

COMMENTARY

HE TIKANGA RANGAHAU, HE TINO RANGATIRATANGA

Te Tiriti o Waitangi as constitutional warrant for compositional, non-synthesised research

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Abstract

This commentary proposes that the decision to hold findings from te ao Māori and biomedicine in productive tension—rather than resolving them into a single integrated account—is not a methodological preference but a constitutional obligation grounded in the te reo text of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Drawing on the ontological turn in research methodology and on recent Waitangi Tribunal findings, the commentary argues that the two texts of the Treaty/Tiriti constitute two different worlds of reality: the English-language version enacting a hierarchical transfer of sovereignty; the te reo text enacting complementary, coequal spheres of kāwanatanga and tino rangatiratanga. Since tino rangatiratanga in Article Two extends to all taonga, including mātauranga Māori, the absorption of Māori health knowledge into dominant biomedical or social science frameworks without consent is constitutionally unsound. Composition—the practice of holding multiple worlds of reality in structured relation without reducing one to another—is proposed as the methodologically and constitutionally appropriate alternative.

Keywords

compositional methodology, diffractive analysis, mātauranga Māori,
ontological turn, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, tino rangatiratanga

Introduction

The decision not to synthesise findings from te ao Māori and biomedicine is not, in the first instance, a methodological decision. It is a constitutional one.

This commentary develops that claim. My argument has three moves. First, the two texts of the Treaty/Tiriti constitute different worlds of reality—not two translations of one agreement, but two different founding documents that

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enact different distributions of authority. Second, synthesis in Māori health research enacts the world of reality constituted by the English-language version of the Treaty: a hierarchical incorporation of Māori interests into Crown frameworks. Third, composition—the structured arrangement of multiple worlds of reality in relation without reduction (Stengers, 2010)—enacts the world of reality constituted by Te Tiriti o Waitangi: coequal, complementary authority grounded in tino rangatiratanga over taonga, including the taonga of mātauranga Māori.

My argument draws on the ontological turn in social science and health research methodology, particularly on Barad's (2007) agential realism and Mol's (2002) ontological multiplicity, and on the constitutional foundations established by the Waitangi Tribunal's findings in *Te Paparahi o Te Raki* (2014, 2022) and *Tino Rangatiratanga me te Kāwanatanga* (2025). It is written from within Māori health research, with specific reference to mixed methods studies that bring quantitative epidemiological data and qualitative te ao Māori knowledge into the same analytical frame.

Two texts, two worlds of reality

Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the English-language version of the Treaty of Waitangi are not two translations of one agreement. They enact two different constitutional relationships.

The te reo text was drafted in te reo Māori by Henry Williams and his son Edward on the night prior to 6 February 1840. Over 500 rangatira signed the te reo text at Waitangi and at subsequent locations throughout Aotearoa New Zealand; fewer than 40 signed the English-language document (Orange, 1987; Walker, 1990). The document that carries both historical and constitutional primacy—in terms of who signed it, what the signatories understood, and what international Indigenous rights law recognises—is the te reo text (Waitangi Tribunal, 2014).

The te reo text constitutes a specific distribution of authority through three concepts that cannot be translated without ontological loss. Article One confers *kāwanatanga* on the Crown: the Waitangi Tribunal (2014) has established that rangatira understood this as limited governance authority over British settlers, not the comprehensive sovereignty over all persons and territories that the English word “governance” implies. The rangatira retained *tino rangatiratanga*—paramount authority over their peoples, lands, and all *taonga*—under Article Two. These were understood as complementary, coequal spheres, not competing

claims to the same authority (Waitangi Tribunal, 2014). The English-language version, by contrast, states that Māori “cede to Her Majesty the Queen of England, absolutely and without reservation, all the rights and powers of Sovereignty” (Orange, 1987, p. 40), a formulation that carries the weight of nineteenth-century British constitutional law: indivisible, comprehensive, and hierarchical.

