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**“Whānau Vibes”:
Reclamation of Self, Space and Community within Group Fitness
Gyms.**

A thesis

Submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Social Sciences in Anthropology

at

The University of Waikato

by

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Hāuae Hānau o Waikato

July 2025

Mihi

Ko Tainui te waka
Ko Whitiāreia te maunga
Ko Raukawa te moana
Ko Porirua te awa
Ko Takapūwāhia te marae
Ko Toarangatira te whare tipuna
Ko Ngāti Toarangatira te iwi
Ko Cydney Metekingi ahau

Abstract

Group fitness gyms are becoming more popular in Aotearoa, New Zealand. This thesis is an investigation of the lived experiences of Māori members within a commercialised fitness space called BFT Hamilton East, located in Kirikiriroa, Hamilton. Drawing on Indigenous anthropology and autoethnography, and grounded in Kaupapa Māori theory, this thesis firstly explores how the gym becomes a site in which Māori members seek to reclaim the narrative around their own bodies. I explore the colonial depictions, the politics of the Indigenous body and how Māori-owned clothing brands contribute to this reclamation. I then examine how Māori gym members use the gym space with a sense of purpose, balancing the values of culture and commercialisation. And finally, I investigate the importance of relational well-being and the use of whanaungatanga and manaakitanga to create a sense of belonging among participants in their search for connection. In foregrounding Indigenous ways of knowing, being and moving in a commercial group fitness gym, this thesis aims to contribute to the anthropological conversations that advocate for the inclusion of Indigenous methodologies into Anthropology, centring Indigenous agency and advocating for the decolonisation of fitness spaces.

Acknowledgements

E ōku nei tūpuna kua kawea mai au, arā, e hāpaingia tonutia ai au, tēnei te mihi aroha ki a koutou katoa. Ka mauria tonutia ngā taonga tuku iho mai e au. Heoi anō, nō koutou tēnei taonga.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Bronwyn Isaacs. Thank you for your guidance, patience, and insight. You challenged me to think deeper and supported me to write in a way that felt true to my own voice. Your passion for Anthropology is inspiring, and I thank you for sharing it with me.

To the BFT Hamilton East community, thank you for welcoming me, sharing your stories, and allowing me to witness the deep love and connection that defines your space. Your presence reminds me that Indigenous resistance lives on in the small, everyday acts. This research was made possible because of you all.

To my peers and mentors in the field of Anthropology, thank you for paving the way and for seeing the beauty in Indigenous anthropology and Kaupapa Māori research. Thank you to all my lecturers over the years, both here and at BYU-H.

To my whānau, your aroha, encouragement, and unwavering belief have carried me through this journey. Mum, thank you for nurturing my love of cultures and for raising me to see the vibrant, joyful and steadfast beauty of our cultures of Te Moananui-a-Kiwa. I am forever grounded in who I am and where I come from because of you.

To Tukai, my biggest supporter! Thank you for showing up for me with popcorn and M&M's on those extra hard days. I would not have made it this far without your love, support, kindness, patience and encouragement. You mean more to me than you'll ever know. Au domoni iko!

Finally, to my Heavenly Father, with whom everything is made possible.

Table of Contents

Mihi.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Methodology.....	6
Positionality.....	9
Chapter One - Reclaiming the Indigenous Body.....	14
Politics of the Indigenous Body.....	17
The Warrior.....	18
Reclaiming the body.....	21
Before the challenge.....	24
Where'd you get that from? Clothing as Expression.....	27
Conclusion.....	32
Chapter Two - The Importance of Place.....	34
Setting the scene: BFT HAM EAST.....	39
Purpose of the Space.....	44
The Space Between - Commercialisation & Culture.....	47
Chapter Three - Community.....	53
Whanaungatanga.....	57
Manaakitanga.....	66
Conclusion.....	75
References.....	78

Introduction

*"Ēhara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini"
"My strength is not that of one, but the strength of many."
(whakatauki)*

Community is a core value of Indigenous life. As a wahine Māori, I have always been taught that we are not self-made, we are community-made, we are made of every one of our tupuna who have ever lived, and every decision made by our whānau across generations leads here to who we are now. This relational philosophy underpins much of how I move through the world and shapes this research. This idea of relationality is reflected in the understanding that the well-being of one is intimately tied to the well-being of the many; this collective orientation ensures that no one is left behind in the pursuit of prosperity (Spiller et al., 2010). The view of a community-centred life reflects a deeply held Indigenous value: connection.

I fell into the topic of this thesis by accident. I was previously completely convinced that I would write a paper on Pacific dance because that is what I'm most passionate about. Grappling with the logistics and convenience of it all, I decided to take a break from picking my topic. Days passed by, turning into weeks and eventually a month had passed and still nothing concrete. Naturally, as a professional procrastinator, I was only secretly worried but outwardly calm about the fact that I hadn't chosen a topic yet. I went back and forth in my mind until one day, during Te Wiki o Te Reo Māori, as I sat on the exercise bike, the idea came to me. I looked around the class as members and staff of all ethnicities engaged in this week of celebration, participating in the day-to-day challenges of 'Pukana or Burpee', greeting each other in Te Reo Māori or trainers giving the introductions of the day in Te Reo Māori. Thoughts swirled in my

head. I truly did not intend to write about group fitness communities, but the most prominent thought that continued to replay in that moment was *Why are we all here? What is it about this place that brings all of these people together into one space?*

In my younger years, I was surrounded by sports. My whānau and especially my dad, cousins, and extended whānau were always either coaching, playing, watching, or travelling for basketball. As a young girl, I picked up a basketball not long after I could walk, and many of my earliest memories are shaped by travelling with my mum to games in Auckland on the weekends, training after school and loving the game. Sport became more than a pastime; it was part of how my whānau connected to one another and to our community.

As I got older and went to high school, I became less and less involved in sports and more involved with our Pasifika dance group. Again, the idea of community continued to manifest itself in these spaces, even though I didn't always recognise it at the time. This followed through to my undergraduate studies, when I moved to Hawai'i, and I danced as my full-time job. I quite literally danced my way through university, supported by a scholarship that allowed me to pay off my student loan and return home debt-free. In those years, movement became more than just something I did; it became a way of life, a lifeline, and a form of nourishment for my soul that longed for community and connection. Whether through team sports or group dance, I learned that movement continued to connect us to our cultural identities, our ancestors, and the values we carry with us.

These experiences deeply inform the lens through which I now approach this research, as it is grounded in my own lived experiences as well as the experiences of participants. These experiences also led me to draw on Indigenous autoethnography as a methodology and Kaupapa Māori Theory as an interpretive framework. Kaupapa Māori Theory offers a 'by Māori, for Māori, with Māori' approach to research, which puts Māori interests at the centre. It also challenges 'accepted' ways of 'knowing, doing and understanding' Māori, in order to make a positive difference (Smith, 2017, p. 85 as cited in Wilson, Mikahere-Hall, & Sherwood, 2021).

This study aims to explore how Māori cultural ties are strengthened through community fitness; examine how cultural values contribute to participants' sense of belonging, analyse the social dynamics of Māori participation in fitness spaces, and evaluate how mainstream group fitness environments influence Māori participants' sense of self. This research explores how Māori identity, cultural values, and collective wellbeing are expressed, cultivated, and displayed within a group fitness environment, focusing on three main chapters that are conceptualised in a journey from the inside out. This journey begins in chapter one with the self, the politics of the Māori/Indigenous body (Hokowhitu, 2004; Simpson, 2016) as a site of reclamation, exploring not only the physical but also the cultural and political expectations placed on the Indigenous body, which is historically shaped by colonial narratives. Chapter two explores the nature and value of the gym space itself, examining it not just as a backdrop to physical activity, but as a relational environment, setting the intentions of the space, its purpose, challenges and exploring the balance between commercialisation and culture. Finally, in Chapter Three, I explore how the community fosters a sense of cultural safety, where whanaungatanga and manaakitanga are not just conceptual but are also experienced as lived practices. By examining the social, cultural, and

political moments of these environments, I hope to understand how an Indigenous presence in mainstream gym spaces can create culturally-informed fitness gyms. Although this chapter focuses on Māori members in particular, I acknowledge that this gym is not exclusively for Māori. Many different ethnicities make up the fabric of this gym, both in those who work there and those who attend, and I do touch on this briefly in sections of this thesis, but for the wider narrative of my thesis, I focus on the experiences, opinions and challenges of Māori members within this space.

I engage with three main bodies of scholarship. Firstly, Kaupapa Māori Theory, which challenges colonial methodologies and provides an Indigenous centered framework that centres Māori ways of knowing and being. On the *Kaupapa Māori as Transformative Indigenous Analysis* website, it expresses that “this Kaupapa Māori knowledge is the systematic organisation of beliefs, experiences, understandings and interpretations of the interactions of Māori people upon Māori people, and Māori people upon their world.” (Nepe, 1991, as cited in Kaupapa Māori, n.d.). Kaupapa Māori theory (Mane, 2009; Mead, 1996; Pihama, 1993, 2001; Smith, G.H., 1997 as cited in Pihama, 2010) is shaped by the knowledge and life experiences of Māori communities. It is a theoretical framework that has grown from both Mātauranga Māori and from within Māori movements for change (Pihama, 2010, p. 5). According to Pihama (2010), it asserts the rights of Māori to theorise and research in our own ways and relates to Māori philosophies of the world, to Māori understandings on which our beliefs and values are based, Māori worldviews and ways of operating. In the linking of Kaupapa Māori and the group fitness community, and as a wahine Māori, I seek to understand how these theories are enacted within a commercialised space and influence participants' experiences and connections to it.

I also engage with the Ethnographies of gym spaces. (Crockett & Butryn, 2018; Edmonds, 2019; Gibbs, Salinas, & Turnock, 2022; Hedblom, 2009; Sossa, 2017). In particular, I engage with texts that reveal that gyms are far more than sites of physical training. As Edmonds (2019) notes, the CrossFit Box functions as both a local and global space of fitness-making and social relationality, a “nexus” where embodiment and belonging converge. In Ross' (2022) research on the experience of ‘larger-bodied people’ in gym environments, and the influence of space on gym-goers' experience, her research into the gym provides insight into the socio-spatial processes which manifest, routinise and reinforce figured spaces of health. Vertinsky (2004) meanwhile, explains that gyms “are often seen as too commonplace and ubiquitous to make meaningful study, yet they reflect particular notions of the training and education of the body, while their various orderings of space embody constructions of race, place, gender, and identity” (Vertinsky, 2004, p. 13 as cited in Crockett, 2015, p. 11).

