pākehā participant, a trans man in their late 20s, who did not use the word takatāpui, but lamented the colonial hegemony of heteronormativity: “I want a greater understanding of trans people not as a group separate or distinct from the rest of society, and a recognition of binary gender as being repressive and restrictive and colonial and all of these things.”

Other Pākehā participants demonstrated different levels of their understanding of the meanings of takatāpui. For instance, a trans femme participant in their early 20s clearly illustrates their knowledge of takatāpui drawn from online resources:

I think . . . the internet has the potential to be a wonderful place . . . because there are many trans people in so many different iterations, whether that's nonbinary, transfemme, transmasc, or kind of independent, culturally significant, like takatāpui, and there are so many varied experiences . . . because we have access to the internet, to social networking, to online databases, to resources . . . (P#13 Pākehā trans femme in early 20s)

This participant mentions takatāpui as one of multiple diverse representations of gender, while emphasizing the importance of culturally significant resources available online (e.g., GMA, 2024; Rainbow Youth, Inc. & Tīwhanawhana Trust, 2024). It is interesting that some Pākehā participants talked about takatāpui identity in response to the question about the impact of media constructions on gender identities. For example, a nonbinary Pākehā participant in their early 20s expressed their desire to see more information about takatāpui in mainstream media:

I'm thinking of a story about somebody who is takatāpui and it was their life story, and it felt like they were this one person in their community, and they were sort of being held up as, you know, this unique individual, which I think, yes, we are all unique individuals but sometimes we just want to be part of the hoard.

Just have that be the norm in an Aotearoa-specific context, I know from my limited knowledge of Māori history that there are some great contexts there that we can bring into our mainstream media in support of takatāpui individuals and just . . . the general respect of people for their chosen gender, or how they identify, and remembering that every gender is empowering. I think there's a lot there that we could bring into it. And that's potentially something that other countries don't necessarily have as much. I mean certainly there are lots of Indigenous cultures that do bring that. And western culture, it's a little . . . we're a little more of the individualistic settler mentality, aren't we? And I don't know about the Pacific identities, but I know that again they would have similar values that could be brought in. (P#16 Pākehā nonbinary in early 20s)

This participant suggests that Aotearoa has a unique position by having the concept of takatāpui grounded in the Indigenous culture. Alongside other Indigenous queer identities (Driskill, 2010; Farran, 2010), knowledge of takatāpui can educate and emancipate Western settler societies, ultimately contesting the ideology of hegemonic White masculinity (Kennedy, 2007). Hellmann (2024) argues that in Aotearoa, difficulties that early European settlers faced at the start of colonization have forged the national myth of a (White) heroic pioneer identity contributing to the narrative of "progress." The grand narrative of colonization as "progress" over nature (Tompkins, 2015) extended to the idea of bringing "progress" to the Indigenous people, who were commonly seen as sinful and uncivilized (Kerekere, 2017). This hypermasculine cultural representation of the national identity still functions as "the dominant and enduring cultural theme" (Kennedy, 2007, p. 405), sidelining any feminine, queer, and non-White manifestations of other cultural identities. Hence, celebrating and promoting queer Indigenous identities aims at dismantling the hegemony of White hypermasculinity and liberating all other gender representations.

Another Pākehā nonbinary trans masc participant in their 30s argues that a gender binary is an alien concept for Aotearoa. They suggest that decolonization can only proceed through creating spaces and resources for Indigenous identities, including takatāpui:

Especially in New Zealand, I would like to see more recognition of the existing Indigenous transgenders, like the Indigenous non-binary genders. I don't think that there can be any move toward honoring Te Tiriti or working in decolonization environments without also saying, hey, having binary genders is very much like a foreign concept. There's a quote that I wish I could remember who said, but it was like "the binary came on the boats." So, I'd like to see more flexibility and space open up for Indigenous takatāpui. Get off with their takatāpui genders. I think that's a really important cultural part of New Zealand. (P#20 Pākehā nonbinary trans masc in their 30s)

The phrase the participant refers to is attributed to one of the Australian Indigenous activists, recorded by Hayden Moon (2020): "A beloved Bundjalung Sistergirl who has since passed on to the dreamtime put it simply, stating: 'the binary arrived with the boats!'" (para. 18). While being unique and in use only among queer Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the modern terms sistergirls and brotherboys are derived from English, the language of colonizers, as there are up to 363 different Indigenous languages and dialects spoken in Australia (Bowern, 2011). In contrast, takatāpui is a Māori word rooted in a rich heritage, which many gender-diverse individuals respect and honor.

