

Language As Treasure: The Maori Language Revitalization Movement

“When I could stand up and speak my language, I was standing in my own mana and I could do anything after that. But when I couldn't connect to who I was, my whakapapa, my genealogy, my mountain, my river, my land and my language, I could not.”

In Aotearoa, te reo Maori is considered a taonga, a treasured possession like heirlooms and cultural items, artifacts, water, and the land itself. A taonga is sacred to Maori culture, and what is deemed to classify as one has major social, cultural, and legal implications. As a student of Introductory Law in Auckland, I studied the Treaty of Waitangi, where the concept of taonga is both legally complex and crucially important to modern political issues. In the English document of the Treaty, “full possession of full exclusive and undisturbed possession of lands and estates, forests, fisheries, and other properties are granted to the Maori. In the te reo translation, the term “other properties” is instead referred to as taonga. This creates a conflict in the constitution, and it's reflected in the very conception of a taonga, how this idea informs the Maori worldview and how New Zealand's imposed legal system of the British crown is often fundamentally in conflict with it. This is because taonga prioritizes guardianship of the land over ownership, and the cultural ethos centers collective rights over that of the individual as well as the need to manage resources sustainably (Craig et al 2012).

This dichotomy, of ownership versus guardianship, is interesting to me in thinking about te reo as a cultural treasure. To own implies to possess, to hold something as your own. Does this mean we can think of the speakers of te reo as guardians of the language? Was it ever meant to be shared, and because it is a cultural treasure should it be restricted? In Aotearoa, there are strict rules about how to handle other items or beings that fall under the taonga classification— when my father found a deceased native bird, a tui, in his yard, he was instructed to report to a local iwi to handle the funerary rights for the bird. They are to be conserved and processed in a particular way. Cushla King, participant in a wananga held to process a number of these birds, states that working with the birds gave her “a sense of belonging to the wairua (soul),” and she felt that they still had much to give (Fuller 2018).

Taongas such as these are entrusted to the iwis, who the Department of Conservation works with, and restricted from use to pakeha (non-Maori). Restriction is an interesting concept because the Maori are traditionally the guardians of taonga, but the sentiment surrounding language typically emphasizes the importance of use, by all citizens of Aotearoa. And since language cannot be commodified, physically handled and processed in the same way, can it really ever be restricted? Should it be? Is it inappropriate for the descendants of colonial oppressors to take on the language of the indigenous community, or is it necessary to keep it alive, to flourish within the wider society as it exists today? And does thinking of language as treasure, as vital and alive as the land itself, help to protect a minority language? Because te reo is a taonga, it has been protected under the law. In 1986 it was determined that the law had an obligation to protect the right to speak the language. Though this legal language is rather limited, the Waitangi Tribunal outlined a proactive vision— to recognize te reo as a taonga under the law necessitated that the government “protect and sustain the language” (Chrisp 247).

Since then, what measures has the government actually taken to keep te reo, which has been classified by UNESCO as vulnerable after a history of colonial oppression that banned it in favor of English, ‘alive’? In 2019, the New Zealand government pledged to ensure one million residents speak basic Maori by 2040 (Gunia 2020). Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has vowed that her daughter will learn to speak the language. There have been tangible results to this recognition, with a surge in enrollment in language classes, by Maori and pakeha alike— perhaps these seemingly symbolic efforts, acts like public government recognition, have helped to shift the balance in favor of recognizing the importance of te reo.

Increasing use of te reo is part of a larger cultural shift to recognize indigenous rights, to answer for the country’s colonial history. In Aotearoa today, te reo can be heard in all spheres of life— my professors began every class with a greeting in te reo, every email was headed by “kia ora” instead of hello, and it is not uncommon to hear the place a person is from being described in terms of the nearest river or mountain, which is a custom called pepeha, placing yourself in relational terms— your origins as described by your nearest natural landmark as well as your family and lineage, your identity in relation to the people and places important to you. Companies are also adjusting to the cultural shift— Vodafone changed the language its users see on their phone screens from Vodafone NZ to VF Aotearoa, “the meeting rooms in Microsoft’s Auckland office have Māori names, and Pic’s, a popular peanut butter brand, has translated its labels” (Gunia 2020).

These brief te reo acknowledgments, taking up mere seconds in the beginning of class time, reminded me of native land acknowledgments that are common, however much less so, to hear in educational institutions in the US. I have wondered if these acknowledgments require a certain level of cognitive dissonance spoken from the mouth of a non-indigenous person when indigenous people remain materially oppressed in significant ways that cannot be remedied by this brief speech. However, perhaps it is the least we can do— to hold space and to recognize the people who remain stewards of the land even if we don’t see immediate tangible changes. And when people who hold power, such as administrators or educators, use te reo, even if Maori remain in a disadvantaged position in society, if we are trying to normalize and spread a language to as many people as possible, I can understand why speaking it, even briefly, could be beneficial.