Finally, I engaged with scholarship that explores the intersections of Indigenous health, sport, fitness and identity (Eggleton et al., 2018; Greaves et al., 2021; Hawkes, 2019; Hippolite & Bruce, 2014; Hokowhitu, 2004, 2009; Karaka et al., 2023; Muriwai et al., 2022; Severinsen & Reweti, 2021; Warbrick, Wilson, & Boulton, 2016). The embodied effects of colonisation on Indigenous peoples have significantly shaped experiences within the fitness and sport spaces, yet this literature provides context and a foundation for understanding how fitness can serve as a pathway to connection.

Methodology

This work is based on five months of immersive fieldwork conducted through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with gym members, trainers, and staff at BFT Hamilton East. Using participant observation, my goal was to as much as possible integrate myself into the daily rhythms of BFT Hamilton East as an active participant. To that end, I attended classes five to six times per week, actively engaged in an eight-week challenge, and participated in social and community events outside of the gym. I did this in an effort to gain an understanding of the daily happenings of the gym and the community. In this research, I use Indigenous autoethnography to indicate that I am both a participant and a researcher within the communities I am writing about. This method allows me to connect with other participants and reflect on my journey while grounding the work in kaupapa Māori values such as whanaungatanga, manaakitanga, and whakapapa. Indigenous knowledge is lived and carried through the body, and so approaching this study through an Indigenous autoethnographic lens helps me honour that, while also challenging research traditions that separate the personal from the political.

Bodyfit Training (BFT) is a global brand with over 300 studios worldwide. The structure of leadership for BFT follows a franchised business model, with tiered layers of leadership and decision-making that operate at global, national, and local levels. Although BFT is not an exclusively Māori-owned company, BFT Hamilton East is a Māori-led gym. In the context of this study, I intend to use the term ‘Māori-led’ to refer to the owners of BFT Hamilton East who whakapapa Māori. This framing acknowledges their genealogical ties as Māori and also the visible significance of Māori leadership in shaping this space.

This study intends and seeks to understand how these typically ‘mainstream’ gym spaces can be transformed into an environment that nurtures and cultivates cultural inclusion.

Although BFT Hamilton East was my main gym of focus, I was also able to interview others from BFT Palmerston North and other group fitness gyms across the wider community of Kirikiriroa, Hamilton. For example, I include an interview with Madisyn, who attends BFT Palmerston North, as a way to understand how a different BFT location may differ or be similar to BFT Hamilton East. Although the interviews I conducted with individuals from other group fitness gyms across the wider Kirikiriroa Hamilton community are not formally included in this thesis, the kōrero shared during those conversations provided valuable insight. These informal engagements contributed to a broader and more nuanced understanding of the role group fitness spaces play within different communities, enriching my reflections and shaping the direction of the research.

During the writing of this thesis, I conducted 12 qualitative interviews with gym members who are of Māori descent. Their experiences in the fitness space range from months to years. I wanted to ensure a wide range of experience to understand what it is that brought them to the gym and why they stayed. Although some participants have less experience in the gym space than others, most, if not all, have been involved in sports teams or community groups at some point in their lives. These interviews ranged from 15 to 45 minutes long, and I was able to meet with participants both in and outside the gym, creating opportunities for open dialogue. To ensure that data was recorded accurately, I ensured that I took detailed notes as well as voice recordings, allowing me to capture each participant's viewpoints and experiences within the fitness community. In this thesis, the real names of participants are used with their full and informed consent. Participants were given the option to remain anonymous or to have their

contributions attributed to them by name. By aiming to balance correct data collection and authentic engagement during these interviews, I aimed to uphold the Kaupapa Māori research approach (Smith, 2006; Mahuika, 2008; Webber, 2008, as cited in Muriwai et al., 2022) with respect and genuine collaboration, where participants were free to share any experience that they wished.

This study was informed by a Kaupapa Māori Research approach (Smith, 2006; Mahuika, 2008; Webber, 2008, as cited in Muriwai et al., 2022). The study centres Māori voices, and the goal from the outset was that participants would not only be the subjects of research but also actively contribute to the narrative of this paper. Early Māori anthropological researchers such as Makereti Papakura (1938) and Ngapare Hopa (1980) emphasised the importance of Māori-led ethnography and research, both advocating for the representation of Māori by Māori. The overall goal of this paper was to carry out research that would be beneficial to the upliftment of the community, not only through fitness but also through the value of the community. The Kaupapa Māori Research approach was key in ensuring that each participant's story was heard, respected and shared with care, in acknowledgement of each person's unique cultural outlook and personal fitness journey. As an Indigenous researcher, I understand that working with Indigenous community members means constant collaboration with Indigenous voices.

I hope that this research will have meaningful outcomes by highlighting ways in which Indigenous communities actively strengthen fitness groups through their values, relationships and knowledge. This research aims to amplify Indigenous voices and support Indigenous-led approaches to hauora. By drawing on Robbins' (2013) call for an increase of “Anthropology of the good”, I seek to add to the dialogue that pulls away from critiquing Indigenous culture and experience and towards meaningful contributions that emphasise positive experiences of cultural

value. In doing so, this work adds to the growing body of Indigenous anthropology that calls for more affirming scholarship on the value of Indigenous lives and culture (Hau'ofa, 1975)

Positionality

As a wahine Māori and a member of the group fitness community, I acknowledge my bias and am committed to being transparent regarding how this bias affects my research. My bias will be heavily influenced by what and who I know. In this study, I carried out my primary field research at BFT Hamilton East, a gym that I am a current member of and a gym that my brother Levi has co-owned since 2021. As part of this research, I also interviewed him to provide insight into the values, practices, and vision behind the space. My familiarity with the subject and participants inevitably places me in a position of privilege, which can narrow the scope from which I view this research. From this viewpoint, I accept that although I am in this position, I do not expect that others will share my thoughts as their lived experiences are completely different to my own. Accepting information as it comes and being receptive to information means confronting the positionality of the learner as a means of moving outwards, demonstrating that reflexivity leads to an understanding of difference, “others,” opposites and alternatives (Takacs, 2002).

By embracing participant observation, I did not remain a distant observer but instead became an active participant, experiencing firsthand the physical, social, and cultural dimensions of group fitness communities. This approach allowed me to understand not only the structured routines of workouts but also the informal interactions, relationships, and cultural connections that emerge in these spaces. Whether it was through shared experiences during each workout, conversations before and after class, or social gatherings outside of training, which often

included food (a staple of all great gatherings), my involvement provided insight into the relational fabric that binds these communities together.

This research takes a deliberately positive and relational stance, positioning itself within a methodology that centres Kaupapa Māori values (Smith, 2006; Mahuika, 2008; Webber, 2008, as cited in Muriwai et al., 2022) and Indigenous methodologies, where relational bonds are at the heart of the research. This study prioritises expressions of community, cultural identity, and wellbeing within Māori-led group fitness communities. Such an approach may be considered uncommon within anthropology; however, it aligns with and is influenced by Indigenous anthropologists who call for the reimagining of how Indigenous lives are represented. Epeli Hau'ofa (1975, p. 286) states:

“After decades of anthropological field research in Melanesia, we have come up only with pictures of people who fight, compete, trade, pay bride-prices, engage in rituals, invent cargo cults, copulate and sorcerise each other. There is hardly anything in our literature to indicate whether these people have any such sentiments as love, kindness, consideration, altruism and so on. We cannot tell from our ethnographic writings whether they have a sense of humour. We know little about their systems of morality, specifically their ideas of the good and the bad, and their philosophies; though we sometimes get around to these, wearing dark glasses, through our fascination with cargo cults. We have ignored their physical gestures, their deportment, and their patterns of non-verbal communication.

Hau'ofa (1975) critiques the legacy of anthropological research in the Pacific as an incomplete picture of the duality of Pacific cultures. His statement draws attention to the need for

more nuanced writings that show the depth of these cultures as more than one-dimensional. This erasure of depth and relational values in anthropological literature, as Hau‘ofa (1975, p. 286) argues further, is not merely an oversight but a decision which he states that:

“By presenting incomplete and distorted representations of Melanesians, we have bastardised our discipline, denied people important aspects of their humanity in our literature, and we have thereby unwittingly contributed to the perpetuation of the outrageous stereotypes of them made by ignorant outsiders who lived in their midst”

Hopa (1988, p.3), meanwhile, writes that, “native anthropologists like myself, raised in tribal contexts, have returned from a different vision quest, to ‘our people’ in response to their call and the clarion call of radical anthropologists for the need to decolonize the discipline”. Both Hau‘ofa (1975) and Hopa (1988) emphasise the need for anthropology to move beyond simplified or exoticised portrayals of Indigenous life, calling rather for methodologies grounded in relational accountability, cultural representation and the day-to-day practices that nurture these Indigenous communities.

In “*Indigenous Methodologies for Sport, Leisure and Social Justice Research*”, Hawkes (2019) emphasises that sport offers joy in its ability to create meaning, community, belonging, happiness and opportunities. She goes on to say that it is just as important to acknowledge the role of joy in sports as it is the continuing problems, especially for people from historically and structurally marginalised groups. In this study, I attempt to explore that vision by focusing on the “Anthropology of the good” (Robbins, 2013). Robbins (2013, p. 457) explains, “If you look

around anthropology today, it is hard to miss the importance of work on suffering. But it is also possible to spot a number of lines of inquiry that, while each still somewhat small or even marginal in themselves, may be poised to come together in a new focus on how people living in different societies strive to create the good in their lives”. This is where my research begins, with the hope to highlight the “good” that Māori group fitness spaces represent as sites of embodied whanaungatanga, cultural continuity, and decolonial wellbeing.

This research culminates in a thesis that explores the role of group fitness communities in shaping and reinforcing Māori culture, identity, and collective well-being. It examines how these spaces serve as more than just sites of physical exercise. I show that the deeper, more impactful use of these spaces can provide a place of weaving whakapapa (genealogy), whanaungatanga (relationships), and cultural continuity together. By applying ethnographic narratives and theoretical insights, this study also seeks to highlight the significance of movement as a form of cultural expression and resilience, revealing how fitness communities contribute to the continuation of Māori identity in contemporary Aotearoa.