The violence of heteronormativity (Yep, 2014) and the rigid gender binary enforced on the Indigenous peoples (Kerekere, 2017; Moon, 2020) also affected the non-Indigenous trans and nonbinary individuals, which made them more alert to the harmful effects of colonization. Another Pākehā nonbinary participant in their late 30s explained such effects on their own gender identity formation: "I was operating . . . influenced, from under the boot of what I see now is violent and colonial heteronormativity." They continue explaining that this colonial violence needs to be counteracted by educating and emancipating White cisheterosexual (cis-het) people, and by building and promoting cultural resources for better understanding the experiences of all gender-diverse individuals, including takatāpui:

I wish White cis people in Aotearoa would just learn to recognize what it means to have privilege and recognize that incredible cost on people who are marginalized and hurt . . . How do we begin to undo some of this cis-het colonial violence?

Auckland University Press have published this anthology called *Out Here* . . . And it's takatāpui and LGBTQ+ stories from the last 35 years . . . [with] incredible 69 contributors . . . And I think it's such a powerful tome . . . and such a legacy [of] the editors, Chris Tse, who is a gay man of Chinese descent, and Emma Barnes, the non-binary Pākehā. They have just left such an incredible taonga (Māori: treasure) that, you know, the outcome of that collection is that it starts now. And I think the effect that this treasure is going to be remarkable. (P#26 Pākehā nonbinary, in their late 30s)

The participant refers to the book with 69 contributors edited by Tse and Barnes (2021) *Out Here: An Anthology of Takatāpui and LGBTQIA+ Writers from Aotearoa*. And although this Pākehā participant does not identify as takatāpui, the meaning of this concept is well known to them, alongside other Māori terms they use in their narrative. One more Pākehā participant, a trans masc nonbinary person in their 30s, mentioned the term takatāpui while referring to the resources produced by Women's Refuge network:

Women's Refuge network got four cornerstones that they work under. There's collectivism, parallel development, feminism, and it used to be biculturalism, and it got changed to takatāpui . . . And there were two korero (Māori: discussions) around it. One person said, well, why is takatāpui being used? And we were told that this was because when the caucus meet that was the language that they were comfortable with everyone using. And secondary, it was to include all people under the rainbow umbrella. (P#29 Pākehā trans masc nonbinary in their 30s)

These two Pākehā participants point to the importance of various resources aimed at promoting and developing further the understanding of takatāpui within queer communities, as part of decolonizing projects in Aotearoa (Smith, 2021). Both of them fluently use not only the term takatāpui but also other Māori words (taonga, korero, etc.). They are competently weaving takatāpui meanings into their queer spaces, also lauding the incorporation of takatāpui into cultural and community resources. The formulation of takatāpui by Women's Refuge network to include all representations of gender and sexual diversity under the rainbow umbrella is significant from two perspectives. Firstly, the inclusion of "Takatāpui Nurturing Diversity: Commitment to nurture diversity and difference and work actively to combat heterosexism and homophobia" (Women's Refuge, 2024, para. 3) as the fourth cornerstone to underpin the values of the organization signals the acceptance of the Māori term into the predominantly Pākehā system of meanings. Secondly, this presents the transference of this Indigenous meaning of gender and sexual diversity on other cultural subjects, encompassing all manifestations of queer identities. Although it may be questionable whether it is ethical to apply a culturally and historically bound Indigenous word for anyone from other cultures, for example Pākehā, any language is a living entity, and it changes because of changing context and environments (Murray, 2003). The meanings shift in the way people apply them to different phenomena. The original meaning of takatāpui stemming from same-sex relationships has already shifted to include all queer representations of Māori identity (GMA, 2024). And although the English language struggles with finding one word to represent diverse genders and sexual orientations (i.e., queer versus rainbow, etc.), Māori people already have it—takatāpui—a unique and clear definition of all those aspects.