The ontological turn in social science research provides a vocabulary for describing what is at stake here. Barad (2007) argues that apparatuses do not passively describe prior, independent realities; they produce—constitute and enact—particular phenomena as determinate and real. An apparatus makes certain things visible, causally operative, and institutionally actionable while excluding others from the domain of the real. Each text of the Treaty/Tiriti is an apparatus in this sense: each enacts a world of reality, and the world each enacts is different. The English-language text produces a Crown sovereign and a subordinate Māori subject; the te reo text produces a Governor with limited authority and rangatira with coequal, continuing authority in their own spheres. These are not two perspectives on one constitutional reality; they are *two* constitutional realities, both enacted, both producing ongoing effects.

The Waitangi Tribunal's December 2025 findings in *Tino Rangatiratanga me te Kāwanatanga* confirmed what its 2014 and 2022 *Te Paparahi o Te Raki* reports had established: the Crown has consistently and systematically enacted the English-language text's world of reality over the te reo text's constitutional guarantees, asserting practical authority while repeatedly and foundationally breaching the tino rangatiratanga guaranteed in Article Two (Waitangi Tribunal, 2025). The finding is not historical; it describes an ongoing constitutional condition.

What synthesis does to tino rangatiratanga

The standard methodological ambition of mixed methods health research is integration: bringing findings from different sources, frameworks, and methods into a single, coherent higher-order account. This is understood as the mark of research quality—the achievement of a more complete picture than any single framework could provide (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). When it is applied to research that includes both biomedical frameworks and te ao Māori knowledge, the integrative impulse generates a specific constitutional problem.

Synthesis requires a vantage point from which

different accounts are adjudicated and merged. In Aotearoa health research, that vantage point is constituted almost entirely within what Barad (2007) would call the *kāwanatanga* apparatus: the dominant, Crown-governed, biomedically inflected research system with its own peer review standards, funding criteria, publication conventions, and audit requirements. When biomedical findings and *te ao Māori* findings are synthesised within this apparatus, the latter are incorporated into the terms of the former. The specific ontological content of *te ao Māori*—the causally real status of *wairua*, the constitutive role of *whakapapa*, the relational and historical nature of Māori bodies and collectives—is translated into categories the dominant framework can recognise: psychosocial factors, cultural variables, protective factors for resilience (Durie, 2001; Tinirau et al., 2021).

What is lost in that translation is not merely interpretive nuance. What is lost is a world of reality. To synthesise *mātauranga Māori* into biomedical categories is to enact the English-language Treaty's constitutional arrangement: the incorporation of Māori interests into Crown frameworks on the Crown's terms, without Māori consent over how knowledge is held, structured, and used. This is not a matter of intent. It is a matter of which apparatus performs the "agential cut"—which framework determines what counts as a finding, what constitutes adequate evidence, and what remains as remainder at the edge of the analysis.

Under *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*, *tino rangatiratanga* in Article Two extends to all *taonga*. The Waitangi Tribunal and New Zealand courts have consistently recognised that *taonga* include *mātauranga Māori*, *tikanga*, and *te reo* as foundational knowledge systems whose authority resides with Māori (Waitangi Tribunal, 2011; *New Zealand Māori Council v Attorney-General* [1994] 1 NZLR 513 (PC)). The absorption of *mātauranga Māori* into Crown-governed research frameworks without consent is therefore not merely methodologically inadequate; it is an exercise of *kāwanatanga* over a domain that *Te Tiriti* guarantees to the authority of *tino rangatiratanga*.

Composition as constitutional practice

Composition is not the absence of integration; it is a different kind of coherence. Where synthesis seeks a single higher-order account that reconciles difference, composition seeks a structured arrangement in which different worlds of reality remain distinct, audible, and mutually illuminating without being reduced to one another (Mol, 2002;

Stengers, 2010). The term is preferred here over alternatives such as *triangulation* or *multi-perspectivism* precisely because it does not presuppose a prior unity that the analysis recovers. There is no pre-existing complete picture of which different methods offer partial views. There are multiple, partially overlapping, sometimes incompatible worlds of reality, each enacted through specific practices and apparatuses, each making certain things real and excluding others from the real (Mol, 2002).