While autoethnography centres the personal narrative, Indigenous autoethnography draws from the experience of the researcher as well as the collective, genealogical and place-based knowledge system. According to Bainbridge (2007, p. 6), the distinguishing feature of autoethnography lies in the active presence, participation and acknowledgement of the self in the research. In the context of Indigenous autoethnography, it draws a deeper significance. That is, as a wahine Māori, I am not only a researcher but an active participant with my own experiences, emotions and reflections that become sources of insight into this research. Neumann (1996, p. 173) describes it as the “gaze inward for a story of self”, highlighting the introspective nature of Indigenous autoethnography, not in a ‘selfish’ act but as a way to weave personal experiences

alongside the experiences of others. Therefore, this study becomes a relational and situated practice that honours both personal truth and collective knowledge.

Chapter One - Reclaiming the Indigenous Body

*For Indigenous people (as with all people)
There is nothing more immediate and everyday than the body
(Hokowhitu, 2009, p. 108)*

I want to start this chapter with the beginning of my story. Growing up as a young Māori girl in the early 2000s, a time before social media flooded our screens with the idea of the “perfect body”, my understanding of body image was shaped by the people around me. Of course, we still had media in the form of television, newspapers, magazines, and the internet, but all of this was not as easily accessible as it is today. As a young girl growing up in a small town, there wasn't much to do but play. Riding our bikes down to the park and playing sports with all the kids in the neighbourhood was something we did often, not thinking that in 20 years or so we'd be calling it fitness. As kids, we were always doing something, going up to church college for Kapahaka, and Hula lessons with my siblings at home. At school, I played touch rugby, basketball, soccer, inline hockey, and tennis, all before I had the understanding of how the world valued the aesthetic over the function of a body. Back then, being strong meant being good at your chosen sport, being fast, fluid with your motions or (as a girl) being able to keep up with the boys at lunchtime (which I now roll my eyes at because girl power!). I remember the first time my body was pointed out as a young Māori girl. I must have been about nine or ten the first time my body type was questioned. My school had entered an inline hockey tournament. I remember looking around and seeing only a handful of brown kids. “You don't belong here”, one of the girls said to me. At that moment, I felt the weight of being brown and a girl in a Pakeha-dominated sport come crashing down around me. Feelings of confusion and inadequacy hit me the first time my identity was challenged.

Growing older as Māori girls, we join teams where the uniform doesn't quite fit our shape. The idea that certain bodies “belonged” in sporting spaces while others did not, seeped in slowly. As I got older, it continued, teams with uniforms that didn't fit our body shapes, tight on the hips and chest, always suffocating my body, so instead I learned to wear baggy clothes two sizes too big. I would notice how some bodies were marked as “right” for sport, and others were not. I was confused and felt out of place in my own body, so I stopped. No more sports meant no more having to hear that I didn't belong. I put my energy into Polynesian dancing, and finally felt that I had found a place that I loved and belonged, because what better place to feel belonging than amongst your own people?

This chapter explores how Māori are reshaping contemporary group fitness communities in order to reclaim agency over their bodies. Kaupapa Māori theory reminds us that our bodies are not simply physical forms but holders of whakapapa, which are not only genealogical ties. Rather, as Hikuroa (2016, p. 6) describes, whakapapa is the central principle that orders the universe, demonstrating an interconnectivity between everything, and also a cognitive genealogical framework connecting the creation of the universe to everything that exists within it via descent from ancestors. Hokowhitu (2009) points out that Indigenous identity is not just about the individual, but is shaped by connections to family, ancestors and the wider community. Unlike the Western idea of a person as a separate, individual self, Indigenous ways of understanding identity often include spiritual and collective elements. He describes the difference between Western and Indigenous epistemologies, where one is defined as a ‘singular self’, private and individual, while in contrast, the Indigenous body is ‘communally defined’ as well as genealogical and embodied. This idea situates the Indigenous body as highly relational. Yet colonialism has distorted this, linking the visible Indigenous body to moral deficiency, and

thus deeply shaping how Indigenous people are seen and treated today. This chapter draws heavily on Hokowhitu's (2009; 2004) work because it is useful for exploring the ongoing colonialist legacies on Māori bodies and lived experiences of resistance to those legacies. Situating the body within Indigenous epistemologies increases the potential for one to affirm the body as more than physical but as a living vessel of whakapapa. As Dr Leonie Pihama (2010, p.6) shares:

Kaupapa relates to notions of foundation, plan; philosophy, and strategies. Kaupapa Māori, therefore, indicates a Māori view of those things. It relates to Māori philosophies of the world, to Māori understandings on which our beliefs and values are based, Māori worldviews and ways of operating. While the theoretical assertion of Kaupapa Māori theory is relatively new, Kaupapa Māori as a foundation is not. Kaupapa Māori is extremely old – ancient, in fact. It predates any and all of us in living years and is embedded in our cultural being.

This framing of Kaupapa Māori as 'embedded in our cultural being' positions Kaupapa Māori theory as a knowledge form that is distinctly Māori as opposed to knowledge imparted through colonisation. "To think and act in terms of Kaupapa Māori while experiencing colonisation is to resist dominance" (Pihama, 2010, p. 6); therefore, we understand that our bodily movements are inherited, embodied wisdom passed down from tūpuna, and so are our traumas. Through cultural movement, we display relationality to each other, to the land, and to our ancestors. To be disconnected from our bodies is to be disconnected from our history. Therefore, in attending gym spaces, I wanted to understand how and if these communities transform our understanding of our bodies as Māori and/or if the commercialised spaces reinforce the colonial norms of the value of the Māori body.

This chapter thus explores the act of decolonising the Indigenous body and the ways Māori and Indigenous peoples reclaim embodiment as an act of cultural and political resistance. Beginning with the historical and ongoing colonial framing of Indigenous bodies, often reduced to hyperphysicality, this chapter examines how narratives of Indigenous bodies are being challenged and redefined. I will also explore how the role of reclamation contributes to participants' overall well-being, community, and hauora. Finally, I will look at the use of Indigenous-owned clothing brands. The chapter considers how fashion becomes a wearable form of whakapapa and expression, representing how Māori and Indigenous-owned brands are not just clothing but statements of resistance and belonging. Together, these sections illustrate how the Indigenous body is not only a site of past violence but also of ongoing agency, creativity, and connection.

Politics of the Indigenous Body

Rather than warriors, the athletes I encountered came across as navigators trying to reminisce about a time when they were free to fulfil their potential as people, and to remember that their ancestors were able to navigate the Pacific.

(Besnier, Calabrò, & Guinness, 2020, p. 171)

All bodies are political. The politics of Māori bodies in particular are deeply tied to the histories of colonialism in Aotearoa. Professor Brendan Hokowhitu (2004) argues that colonial discourse has positioned tāne Māori as hyperphysical, innately athletic beings, reducing and racialising their identity. The hyperphysical narrative marginalises tāne Māori as Hokowhitu (2004)

highlights the notion of Māori as natural sportsmen deriving from the “noble savage” ideal, carrying the idea that Māori sportsmen, in particular, were the greatest trophies of colonisation because they signified assimilation and the success of British imperialism (p. 270). The “noble savage” concept is a colonial construct that romanticised Indigenous peoples as physically gifted but intellectually inferior.

The Warrior

On a Wednesday evening at BFT Hamilton East, it was time for the strength lower-body session. Commonly known as “Leg Day”, members crowded onto the gym floor, navigating between groups of friends and barbells and weights set out for the day's workout. “Kia Ora Team”, the trainers begin the class, “Today is lower body strength, so we want you to lift heavy”. After the warm-up, each person is numbered off and moves to their station to begin the workout. There's a hum of conversation as members catch up while also deciding how ‘heavy’ they are going to lift today. Some are reporting that they’re going to try to hit a PB, while others are discussing their injuries, so lifting light today. Loading up the barbells with weight, I notice a few of the tane Māori ‘Yeah, that should be enough for now,’ one of them says as he gets in position to attempt the lift. “One more, one more” A few friends crowd around him, “You got this, bro!” Applause goes out around the class as he completes his set and hits a new PB (personal best).

As one participant shared, “See, this is it right here, not so much the lift but to support the brothers. I train because I want to be here longer for my kids. It's not about being the strongest, it's about showing up for them.” This moment challenged me to reflect on the “warrior trope” often used to describe Māori men (Hokowhitu 2004, Besnier, Calabrò, & Guinness, 2020, p.171). While on the surface, this idea appears to romanticise strength, Hokowhitu (2004)

discusses how this viewpoint of tāne Māori portrays them as hyperphysical, inherently violent, and emotionally distant as part of a broader project of colonisation. The trope of the ‘warrior’ is harmful because it frames this one-dimensional view of what Tāne Māori can be. However, historical accounts from early European settlers depict a different narrative. On the website *E Tu Whanau*, their book “*Our Ancestors enjoyed loving whānau relationships*” (2018, p.12), George French Angas (1822–1886), an artist, naturalist, and writer, recounts:

Both parents are almost idolatrously fond of their children, and the father frequently spends a considerable portion of his time in nursing his infant, who nestles in his blanket and is lulled to rest by some native song... The children are cheerful and lively little creatures, full of vivacity and intelligence. They pass their early years almost without restraint, amusing themselves with the various games of the country.”

The image portrayed a tāne Māori singing his infant to sleep directly disrupts the colonial depiction of the masculine ideal. Instead, it reveals this emotionally expressive and nurturing model of Māori masculinity. In Dame Anne Salmond's (2016) article “*Maori once were tender fathers*”, she writes of the harm of perpetuating colonial narratives that “if you teach children for long enough that their ancestors were violent, abusive savages, after a while, they are likely to believe you”. This rhetoric has the potential to shape how Māori see themselves, yet the moments like the one shared in the gym reframe what it could mean to be a ‘warrior’ not in terms of physicality but through commitment to whānau and intergenerational wellbeing.