### Conclusion

In summary, this study investigated the construction and interpretation of the Māori term takatāpui by trans and nonbinary individuals in Aotearoa New Zealand within the framework of queer humanism (Ciszek et al., 2022) and decolonizing methodologies (Smith, 2021). As demonstrated by Māori and Pākehā participants, the current use of takatāpui in the meaning of all gender and sexually diverse Māori identities has been reclaimed as part of the decolonizing projects in Aotearoa. Importantly, Pākehā participants appear to use takatāpui in their narratives very naturally, seemingly without the need to define or interpret it, which suggests that they are accustomed to its contemporary meaning. This organic weaving of a Māori signifier,

rooted in the precolonial history of Aotearoa, into Pākehā participants' narratives provides pathways for integrating Māori history and heritage into a reworked narrative of the national identity.

Several important lessons can be drawn from this research. The limitation of this project, which focused on trans and nonbinary identities as manifestations of gender diversity, is in the few participants who provided their insights into the meaning of takatāpui. However, although the absence of a specific interview question about takatāpui may also be considered a limiting factor, it is remarkable that not only Māori but also several Pākehā participants talked about this identity without any prompts. This is ultimately a strength of the current study, indicating the undeniable value and complex meaning of this Indigenous concept, seen by Pākehā participants as a liberating identity for all trans and queer individuals that they considered oppressed by the colonial ideology. Future research may further investigate and unpack these important issues in more detail, especially among individuals of different ethnicities and with various cultural identities.

The participants also noted the importance of creating and promoting cultural resources as part of decolonizing efforts, not only in online contexts and mainstream media but also across community support organizations, such as Project Youth, Women's Refuge, and others. This points the future direction for activists, policy makers, and academics toward engaging with the precolonial and contemporary Indigenous discourses to develop more inclusive queer spaces and to achieve what Driskill (2010) calls "doubleweaving"—integrating the critiques from both Native/Indigenous and queer studies, aimed at overcoming the violence of (White) heteronormativity (Yep, 2014). The real-world impact of such research projects as this one is in demonstrating how Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices together, and on their personal examples, validate the diversity of their experiences from the position of agency, dignity, and mutual respect, demanding recognition and equal rights for all minority identities.

Accordingly, two Māori participants indicate that their journey toward embracing their takatāpui identity was possible because of the decolonizing efforts of Project Youth's education and Elisabeth Kerekere's public lecture based on her academic research. Their experiences demonstrate the validity and viability of the Indigenous knowledge and an exceptional value of previously repressed norms and traditions. A vivid representation of the significance takatāpui holds for Māori queer is the last paragraph of the story published by a student at Massey University of New Zealand in the student magazine *Massive* (Hunia, 2024):

Recently, another cultural shift has been witnessed. Starting in the 1980s and reaching today, the word "takatāpui" has been reclaimed in a contemporary sense. The word now extends past its previous definition of a single "intimate friend" and is now used as an umbrella term for Māori who are members of the LGBT+ [community] in any way. It has transformed into a word that melds the experiences of being queer and indigenous into one unifying identity. But most importantly, it tells our community, our society, and our country that we are here. We have always been here, and we will continue to be here until the world sees and loves us for what we are once more. (p. 11)

The ways this student and other young Māori people embrace and give new meanings to culturally significant representations of their identities indicate an inspiring shift toward promising outcomes of current

decolonizing projects of Aotearoa aimed at restoring justice for the Indigenous people of the land. At the same time, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) and many other Māori scholars point out, there is still a lot to be done for further education of the whole society on the historical underpinnings of oppressing and discriminatory practices used against Māori people. Accordingly, global queer cultures that are predominantly White (Asante & Hanchey, 2021; Eguchi, 2021; Ng et al., 2020) need to embrace other minority perspectives, including the Indigenous ones, and extend the emancipation project of queer identities by weaving the decolonizing strategies into the fight for equal rights of gender and sexually diverse people (Ciszek et al., 2022). Seeing some Pākehā queer individuals acknowledge colonialist and marginalizing practices and join Māori in validating the takatāpui identity provides hope that this acknowledgment and solidarity can transpire to other cultural contexts. Hence, the implications of this research point to a potential paradigm shift that can be translated to other Indigenous cultures, to promote and celebrate the identities that have been marginalized and repressed throughout histories of the European/Christian colonization.

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