The question of tokenism is particularly relevant I believe when we are discussing economic gains, however. Companies have been accused of commodifying identity, for example, by changing their logos to rainbow for pride month, or selling a limited edition pride collection, while supporting or being supported by homophobic entities. I wonder if the companies who have made efforts to use te reo can be accused of similar tokenism, profiting from an appearance of cultural sensitivity. On one hand, these companies have the economic power to make te reo widely recognized or experienced— when a phone user sees Aotearoa on their screen, taken to the wider scale of every Vodafone user in Aotearoa, perhaps there is a subtle shift in perception that can create real benefit for the language. However, one has to question the motivations of corporate entities— who profits from these decisions and are they the kind of people who economically back up movements that may be antithetical to the cause? Do we account for intention, or just impact, when it comes to fighting for the cause to save a language?

Moving To The Rhythm Of Our Language: How Rap Music Has Been Used As A Force To Amplify Minority Languages & Resist Cultural Hegemony

“Say it loud: I’m Basque and I’m proud” – from “Esan Ozenki” by Negu Gorriak

Since its origins in late 1970s New York City, hip-hop and rap music have been infused with political messaging. In the early 1980s, rap group Harlem World Crew’s release “Rappers Convention” openly and explicitly criticized U.S. involvement in the Iran-Iraq War. In “The Message,” a 1982 social commentary rap song, Grandmaster Flash And The Furious Five called for critique of the Reagan administration. They shed light on issues such as poverty, police brutality, and the War on Drugs during a time of great racial and socioeconomic inequality in one of the places being hit the hardest by Reagan era policy, the Bronx. N.W.A. and Public Enemy were widely popular, credited with ushering in the golden age of rap/hip-hop, and well known for their highly political tracks, centered around the late 80’s and 90’s Black American experience. The immensely influential album *Straight Outta Compton* featured “Fuck Tha Police,” a song highlighting racial tensions and police brutality, which inspired a response from the F.B.I., warning of anti-law enforcement propaganda. Public Enemy’s “Fight The Power” is all about joining forces to resist mainstream forms of oppression, a predominant theme in rap and hip-hop music which would come to influence youth internationally.

Controversy surrounding this explicit political messaging was pervasive, and as white suburban youth increasingly adopted an affinity for rap music in the 90s, it was criticized by American media, its violent themes condemned for inspiring youth rebellion and aggression. But rap music is all about action, and energy—when rappers, directly or indirectly, call their audience to fight back against the powers of oppression, they are representing the voice of the “poor, urban Black youth, whose lives are generally dismissed or misrepresented by the mainstream media” (Blanchard 1). Rappers have been thought of as the “Black CNN, the keepers of contemporary African-American working-class history and concerns (7).” And, as an inherent function of its musical predecessor, rhyming games, a music style that allowed enslaved people to communicate race relations in code, rap follows a legacy of political advocacy and violence. Rap music was birthed from a culture of resistance and continues to represent the outcry of minoritized youth against systems of oppression, youth “whose worldviews have been shaped by experiencing deep economic inequalities divided largely along racial lines” (14).

Though it began as an art form highly informed by the Black experience, in largely Black communities, rap and hip-hop music and culture have become a “vehicle for global youth affiliations” a tool for framing and bringing to question local identity around the world (Mitchell 2). Inspired by the musical idioms, symbols, and vernacular of golden age hip-hop in the U.S., music artists that span diverse origins across the globe have combined American rap influences with indigenous elements to produce sonically and symbolically unique and powerful music. In Sweden, hip-hop was a vehicle for youth of ethnic minorities to speak out against white skinhead subculture—Swedish rapper Papa Dee’s “tongue-in-cheek claim to be an “Original Black Viking” became a rallying call for struggles against skinhead and neo-Nazi claims of Viking ancestry” (8). Croatian rap group the Ugly Leaders, one of the first

hip hop acts in the Balkans, told the story of the horrors of the Croat-Bosniak War. They were inspired by lyrical representations of violence in Black American rap, stating: “Rap is the form of music that had the power and directness to say what needed to be said. It fit our situation... people here are also killing and dying for nothing” (9). Across the globe, rap and hip-hop became a musical forum for youth protest, in countries influenced by the energy and defiance of this genre and movement from the United States.

For many indigenous and minority groups, music has been used to resist linguistic and cultural hegemony. As a weapon for social change, music has the ability to “create a cultural basis for new nations, transform alliances and identities within already existing states, and unmask the power imbalances that give regions, languages, and ethnic groups very different relations to the state they supposedly all share” (Lipsitz 1994). In the Basque Country, music has long been a tool for uplifting the cause for independence and as a way to spread the language amongst persecution. Similar to the way rappers were perceived in the U.S., musicians have played a prominent role as activists for cultural rights in the Basque Country (Mitchell 171).