The warrior trope is simultaneously representative of the processes subtly shaping the self-image of Indigenous men and their desires to be recognised as fully human, and more than this societal expectation that has been placed upon them. Within Māori rugby mobility, for

example, the warrior specifically evokes the global circulation of discourses and of life projects, authenticating rugby flair as a feature of Indigenous Māori masculinities. The (resilient) warrior image contributes to Māori athletes' appeal to the international rugby industry, media, and audiences, which often fetishizes them, as they fetishize Pacific Island rugby men (Besnier 2014; Grainger 2009; Hawkes 2018 as cited in Besnier, Calabrò, & Guinness, 2020, p 170) However, when the warrior's magical powers become ineffective because of injury or a poor performance, the player is likely to fall into oblivion and be easily replaced, causing further scarring (Besnier, Calabrò, & Guinness, 2020, p. 171). When Māori bodies excel in sport, but are not equally welcomed in political or academic spaces or are shunned from these sporting areas due to ineffectiveness, it underlines how colonisation limits Indigenous peoples to roles that serve settler interests. This can be seen through Hokowhitu's description of schooling systems actively constraining tāne Māori, noting that "Māori boys received a limited form of education that channelled them into non-academic areas, preventing them from gaining intellectual qualifications and subsequent white-collar employment" (Hokowhitu, 2004, p. 267).

Each Māori body can be seen as a potential expression of resistance to ongoing colonial pressure and a reflection of resilience through survival. The survival of the Indigenous body is resistance to colonisation that tries to define and shape what it means to be Māori in this modern day. In *Decolonizing methodologies*, Smith (1999) says, "The international social movement of Indigenous peoples is at all levels highly political...According to Gerald Alfred, 'It has been said that being born Indian is being born into politics. I believe this to be true, because being born a Mohawk of Kahnawake, I do not remember a time free from the impact of political conflict'" (Alfred, G. R. 1995, as cited in Smith, 1999, pg 110).

Reclaiming the body

I remember the dread I felt walking into my first class at BFT Hamilton East. Not because I didn't want to be there, but because I didn't believe it was a place where I would fit in. I initially joined BFT Hamilton East in 2021 during the pandemic. The opportunity to join this gym arose through the strong presence of whānau and friends who were already part of the community. My brother Levi, who co-owns the gym with his business partner Alisha, opened it in early 2021. After months of encouragement from them both, I finally decided to give it a go. I had been home from BYU-H for about 2 years, and during my last 6 months in Hawai'i, I had lost a lot of weight due to mental trauma, so what looked like a healthy weight was actually due to stress. At the time, compliments on my body felt disingenuous, as they were affirming an image that had been created through unhealthy emotional pain. The first time I walked into BFT as that version of myself, I began to feel myself shrink, nervous about how this class would go and how I would be perceived.

As the doors slid open that day, I spied my friend (we had decided to join the gym together to make sure we kept each other accountable) “It's so good to see you”, she smiled, “let's do this”. This was my first time joining a gym with a group fitness focus, and it showed. I couldn't understand half of the terminology that was being used: Burpee, bear crawl, sdrive, kettlebell, all these words felt so foreign to me that I felt completely lost and uncoordinated throughout the whole class. The expectation that “thin” is the only way to be beautiful was challenged as I looked around this class, filled with bodies of all different shapes and sizes, strong and solid. In a gym space, the ‘ideal’ body shape/weight was hardly seen; this space was filled with all different shapes and weights, working together toward their goals. Over time, BFT

Hamilton East became something unexpected: a place where I could begin to reclaim my body, not only through fitness but through movement grounded in community and connection (Crockett & Butryn, 2018; Edmonds, 2019; Gibbs, Salinas, & Turnock, 2022; Hawkes, 2019; Hedblom, 2009; Sossa, 2017; Warbrick, Wilson, & Boulton, 2016). It involved reconfiguring my understanding of what it meant to be strong, Māori, and healthy, on my terms. During my current research and rejoining the gym, there was a newfound understanding of what the reclamation and decolonisation of the body means. I argue that members are encouraged to define their own personal fitness journeys, challenging colonial narratives that have historically marginalised Māori bodies. Paige, a proud Waikato, Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāi Tūhoe and Ngāi Te Rangi wahine, and a member of BFT Hamilton East, shares her experience:

We all understand what it feels like to go through the different fears or stereotypes that may be associated with the gym or with people who are at the gym. Especially being Māori, it's hard, and sometimes we feel like we don't fit the standard of what is beautiful. If you don't fit a certain way, you can't be here. If you look a certain way, you can't be here.

Paige's reflection expresses the emotional and social challenges that many Māori face when entering gym spaces shaped by Western standards of health and beauty. She highlights how these environments often carry unspoken expectations about how one should look or move and often exclude those who do not fit the idealised image of the "fit" body.

The gym is not just like, yeah, you're fit, but you're also super healthy. You spend less on food, so you're re-indigenising yourself. You look at healthier ways to eat. It's more than just that, and I think that's a part of the help from the gym. And I actually think it's a

really key aspect to start with that, to be honest, because it has... Once you can do that, you can do anything, to be honest. And you start discovering more things... We're actually really powerful people. And this is all indigenous, and there's more to just being indigenous than speaking the language.

Paige's thought highlights that there is more to reclaiming one's health than through physical fitness alone, exercise, nutrition, and discipline. Here, the gym acts as a catalyst not just for physical transformation, but for a broader journey into mātauranga Māori, one that remembers and reactivates Indigenous knowledge systems, from kai (food) practices to communal wellbeing. Reclaiming the Indigenous body is not merely about lifting weights or running faster; instead, it is a way to restore what colonisation has attempted to sever the connection between body, land, knowledge, and identity. Paige notes, "We're actually really powerful people." In this statement, Paige uses "we're" specifically referring to Māori as a people, affirming the collective strength rooted in community. For participants such as Paige, reclaiming health is thus not just personal, it is political and profoundly Indigenous.

For Māori, these ideals are compounded by cultural and historical marginalisation, making it harder to feel a sense of belonging. As discussed above, Hokowhitu (2004) describes the positioning of Māori bodies by colonial standards as hyperphysical, where Māori are celebrated as naturally gifted athletes, yet simultaneously restricted by these stereotypes. This colonial framing limits Māori in how they are able to freely express the complex and diverse ways in which they embody and articulate their identities. Hokowhitu (2004, p. 271) states:

Insidiously, the Māori sportsman image can conversely be employed to imply that Tane lack a work ethic and are lazy and fickle. In contrast to Pakeha sportsmen, whose

achievements are attributed to human endeavour, Māori men are said to achieve through innate physical attributes, and thus their achievements lack moral integrity.

This framing constructs Māori success in sports as the product of physical attributes rather than hard work, strategy, and mental fortitude. As a result, achievements are framed as natural rather than earned, thereby lacking depth. This idea of the hyperphysical, lazy Māori is biased as it has been shaped by colonial narratives that have marginalised Indigenous bodies and redefined wellness according to Eurocentric standards. Challenging these reductive stereotypes requires attention to the everyday ways, in everyday spaces, Indigenous people actively reshape what their bodies mean on their terms.

Before the challenge

I pulled up to the gym in my car on a busy Saturday morning, stretching my aching muscles as I stepped out of the car, I noticed there was more movement than usual in the car park. “Morena!” one of the girls shouted from across the car park. “Morena!” I replied, my voice croaking as I realised that was the first word I’d said all morning. This morning was particularly busy, as I would soon find out, because it was the Saturday before the beginning of the summer-time 8-week challenge. The gym was alive with excitement and purpose. There’s a particular energy that fills the room: a rhythm created by the sound of weights clanking, the thump of upbeat music curated by the DJ, and the buzz of conversation as gym members weave in and out of the front door.

The already compact space of BFT Hamilton East felt like it was brimming with energy as members did their scans and collected their goodie bags in preparation for this new 8-week challenge. The mood was light, and conversations unfolded around scan results and strategies, goals, and motivations. There was laughter and the occasional groan as members reacted to their body composition scans, some surprised, others nodding knowingly. “What’s your goal for this challenge?” the trainer asked one woman, who responded confidently, “Consistency. I just want to show up for myself and for my whānau.” Around her, others talked amongst themselves: some wanted to lose weight, while others looked to build muscle, and another member exclaimed, “I need to change my habits, I’m taking accountability, guys!”

These interactions reflect a theme I noticed repeatedly, the more I interviewed and observed people at the gym; I saw that Māori participants were not just seeking personal fitness but pursuing a broader push for lifestyle change and for the chance to build better futures for their whānau. On this theme, Hokowhitu (2009, p. 116) advocates for agency over one's own body, regardless of our pasts, he says:

Conversely, can we ‘jump for joy’ in the knowledge that regardless of our facticity, we have choice, responsibility and freedom...through the realisation of the material immediacy of the Indigenous body will enable Indigenous people to live beyond the search for a pure pre-colonial past and the limits of a mind/body duality.

The concept of the immediacy of the Indigenous Body encourages Māori to embrace the full presence and potential of our bodies in the here and now. Our bodies are living in the now and should not be defined by our colonial pasts. In spaces of fitness, Māori members find connection in the relational moments of shared laughter, casual teasing, and goal setting. A

deeper kaupapa Māori ethos is present, one that affirms the value of showing up for each other, of reclaiming health as a whakapapa-driven responsibility. Tiana, a strong Ngāti Porou and Te Whānau a Apanui wahine and BFT member, shares:

Everything about group-based workouts embodies the here and now. Because you're helping each other, you're...pushing each other to do better, you're encouraging them as well, which is what I feel like, especially for me, would make me want to push further... Yeah, I can do it, I can do it because everyone's just cheering you on.

Tiana's reflections ground Paige's reflections, illustrating how fitness and Indigenous practices of community can serve as a pathway to wellbeing. Paige said,

We forget that the importance of it is also our body, mind, and spirit. And that's strengthening our whakapapa just right there by being healthy, being fit, and being around a community where you're allowed to talk positively in a manner. Not only are you helping your body, but you're disconnecting, you're re-indigenising yourself.

Here Paige emphasises that taking care of yourself is key to the continuation of your whānau, “strengthening our whakapapa”. This suggests that understanding the act of reindigenising yourself is not only through exercise but through other everyday acts of social connection. I argue, therefore, that by reclaiming health through culturally grounded, community-based fitness spaces, Māori participants reassert tino rangatiratanga over their bodies. More than individual transformation, these bodily and social transformations actively disrupt colonial narratives that have historically rendered Māori bodies as unhealthy and unruly.