In Aotearoa mixed methods health research, composition means three things in practice. First, it means protecting the ontological integrity of each methodological strand. Quantitative epidemiological analysis enacts individuals, variables, and probability distributions as the units of a world of reality; that world produces important findings about health inequity that carry genuine force. *Kaupapa Māori* qualitative work enacts relational, historical, and spiritual beings—*whānau*, *atua*, *whenua*, *tūpuna*—as constitutive of health (Pihama, 2010; G. H. Smith, 2012). Neither strand is a validation device for the other. Each produces findings that are adequate within its own ontological commitments and its own criteria of adequacy. Composition means designing analysis so that each strand retains that integrity throughout.

Second, composition means writing findings from *te ao Māori* in *te ao Māori* terms, without translation into biomedical or social science categories at the point of analysis. This is not a refusal of dialogue between frameworks; it is a prior condition for dialogue that does not absorb one partner's terms into the other's. A *whakataukī* about *kai*, *kaumātua* accounts of *whakapapa* and illness, *rangatahi* descriptions of *wairua*; are written in their own idiom and read in their own terms—not as illustrations of a biomedical finding, and not as qualitative "texture" for a quantitative argument.

Third, composition means applying diffractive analysis (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 1997) to attend explicitly to the interference patterns produced when different frameworks are brought into relation. Where two apparatuses *intra-act*—as they do in any mixed methods study—they produce constructive interference (where differences between accounts amplify each other into new phenomena visible from neither framework alone) and destructive interference (where the agential cuts made by one apparatus cancel what the other can make visible). Attending to these patterns as primary analytic findings—rather than

resolving them through a higher-order synthesis—is the distinctive methodological contribution of a compositional approach.

To illustrate concretely: In a study of Māori elder wellbeing drawing on both survey data and whakawhiti kōrero, quantitative analysis may show strong statistical associations between self-reported wellbeing and participation in cultural practices. A compositional reading does not translate this into a biomedical protective factor model. Instead, it asks: What does the statistical apparatus make visible about this relationship that the kōrero cannot—and what does the kōrero enact about whakapapa, mauri, and intergenerational relationship that the statistical apparatus excludes by its agential cuts? The interference pattern between these two sets of findings—what each amplifies and what each cancels—is the analytic site of greatest ontological significance.

This practice is not novel in Kaupapa Māori research. It is, in important respects, what the best Kaupapa Māori scholarship has always done: refuse to subordinate Māori knowledge to dominant frameworks while remaining in critical, generative dialogue with them (Pihama, 2010; L. T. Smith, 1999, 2012). What the ontological turn adds is a theoretical vocabulary and a set of methodological commitments that make explicit what Kaupapa Māori researchers have enacted through careful practice: that the worlds of reality constituted by te ao Māori and by dominant frameworks are genuinely different, that their difference matters, and that holding the difference open is not a methodological limitation but a principled and constitutionally grounded analytic achievement.

The constitutional stakes

The argument that composition is constitutionally grounded has stakes beyond academic methodology. It shifts the burden of justification.

Currently, researchers who refuse to synthesise findings from te ao Māori and dominant frameworks are required to justify that refusal—to explain why they are not integrating, why they are leaving things in tension, why they have not produced the “complete picture” that funders and reviewers expect. The assumption built into this demand is that synthesis is the default and refusal requires special pleading. The constitutional reading of Te Tiriti proposed here reverses that assumption: the burden falls on those who synthesise to demonstrate that they hold the authority to absorb mātauranga Māori into their frameworks—and under Te Tiriti, that authority

requires consent, meaningful Māori participation in research governance, and accountability to the communities whose knowledge is at stake (Hudson et al., 2020; L. T. Smith et al., 2018).

I am not here making a claim that mixed methods research engaging with te ao Māori knowledge is inherently a breach of Treaty obligations. Rather, I am claiming that the *manner* of engagement—whether it produces synthesis or composition, whether it preserves or dissolves the ontological integrity of mātauranga Māori—is a matter of Treaty obligation, not methodological preference. Research that synthesises Māori health knowledge into dominant frameworks without those protections in place participates, however unwittingly, in the same absorptive logic that the Waitangi Tribunal (2025) has consistently identified as the foundational Treaty breach: the enactment of kāwanatanga over a domain that Te Tiriti guaranteed to tino rangatiratanga.