Where'd you get that from? Clothing as Expression

*“In a consumer-driven society,
one significant way to wholeheartedly back a cause is to wear it.”*

(Neema Amani U., 2025, p. 3)

Regarding the stylisation of the body, Neema Amani U. (2025, p. 4) tell us that fashion is far more than a mere aesthetic or commercial industry; it is a dynamic and potent form of political expression. From historical revolutions to contemporary social movements, clothing has been used to symbolise resistance, foster solidarity, and challenge power structures. When I reflect on the role of fashion in my life, my mind immediately goes to new trends or aesthetics. I think of celebrities and big luxury brands, completely out of my reach. My siblings and I would sit on the couch in the living room after school, eyes locked on the TV. I had an older brother, so we spent a lot of time watching him play the PlayStation, or watching sports like the NBA or Wrestling, we'd watch music videos, athletes, singers and rappers all repping the latest brands. We'd also absorb the fashion, we'd point to the shoes, the jerseys, the fitted caps. We saw brands like Nike, Adidas, Reebok, and FILA everywhere we looked. Back then, we wore what we had, mismatched gear, the off-brand stuff from the warehouse and the occasional cool hand-me-downs from our cousins. We thought that wearing those big-name brands meant something. It meant that you were somebody. It meant being seen. It meant you could be good enough if you looked the part. Little did we know at the time that fashion wasn't always about 'looking the part'. Fashion can also offer something deeper; it opens up the possibility of being a powerful expression of who we are, where we come from, and what we stand for.

Throughout history, clothes have been used to make bold political statements. Examples include the Black Panther Party wearing black leather jackets, berets and their natural hairstyles. Similarly, the REDress project, representing the thousands of missing Indigenous women or the Palestinian Keffiyeh, has become a symbol of Palestinian identity and resistance. Fashion, whether worn at protest movements using style to stand out or communities dressing a certain way to showcase cultural ties, takes on a larger role for expression. For Indigenous communities, the wearing of certain clothing is not only fabric, but it's also whakapapa, it's connection, it's identity that you can wear. Reclamation through Indigenous clothing brands opens up new possibilities for expressing identity. These brands may offer more than just apparel; they can become platforms for cultural revitalisation through their use of language and collective empowerment.

At BFT Hamilton East, I observed the mix of branded gym wear in the space, mainstream labels like Puma, Adidas, and Nike sit alongside gym-specific brands such as Lululemon, LSKD, Gymshark, and The WOD Life. Along with these brands comes a 'lifestyle' and image being sold: The fit athlete who works out every day, drinking smoothies and eating clean, all you have to do to achieve this lifestyle is pay hefty prices for these workout sets. I've also observed a growing presence of wahine Māori-owned activewear brands like HINE Collection, Wahine Toa, Soil and Sand, and ARIA. These aren't just aesthetic choices; they are political statements. For many wāhine Māori in the gym, wearing these brands is an expression of whakapapa and pride. I argue that wearing brands that are culturally grounded, such as Aria or HINE, helps wahine Māori members to create relational bonds through clothing.

During my time observing morning classes, especially those attended predominantly by Māori and Pasifika women, I noticed clusters of members gathering around the cubbies before

class, greeting each other, complimenting each other's outfits, and often laughing about matching sets from HINE's latest drop. One woman, pulling her long sleeve over her head, said, "Look at us in our HINE today, sis," to a friend across the room. They fist-bumped, and another joined in, saying, "Oi, we're all matching. Let's take a photo together". The HINE branding was worn proudly by these wahine, bright, bold colours that almost said "I'm here!". These moments reflect more than fashion; they are moments of connection. Wearing Māori-owned activewear, according to some gym members, feels different. One member shared during our post-class kōrero, "It's not just clothes. It's knowing where it comes from; it's our own people doing this. They put heaps of thought into it, on what works for Wahine and what doesn't. That makes you feel good, even on the days you feel tired or not your best." By choosing to wear Indigenous-designed clothing, wahine Māori assert tino rangatiratanga over their bodies and how they are seen. Simpson (2016, p. 15) puts forth the idea that:

"An Indian woman's body in settler regimes such as the US, in Canada, is loaded with meaning - signifying other political orders, land itself, of the dangerous possibility of reproducing Indian life and most dangerously, other political orders. Other life forms, other sovereignties, other forms of political will".

As Simpson argues, the Indigenous person and more specifically the Indigenous woman's body becomes a symbol of continuation, signalling the persistence of Indigenous life. The power that Indigenous women hold in communities is a direct threat to the lifestyle and values that colonialism fought to diminish through efforts to break down these kinship ties and the value of women in communities. Ani Mikaere (2003, p. 31) applies this idea to the role of Māori women, stating:

The inherent tapu of each Māori person is sourced in their connection, through whakapapa, to the rest of humanity, to the gods and the environment. The role of women, as the bearers of past, present and future generations, is therefore of paramount importance. The survival of the whānau, hapū and iwi is dependent upon the reproductive functions of women.

For wāhine Māori, whose roles include carrying the past, present, and future through their nurturing capacities, the body holds special cultural and political significance. Within Māori-led group fitness communities, these understandings help recognise the potential for the body to be reclaimed and not simply as a site for physical change. Reclamation also occurs concerning the purchasing and wearing of Māori-owned clothing brands as a form of resistance. This reframing challenges colonial notions of the body as objectified and controlled, instead asserting a kaupapa Māori view of the body as sacred. These garments, often celebrated for their size inclusivity, affordability during sales, and the intentional use of te reo Māori in branding, challenge the ideals of health and fitness historically shaped by colonial systems. In this space, they become an expression of inclusion, creating brands that look to represent not only Wahine Māori but Wahine from all over the world. While exploring the Hine website, I noted this passage from their *about us* section: “This notion of mana wāhine (the unique power and essence of women) is embedded in our Māori world view, and embodies the very soul of our brand.” The deliberate inclusion of Te Ao Māori into the brand identity celebrates the uniqueness of their outlook from a wahine Māori-owned business. Through this approach, I argue that commercial brands such as Hine contribute to a broader movement of Indigenous entrepreneurship.

At first glance, it may seem like participants are just wearing regular gym clothes, but thinking about what it means to be stepping into a commercialised space, with Māori-designed

apparel, opens a conversation to understand how the physical act of wearing Māori-designed gym gear in a franchised fitness environment could be part of a larger practice of reclaiming the body. The presence of the capitalist market model is sometimes assumed to remove the authentic expression of indigeneity (Li, 2010). While capitalist market models can challenge indigenous socioeconomic practices, in this case, wearing Māori-designed apparel can be considered part of a larger set of cultural values and practices that acknowledge that strength and well-being are not solely defined by Eurocentric standards, but can instead be deeply rooted in Māori cultural values. In Gibbs et al. (2022) “*Post-industrial masculinities and gym culture: Graft, craft and fraternity*”, the authors argue that in a neoliberal society, the gym has become a substitute for the physical labour of now absent industrial jobs, allowing men to reclaim masculine ideals as well as creating relationships. Both these spaces became sites for performing and affirming identity in their own unique ways. What differs in these gyms is the intertwining of cultural values with relational dynamics, where Māori experiences in group fitness emphasise values such as whanaungatanga and manaakitanga, and this distinctive relationship between commerce and culture in Māori-led spaces.

The founders of Aria collection, another indigenous brand, for example, state on their website, “The brand is named after our daughter, Aria. It is a daily reminder of our pure passion to see this vision through and build a powerful community of individuals to be role models for our next generation, therefore continuing a lineage of empowered communities for many years to come”. This vision acknowledges the act of wearing Indigenous-designed clothing as deeply relational. Each piece challenges the colonial narratives by affirming Indigenous pride, values, and sovereignty. While some may argue that not all wearers are consciously aware of the brand’s deeper vision, the act of choosing to wear Māori-owned gym wear featuring kupu Māori and

cultural symbols contributes to the Indigenous visibility. It acts as a reminder to both the wearer and those around them that visibility is important. The Aria brand founders' desire to “build a powerful community” speaks to the role of clothing as more than self-expression but as a shared expression, worn and seen in public, strengthening collective ties and affirming a visible, living presence of Indigenous identity in contemporary spaces.

Conclusion

The Indigenous body has been a site of political struggle, surveilled, romanticised, commodified, and disciplined under colonial powers. Hokowhitu states (2009) As Indigenous scholars, we cannot ignore the historical inscription upon the Indigenous body, especially as a material occupier of colonised space. In Aotearoa, the figure of the Māori body has been constructed through racialised narratives that reduce Indigenous excellence to physicality while erasing its complexity. As scholars such as Hokowhitu (2004) and Besnier, Calabrò, & Guinness (2020) have demonstrated, these depictions are colonial constructs that carry power by limiting the possibilities for Māori self-determination. Yet, this chapter has also highlighted how the narrative of the Indigenous body is being reclaimed through resistance when Māori and other Indigenous peoples assert tino rangatiratanga over their bodies, their movements, and their ways of being. It is essential that the Indigenous body should not only be seen through a lens of loss. In *‘Indigenous Extensionalism and the Body’*, Hokowhitu (2004, p. 133) emphasises that we shouldn't romanticise the Indigenous body in the search for a pure pre-colonial past, “That is, the importance of strenuous analyses into the immediacy of the Indigenous body as an existing, living, breathing, playing, thinking, working, ageing and dying physical agent”.

I argue that through group fitness gym communities and everyday acts of dress, the Indigenous body becomes a canvas for cultural renewal and a site for maintaining a presence in spaces that have historically erased or misrepresented Indigenous life. Ultimately, in line with Hokowhitu's (2004) call for the recognition of Indigenous persons' agency, this chapter has shown that the politics of the Indigenous body are not simply about representation but about the reclamation of the narrative surrounding Māori bodies. In centring Indigenous voices and practices and Indigenous agency, we begin to see not a singular Indigenous body, but the vision of the community as a whole. Indigenous bodies carry with them not just histories of trauma, but the agency to choose futures of resistance and resurgence of culture.

Chapter Two - The Importance of Place

*“Waikato taniwharau, he piko he taniwha, he piko he taniwha”
"Waikato of a hundred taniwha, at every bend a taniwha”*

An acknowledgement of place invites us to consider where we are not only in physical terms but as deeply relational, ancestral, and alive. I would like to acknowledge the whenua on which BFT Hamilton East currently resides, this land with deep ancestral ties to Ngāti Wairere (*Te Pae Here*, n.d.). This area holds lasting importance for Ngāti Wairere, and I acknowledge their deep relationship and ongoing connection to this whenua.

Colonisation is an ongoing process; it is not stagnant, nor is it historical. As it takes on new forms, some forms may be less obviously violent, but they continue to deny Indigenous peoples the right to freedom in their own lands (Jackson, 2022, p.55). Aotearoa is no different, and the history of Hamilton East cannot be understood without recognising the lasting impact of the New Zealand Land Wars, more specifically the Waikato campaign of 1863-1864. The invasion of British forces stood as a pivotal moment for local iwi. Through false claims and incorrect narratives, the invasion of this area resulted in the mass confiscation of iwi and hapu ancestral lands. This occurred via the legal mechanism of the New Zealand Settlements Act; according to the Manatū Taonga — Ministry for Culture and Heritage (2021), “The New Zealand Settlements Act enabled the confiscation (raupatu) of land from Māori tribes deemed to have ‘engaged in open rebellion against Her Majesty’s authority’”.

This whenua, taken without consent or compensation, was used to establish military settlements such as current-day Hamilton East, fundamentally altering not only the culture of the

area but also the physical landscape. The military-settler townships were to be the nodes from which settlers would spread out onto the land (Ritchie, 2007, p. 37). From the 1870s until the mid-20th century, Hamilton East was known as ‘Irishtown’, this was because a significant number of the militiamen who settled there were of Irish descent, and many other Irish Catholics came to live near the Catholic church and convent (Swarbrick, 2010). Streets such as ‘Grey Street’, where BFT Hamilton East currently sits, were named after colonial figures like Sir George Grey, illustrating a narrative of power put forth by the colonisers in order to enact the erasure of the existence of Iwi and hapu whose home they had invaded.

This chapter first introduces themes of histories of colonisation in Aotearoa and Hamilton, in doing so giving context to the reclamation of space that comes from the gym as a Māori-owned, Māori-led franchise. Continuing on, this chapter will then set the scene for BFT Hamilton East as the site of primary research for this thesis, with an ethnographic description of the space. The chapter also examines the purpose of this space. In a space as compact as BFT Ham East, the use of space needs to be intentional if it is not to be chaos. Purpose drives how this space is used to maximise its potential as a gym and as a space of connection. This chapter explores how the size and use of space in a gym matter in terms of cultural community and community engagement. Within Kaupapa Māori, physical space is relational, layered with meaning, and constantly shaped by the people who occupy it. Finally, this chapter will examine the “space-between” in reference to the intersection of commercialisation and culture and how Indigenous placemaking reclaims commodified/commercial spaces.

Scholars have increasingly drawn attention to the ways colonisation and urban development in Aotearoa have systematically erased Indigenous presence in both tangible and intangible forms. Matunga (2013) and Nejad (2018), as cited in Raerino et al. (2021, p. 233), concur that this legacy of colonisation and urban development on Indigenous lands has entailed the elimination of Indigenous ‘memory’ (existence, heritage, experience) and ‘materiality’ (physical presence, structures, places). As an example of how this erasure extended beyond physical landscapes and into the lives of Māori, Indigenous children were banned from speaking their native languages to force assimilation and sever their connections to place, culture, and identity. Renowned Māori activist Tame Iti discusses his experience of forced assimilation while attending school in his community. His school principal stated, “I will not allow you to speak Māori on my school grounds. So, if you continue to speak Māori, you will remain after school and be punished” (TEDx Talks, 2015, 3:01). His punishment was to write “I will not speak Māori” 100 times on the blackboard” (TEDx Talks, 2015, 3:49). This type of forced assimilation has a drastic effect on indigenous communities; as seen in the loss of language, cultural values and practices, land, and knowledge, all contribute to the destruction of a culture. Yet, despite these impacts, Indigenous epistemologies and lives endure; Indigenous people continue to challenge the dominant narratives of Western thought and, as Brayboy (2005) argues, through their lives and epistemologies, provide critical frameworks for understanding the complexities of Indigenous existence and survival in the face of ongoing colonialism.

This survival can be seen when considered alongside the material dispossession of Indigenous lands, where, as Smith (1999, p. 51) explains, space was appropriated from indigenous cultures and then 'gifted back' as reservations, reserved pockets of land for

indigenous people who once possessed all of it. This land was forcibly taken as Grey justified the military invasion of the Waikato on the pretext that he was pre-empting a planned Māori attack on Auckland (Dench, 2011, p. 43) as seen in the article “*Invasion Plans*” (Manatū Taonga — Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2021), which states:

Grey blamed the Kīngitanga, which he alleged was also planning a ‘bloodthirsty’ assault on Auckland. Claims that there was ‘little doubt [that the Waikato] are at the bottom of most of the mischief’ were used to convince his superiors in London that an attack on Auckland was imminent. By the time it was clear that there would be no such attack, another 3000 troops had been sent to New Zealand.

These claims, though largely unfounded, were used to persuade British authorities to send thousands more troops. In reality, no such assault was ever planned. This narrative served to frame the British as acting in self-defence. Dench (2011, p. 43) explains that it is generally accepted now that Waikato Māori were fighting a defensive war in 1863–64 and that the British Army’s advance and attack had little to do with quelling a Māori uprising. One example of the reclamation of Indigenous space and narrative in Kirikiriroa, Hamilton, is the recent renaming of colonial-era landmarks and placenames. As part of wider efforts to restore Māori place names and acknowledge the histories of the whenua, Hamilton City Council approved significant changes in 2022. A council statement explains:

Hamilton City Council’s Community Committee yesterday (26 April) approved applications to rename Von Tempsky Street to Puutikitiki Street and the nearby Dawson Park to Te Wehenga Park. The new te reo Māori names serve as an opportunity to revive original place

names that have a closer relationship to the whenua (land), reflect the area's history and are significant to mana whenua. (*News*, 2022)

Efforts to restore Te Reo Māori place names to street names and suburbs, remove colonial statues, protect wāhi tapu, and reinstate Indigenous narratives are part of a wider movement to restore knowledge and reconnect Māori with their whenua. These acts of reclamation resist the legacy of colonial violence and reassert Māori tino rangatiratanga (self-determination) in both physical and non-physical landscapes. Considering this history of the Whenua, I reflect on how this space functions, not only as a site for physical fitness but potentially as a place of cultural connection and reclamation.

This cultural and physical reclamation challenges colonial erasure and asserts Indigenous sovereignty through daily actions such as group fitness, which are entwined with broader movements of restoration of Māori presence in these spaces and values within urban landscapes. Therefore, in this chapter, I will not focus on 'Decolonising' but, as Jackson (2020, p. 62) describes, the 'ethics of restoration', a rebalancing of relationships and restoration, not as an event but as a process. Much like colonisation is a process, so too is the undoing (restoration).

Situated on Grey Street, a site shaped by Aotearoa's colonial past, the gym highlights the importance of recognising and engaging with the historical context of place. Recognising this context allows for a more profound appreciation of how contemporary spaces such as group fitness gyms can serve as sites for cultural resurgence and community empowerment.

Setting the scene: BFT HAM EAST

In Aotearoa, BFT gyms are situated in all types of repurposed commercial spaces. There are BFT gyms in warehouses, office spaces and high-rise buildings. BFT Hamilton East currently sits in a space that was once occupied by a Westpac bank. The gym is located at the busy intersection of Grey & Clyde streets in the heart of Hamilton East. As you approach the intersection, there sits the gym, enclosed with frosted glass windows and the slogan on the company sign sitting high above the footpath, “*Different. Better.*”. Upon entering the gym, the glass doors slide open to reveal a relatively small workout space. As the rush of cool air-conditioned air hits you in the face as you enter, it carries the smell of a scented candle mixed with disinfectant. The first thing likely to catch your eye is the front desk; its high front creates a barrier between you and the trainers, who sit, check emails, and review the day's workout programming on the computer.

To the right of the entrance, along the window, are the cubbies, where members store their personal belongings during class. The use of cubbies, rather than rental lockers like those found in larger commercial gyms, signals that this is a space designed for short, purposeful visits instead of long, drawn-out stays. The cubbies are filled with bags, phones, water bottles and an accumulation of lost property that has been left behind during the various workout sessions. I later discovered that the lost property gets donated to the local op-shops if not collected within a fortnightly period. I discovered this when I left my brand-new workout top at the gym and forgot about it, later learning it had been donated. To the left of the front desk sits a shelf with a few pieces of merchandise, such as BFT-branded tank tops and t-shirts, and a large standing freezer holding frozen diet-approved meals for purchase. Just below the merchandise is a shelf holding the various awards the studio has won at the annual BFT conference, “BEST NZ STUDIO” for

2022, 2023 and 2024. These awards reflect the studio's consistently high yield, a measure of financial performance that accounts for both strong membership numbers and the ability to generate high average revenue per member. Hanging proudly just below these awards is a 'Tino Rangatiratanga' flag, which stands out amongst the black, blue and white studio colours. Its presence in the space seems to be more than decorative, indicating that its placement is intentional. The flag carries deep cultural and political significance, as reflected in its design. As Pollock (2009) explains:

Hiraina Marsden, Jan Dobson and Linda Munn designed what became known as the Tino Rangatiratanga flag in 1989. The black represents Te Kore (the void), the space beyond the world of everyday experience. White represents Te Ao Marama, the world of light. Red represents coming into being and life, and Papatūānuku, the earth mother. The koru (spiral, symbolising an unfurling fern frond) in the centre suggests the unfolding and renewal of life.

This flag has become a symbol of strength and an enduring symbol of self-determination for many Māori, often seen at protests, marches, commemorations and other significant events. In a recent interview with Whakaata Māori, Munn describes the movement for Māori as not only restoration by reclamation ("Hīkoi to Parliament: Linda Munn Talks Māori Activism and Her Tino Rangatiratanga Flag," 2024). The use of the Tino Rangatiratanga flag during the '*Toitu te Tiriti*' movement in 2024 served as a visual representation of resistance. The *Toitū Te Tiriti* movement emerged in response to the proposed "Treaty Principles Bill" put forward to parliament by the ACT party in 2024 as a part of the coalition government with the National-led

government. This bill would attempt to reinterpret and redefine the already existing principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. Its efforts to undermine the place of Te Tiriti o Waitangi within Aotearoa's constitutional framework were widely opposed by Tangata Whenua and Tangata Tiriti sparking a nationwide Hikoī that spanned the length of the North Island from Te Rerenga Wairua at the top of the North Island with roopu (groups) running from place to place, with major activations organised in major cities all around the motu (island). Framed by a kaupapa Māori worldview, the movement articulates a vision rooted in intergenerational responsibility and collective resistance. Organisers state on their Kaupapa section of the *Toitu Te Tiriti* website:

“Toitū Te Tiriti is tupuna inspired, tiriti led, mana motuhake driven, and mokopuna focused. Our intent is to demonstrate the beginning of a unified Aotearoa response to the Government's assault on tangata whenua and Te Tiriti o Waitangi.” (Toitu Te Tiriti, 2025)

This statement reflects the deep ancestral grounding of the movement, one firmly rooted in whakapapa. The phrases 'Tūpuna inspired' and 'Mokopuna focused' evoke a whakapapa-based worldview, where connections between past, present, and future generations are central. As Hikuroa (2017) explains, whakapapa is the foundational principle that orders the universe, illustrating the interconnectivity of all things and serving as a cognitive genealogical framework that links the creation of the universe to everything that exists within it through descent from ancestors.