This analysis has implications at each stage of the research enterprise. In research design, it requires structural protections for the ontological integrity of te ao Māori strands—analysis phases that precede rather than assume integration, and explicit attention to the agential cuts made by each method. In ethics review, it requires attention to the ontological structure of the analysis, not only to consent procedures and data ownership. In publication, it requires journals and reviewers to develop literacy around ontological plurality and the difference between synthesis and composition as forms of research coherence. And in research funding, it requires the Health Research Council and other bodies with explicit Treaty obligations to develop criteria of research quality that do not require synthesis as a condition of adequacy.

He tikanga rangahau, he tino rangatiratanga

Te Tiriti o Waitangi was signed at dawn on 6 February 1840. The rangatira who signed it understood themselves to be entering a relationship—not surrendering a world. The te reo text they signed constituted coequal, complementary authority: kāwanatanga for the Governor, tino rangatiratanga for the rangatira, and an ongoing relationship founded on consent, good faith, and continuing negotiation (Waitangi Tribunal, 2014; Williams, 2011).

That constitutional act was not extinguished by 185 years of the English-language Treaty’s world of reality being made to stick through force of law and institutional practice. The Waitangi Tribunal’s (2025) findings make this clear. Tino

rangatiratanga over taonga—including the taonga of mātauranga Māori, of knowledge about Māori health, wellbeing, and being—was guaranteed and never ceded.

Composition is not a method in search of a rationale. It is a Treaty obligation in search of a method. The methodological tools of the ontological turn—diffractive analysis, ontological staging, parallel narration with method integrity—offer practical resources for meeting that obligation. Kaupapa Māori research has been meeting it through careful practice for over three decades. What the constitutional reading offered here adds is the warrant: the refusal to synthesise is not methodological timidity, not a failure to complete the analysis, not political overcaution. It is an enactment of tino rangatiratanga within the research apparatus itself—small, perhaps, in the full scale of what Treaty obligations require, but real, grounded, and constitutionally defensible.

The constitutional warrant was signed at Waitangi. The methodological task is to enact it.

Glossary

atua	deities, gods
he tikanga rangahau	research methodology; customary approach to inquiry grounded in tikanga
he tino rangatiratanga	absolute chieftainship; full authority, autonomy and self-determination
kai	food; to eat
kaumātua	respected elder; holder of knowledge and authority within whānau/hapū (subtribe)
Kaupapa Māori	Māori approach or agenda; research and practice grounded in Māori principles and the world of reality of te ao Māori
kāwanatanga	governance; delegated authority of governance (often contrasted with tino rangatiratanga in Te Tiriti)
kōrero	speech, discussion, narrative or story
Māori	Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand; “ordinary” or “natural” in older usage
mātauranga	knowledge, knowing; includes traditional and contemporary Māori knowledge systems

mauri	life force; vital essence that animates and connects entities
rangatahi	young people, youth
rangatira	chief; leader with authority derived from whakapapa and relationships
taonga	treasured thing; anything of value (material or non-material, including language and knowledge)
te ao Māori	the Māori world; ontologically the Māori world of reality
te reo	the language (usually referring to te reo Māori)
Te Tiriti o Waitangi	the Treaty of Waitangi (Māori text, 1840)
tikanga	correct procedure; customary values, practices, and ethical framework
tino rangatiratanga	full chiefly authority; sovereignty, self-determination, highest form of authority
tūpuna	ancestors (also tipuna); those who precede and continue to shape the present
wairua	spirit; spiritual dimension of existence
whakapapa	genealogy; layered relational ordering connecting people, land and entities
whakataukī	proverb; ancestral saying embedding knowledge and values
whakawhiti kōrero	exchange of ideas; dialogue, discussion across people or positions
whānau	customary extended family; collective group connected through relationships and purpose
whenua	land; placenta, signalling deep relational connection between people and land

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