As the doors open, its bold colours draw your eye as it waves, with each gust of wind, the flag signals an intent to recognise Te Ao Māori (the Māori world). “It's cool that it's there,” one

wahine Maori said to me, towelling off after a cardio block, remarking that she noticed it when she first joined: “I wasn’t expecting it, but I saw it straight away. It kind of made me feel seen. You don’t see that often, so it is nice to see that we are represented in this kind of space.” The Tino Rangatiratanga flag thus represents the continuous spiritual unfolding of life, also being used to express the refusal of Tangata Whenua and Tangata Tiriti to accept the reinterpretations of the Treaty put forth by the government. In this way, it becomes both a sign of protest and a unifying force across diverse iwi and hapū, reinforcing the movement’s kaupapa of Indigenous authority and relational responsibility to the land and people. The presence of the flag also prompts conversation about the depth and nature of that recognition among the gym members. Is the flag an authentic marker of cultural integration, or does it risk becoming a surface-level marker?

On the left of the flag is the gym floor, a matted space with a running track and rig indicating where the workouts take place. The gym floor is exceptionally smaller than most commercial gyms and other BFT locations, totalling 180 sqm. Outlining the walls are neatly organised dumbbells, kettlebells, weights and cardio machines like ski-ergs, rowers and treadmills, the equipment is stacked neatly to make space for the workout of the day; with each piece of equipment being worn and well-used, indicating the busy space you've entered. The walls around the gym are similar to the equipment, scuff marks and paint chips dot the walls, showing a story of a popular and well-used space.

Levi, Ngāti Toarangatira tane and co-owner of BFT Hamilton East, acknowledges that the space is small but “we make it work”. He signals for me to follow him for a quick tour. As

we walk through the gym, making our way around bodies, stepping over equipment and weaving under the rig (A workout rig is a sturdy, multi-purpose gym structure used for exercises like squats, pull-ups, and presses), he gestures to the small equipment room that holds much of the gym equipment that does not fit in the main space. We stand at the door as he briefly overviews the equipment. “We keep the extra gear in here to make sure there’s space on the floor” Looking around the room I take note of equipment such as barbells, steps, skipping ropes, medicine balls etc, the amount of gear for such a small space may seem unbalanced but the constant rotation of equipment ensures that everything has its place and time on the floor without overcrowding the space. The entry door to the equipment room is framed by floor-to-ceiling mirrors, which are a popular spot for selfies and progress photos, encouraging members to admire their progress. Celebrating milestones through participation seen in the form of the ‘250’ wall, with signed Polaroids of members from over the years who have completed 250 classes. These Polaroids reflect the diverse community that makes up the gym. Māori and non-Māori members are woven together in this visual archive, representing a shared sense of belonging and commitment. The collective recognition on the wall implies that everyone, regardless of cultural background, contributes to the wider relational network of the gym.

In the back corner, a sectioned-off area serves multiple purposes: operating as a kitchen space and as a childcare area during the 9:30 am ‘Mums and Bubs’ class. Parents can book their children to be supervised while they work out. Among the kids' toys, the comfy couch and kitchen appliances sit the vending machine filled with protein bars, energy drinks and water, often taken advantage of by those members who have had a “long day at the office” before classes. Adjacent to the kitchen are the bathrooms, which include toilets and showers. These

facilities are important for members who attend early classes before work or have other plans following their workout, helping to weave fitness more seamlessly into their daily routines.

Purpose of the Space

The gym space itself has many functions; it is used for both strength and cardio classes, as well as info nights during challenge time. During these hui, prospective new members (and some old) gather to listen to the trainers give all the info about an upcoming challenge. Although current members have seen it all before, it doesn't stop the room from being filled with people sitting on the floor, dragging benches, steps and boxes around the room to sit on to get the best view of the slideshow presentation. While laughing at themselves, veteran members report, “We know what they're gonna say, we just come to hang out and have some food”. This casual comment may reflect that Māori participants are reclaiming these health and fitness spaces in ways that are rooted in social connections. By focusing on the social and cultural dimensions, the purpose of the space may be less about individual achievement and more about whanaungatanga.

Because of the limited floor area, running often spills out onto the footpath outside, inviting an audience of onlookers from their cars as they drive past during peak hour traffic. Despite occasional challenges in navigating around each other and the equipment, the small space is seen by many as an advantage. Members often note that closeness in proximity fosters greater interaction and encouragement among participants. Before classes, it is common to see members stretching, catching up, filling drink bottles, quickly eating a protein bar, or preparing for the session ahead, all made possible by the open layout that encourages conversation and a clear view across the space. With this clear view, members can see the flow of people coming and going from the space. Those who are ‘booked in’ arrive and glance around the room to see

who they know, and those who are on the waitlist, hoping for a ‘no show’ or ‘late cancel’ by another member. While they wait, they sit patiently to see if there is any room left in the class. Through my observations, I noted that members deeply value the small size of the gym for the intimacy and sense of whanaungatanga it creates. In contrast, my visits to other, larger BFT gyms revealed a sense of disconnection with exercises spread out over larger distances; opportunities for casual conversation, encouragement, and relationality were significantly reduced. As reflected in the comments of gym goers, such as;

The actual size of the space is what I love. I love that it's tiny, yeah, so much so that when I go to the other bigger BFT gyms I'm like well... I feel like you're walking into the small cloak of love when you walk into BFT Ham East, and you can feel like you're exercising right next to someone, and you're like cracking up laughing, teasing people. The intimacy of the space is important to me. (Marian, Interview)

For Marian, a strong Waikato, Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāi Tūhoe wahine and a member of BFT Hamilton East, shares that the size of the space directly impacts her experience during workouts and the way she feels about attending this particular gym. The shared appreciation for the experience of this small, intimate gym is echoed by many in this study and is the standout point when discussing the comparison between this gym and others that they have been to in the past.

While many appreciate the closeness and shared space, others found that the close interaction made it hard to enjoy the gym, noting that, especially during the hot summer months, many warm bodies exerting themselves in such a confined area can heighten experiences of body odour, humidity, and general discomfort. Though some may see this as a typical gym experience,

the spatial limitations of BFT Ham East may accentuate situations of discomfort for some members. Unlike larger gyms with more space, the intimacy created by the size and design of this studio heightens the possibility of challenges such as body odour, humidity and general discomfort occurring more often.

This close proximity also forces members to directly engage with the less curated, more "raw" elements of shared space and exercise. During peak classes, especially in the summer months, the air often grows thick and heavy, with the scent of sweat lingering after the session ends. Some members described feeling distracted by the overwhelming sensory setting, finding it harder to focus on their workouts or feel at ease. In these moments, the intimacy of the space, usually seen as a positive, becomes a source of physical and mental strain for those individuals who are sensitive to noise, touch, or scent. The crowded conditions can heighten feelings of fatigue, influencing how often they attend, and then affecting their connection to the community.

While the intimacy of the gym space supports strong connections, it can also create moments of discomfort for those who are not used to that type of high-intensity/social environment. For those who are newer to the community, less confident, or more introverted, the close physical proximity and established social groups can feel intimidating. There also arise challenges when the social bonds of groups become tight-knit. Thus, while the close-knit environment strengthens many social bonds, it can also unintentionally create barriers for those at the margins of the community. In busy sessions, the small space sometimes leads to overcrowding, where navigating between equipment or finding a space to take a break becomes a challenge. Despite trainers' efforts to include everyone, through observation, groups occasionally form around long-standing friendships, making it harder for newcomers to feel immediately

welcomed. In high-intensity classes, where conversation is minimal, it becomes the job of the trainers and those within the ‘pod’ to introduce themselves to newcomers and try to make them feel welcome, especially if they arrive alone. This often takes subtle but meaningful forms: asking their name, where they train, offering a smile or nod of encouragement, helping someone adjust equipment, or explaining the workout format during transition periods. For members who attend regularly, there’s an emerging culture of manaakitanga in the gym that leads to greater support for new members, highlighting the social dimensions of group fitness spaces, particularly the role of trainers and members in supporting others. Rather than focusing solely on performance or outcomes, the focus centres on the process of building relationships and witnessing personal growth, suggesting that the value of fitness lies as much in connection and confidence as it does in physical change.

The importance of this section is not only to describe the purpose of the space but also to acknowledge the challenges and complexities that accompany its use. Its adaptability is a strength, allowing it to meet a range of needs, but this same flexibility can also create uncertainty, offering meaning and connection for some, while making it difficult for others to engage fully.

The Space Between - Commercialisation & Culture

The first time walking into the gym and seeing the ‘tino rangatiratanga flag’, I was surprised. Its bold colours stood out amongst the colour palettes of the gym. I remember thinking, “Wow, that’s so cool”. It became even more important as it stayed on my mind long after I had left the gym. I remember being surprised because one day it wasn't there, and the next it was, taking

pride of place and the entrance to the gym. An image not typically associated with a global fitness franchise. “It was just put up yesterday”, a gym member said to me, no doubt noticing my notable smile as I stood there taking it in. ‘Yesterday’ was a significant day, as the Hīkoi mō te Tiriti passed through Kirikiriroa on its way down to Parliament in Te Whanganui a Tara (Wellington). This Hīkoi was a nationwide protest march opposing the Treaty Principles Bill. Starting at Cape Reinga at the top of the North Island, and finishing at Parliament in Te Whanganui a Tara, the hīkoi spanned nine days and brought tens of thousands of participants out into the streets of their cities. It showed a strong opposition to a bill that was seen to undermine Māori rights and sovereignty. “Yup, we put it up and it's staying up,” Levi remarked to me, his tone was determined. When discussing with Ice, a proud Tainui tāne and BFT Trainer, about whether he believes the gym needs to add or change any aspect to make it more inclusive of cultural values, he states,

“You’ve got to find that balance. We have a very strong Māori and Pasifika community, but we also have our other backgrounds, so that balance, I think, is pretty good. We want to include everyone in learning and growing in their knowledge about Te Ao Māori,” he continues, including Māori language week. So with Māori Language Week, we make sure that we celebrate our language during that period. And look, we've got a challenge today! Fun! And to add on that, I think it's awesome that we have members that are Māori that come from rich backgrounds, and some that don't come from maybe such Te Ao Māori backgrounds, that they can kind of feel comfortable to ask questions if need be, or just build that relationship with their language through those that are, you know. And we include the members in that celebration.”

The challenge of creating a space that is culturally inclusive lies in ensuring that cultural presence is not tokenistic and is a respectful reflection of the value placed upon culture within this space. The “space-between” then becomes not only geographic but is viewed as a physical space of reciprocity where commercial structures built around a franchised business, such as BFT Ham East, are slowly being reshaped by Indigenous presence. Ice’s reflection emphasises the nuanced and intentional ways that Māori and Pasifika values are entwined into the everyday life of this commercial space in an effort to create an inclusive environment that honours the distinct cultural identities present for both Māori and non-Māori. The goal, as I understand it, is to foster an environment where *Te Ao Māori* is not merely presented as static but is actively lived, shared, and celebrated.

Celebrating Te Wiki o te Reo Māori (Māori Language Week) is treated as an opportunity to invite everyone, regardless of their cultural background, to develop an understanding of Te Reo Māori and Tikanga. By welcoming members to celebrate occasions such as Te Wiki o Te Reo Māori, Ice highlights how Māori members, each with different levels of connection to and knowledge of their culture, contribute to this environment by sharing Te Reo with those who may still be building their own knowledge and connection back to their culture. According to members, this open, supportive dialogue fosters and heightens the capacity of the gym to provide relationship-based learning where cultural knowledge is shared *kanohi ki te kanohi* (face-to-face) and peer-to-peer.

As discussed in chapter one, kaupapa Māori research (Pihama, 2010) highlights the importance of values such as *whanaungatanga*, where learning happens through relationships, connection and shared experience. Indigenous worldviews not only operate as systems of knowledge, but they are also political and cultural strategies that help to encourage the

continuation of culture in communities. In this way, the gym becomes a site of cultural reclamation, a commercial space reimagined as a space of Indigenous placemaking and community-led education. The idea of the space-between is referred to in Māori concepts as the ‘Wa’ or in Pasifika concepts as ‘Va’ (Hawkes, 2023), and as imagined in Indigenous frameworks such as “two-eyed seeing” (Lavallée & Lévesque, 2013), is particularly resonant in the context of Māori-led group fitness spaces like BFT Hamilton East. These spaces are not only seen through a cultural lens but also highlight the intersectionality of multiple spaces, including health, fitness, and cultural revitalisation. For Māori participants, the gym becomes a layered site: it operates within a commercial fitness framework to help improve fitness while the owners and staff simultaneously work towards ways to enact cultural values like manaakitanga and whanaungatanga within this space. In this way, understanding the space-between opens the way for Māori-led fitness spaces to forge their own path, reshaping fitness models to reflect local culture and Indigenous goals for wellbeing.

I want to revisit a question I posed earlier in the introduction of this thesis, which was *Why are we all here?* For some gym members, it is, by all accounts, not convenient to travel to, being that the gym is in a completely different neighbourhood, it is relatively smaller than other gyms, and its membership fees are not ‘cheap’ by any account, charging \$60pp per week. So, in considering this, I asked myself again *Why are we all here?* By drawing on the concept of ‘vā’, I don’t suggest that this is an all-encompassing explanation, but rather a way of exploring the relational space that manifests where seemingly opposing forces can coexist. The space-between within the context of franchised fitness spaces like BFT Hamilton East is the space between commercialisation and cultural reclamation. As Hawkes (2023) draws on Samoan author Albert Wendt’s definition vā is ‘the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that

separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things' (Wendt 1999, 402; see also Ka'ili 2017; Lilomaiava-Doktor 2009; Refiti 2002 for scholarship on the vā as cited in Hawkes, 2023). The gym itself exists in a space that is part of a global commercial fitness franchise and is simultaneously evolving by gym owners and members to reflect Māori values such as manaakitanga and whanaungatanga.

The space operates as both a profit-driven business and a space in which Māori create a culturally inclusive environment that creates moments of relationality, dispelling the stereotype of the hyper-masculine Māori body (Hokowhitu, 2009) in an effort to create an environment that is actively transforming into a culturally inclusive site. However, it is important to recognise that people's motivations for joining the gym are diverse. For some members, it may be primarily about physical health or convenience. It is also important to recognise that many of the gym members are not Māori, but their participation still contributes to and is shaped by the relational and culturally infused environment. While not everyone will experience the space in the same way or to the same depth, these relational networks invite varying degrees of connection as all members contribute their own understandings, values and lived experiences to this space. The gym becomes a shared space where Māori values are nurtured, but not exclusive. The presence of the tino rangatiratanga flag, communal food sharing at hui, and inclusive childcare practices are acts of Indigenous placemaking that assert reciprocity and care within otherwise mainstream spaces. These adaptations challenge the assumed political and public neutrality of commercial spaces by embedding cultural significance and relational accountability into their everyday

operations. In doing so, the gym becomes a space-between where the forces of commodification and cultural resurgence don't collide but can coexist.

Chapter Three - Community

“I brought my daughter along for this journey as well, and it changed her life..she's now a part of a community of people of whānau that's actually how we consider it, not just my gym, it's...a whānau, yeah, that's what Ham East is..the whānau vibes.. The people are its secret sauce”.

(Marian, interview)

“Take these and go with your uncle, Moko”, my nan would say to me as she handed me baskets of warm scones, packets of butter and jam and handwritten thank you cards. We’d travel around to her doctors, her lawyers, her panel beaters, her mechanics, even the ladies who did her MYOB payroll, dropping off baskets of scones and the note, “You’re grandmother is so sweet”, they would say as I smiled, not knowing the full value of the lessons my grandmother was teaching me at that very moment. When I got home, she called out to me, “Thank you, moko”, she said, “All those people you visited, they've looked after me all these years. Giving is what we do”. I thought back to my childhood and teenage years, watching the way my nan served our community. She was always on the go, helping with any event, giving her time to those who needed her, and saying yes to church assignments and choirs. Someone was always visiting her, and sometimes it was the other way around.

When I think of my nan, I think of these moments and feel what it means to embody whanaungatanga. Involving the communal ties that intricately weave us all together, whanaungatanga goes beyond relationship-building; it encompasses the threads that bind past, present and future together, and ground us within our whānau and communities. Ritchie (1992, p. 66) describes whanaungatanga as the "basic cement that holds things Māori together".

Describing whanaungatanga as cement refers to its binding properties that create a solid

foundation for ‘things Māori’. In this way, I share this experience to ground my understanding of whanaungatanga and its deep roots within my whānau. Within the context of this study, whanaungatanga also encompasses the intergenerational knowledge exchange, collective empowerment, reciprocal responsibility, sharing, caring, guardianship, and planning together as a collective (M. Durie, 1997, 1998; MoekePickering, 1996; Simmonds et al., 2014 as cited in Greaves et al., 2021) whanaungatanga is used to describe relationships that are built through shared experiences fostering a feeling of belonging among its wider network of Māori members.

Whanaungatanga is described as the action or process of building meaningful family or kin-like relationships (Greaves et al., 2021); therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to explore how values like whanaungatanga and manaakitanga are embodied and experienced within Māori-led group fitness communities, as well as exploring how these values are incorporated into fitness gyms to build stronger relationships between participants. In “*Measuring whanaungatanga and Identity for Wellbeing in Rangatahi Māori*”, Greaves et al. (2017, p. 95) state that the concept of whanaungatanga has shifted to meet the everyday needs of Māori in contemporary times, opening up the possibility for whanaungatanga to be practised in an everyday manner. I then pose the question: How do the social interactions and community ‘vibes’ in Māori-led group fitness classes embody and reinforce whanaungatanga and manaakitanga? To investigate this question, I will aim to draw on Hawkes (2019, p. 534) idea that while sport can be, and has been, damaging and oppressive, it has also been a space of connection, belonging, and identity formation, and has ample potential in positively affecting the practices and perceptions of not only Indigenous peoples, but all peoples across the globe. Hawkes (2019) highlights that despite its entanglement with colonial and capitalist systems, sport can foster joy and connection.

She also notes that it is important to seriously consider the positives of sport in the everyday lives of a minoritised group of peoples (Teaiwa, 2016 as cited in Hawkes, 2019, p. 535).

Relational connection and collective identity are important to the concept of whanaungatanga. The impacts of whanaungatanga and its influence on rangatahi Māori are explored in “*Measuring whanaungatanga and Identity for well-being in rangatahi Māori*” by Greaves et al. (2021), where researchers use quantitative methods to investigate how whanaungatanga and cultural identity support well-being among rangatahi Māori. While “*Māori exercise professionals: Using Indigenous knowledge to connect the space between performance and wellbeing*” by Muriwai et al. (2022) emphasises the importance of Kaupapa Māori principles and Mātauranga Māori, leading to a better understanding of the connection the space between performance and well-being.

While this chapter focuses on group fitness gym spaces, similar relational values are embedded in other forms of physical activity. Waka ama, for instance, is based on cultural values that are fostered, in a distinct form, within group training sessions at places like BFT Hamilton East. I use waka ama briefly to further illustrate the value of culturally grounded movement practices. The sport of Waka ama (outrigger canoe paddling) involves either one, six or twelve paddlers, paddling in unison with each paddler playing their own significant role within the group. It is both mentally and physically demanding as the success of your team depends on not only each paddler's skill but their teamwork, discipline and trust within the group. Waka ama serves as a living link, reminding participants that physical activity can be a means of cultural reclamation and relational healing (Severinsen & Reweti, 2021).

Building on this understanding, Māori fitness group activity can foster relational connections. My research seeks to contribute to the growing body of work that explores how culturally grounded, Kaupapa Māori-based ideals can be represented in group fitness environments. By focusing on Māori-led group fitness spaces, the goal of this chapter is to highlight how wellness spaces have the ability to operate as sites of cultural affirmation and collective well-being rather than purely for physical fitness. It also considers some of the challenges participants face in these close-knit communities, such as balancing boundaries and personal time with community commitments or navigating feelings of cultural belonging. By situating my research alongside this scholarship, I aim to offer a nuanced view of how whanaungatanga and manaakitanga are incorporated within these spaces.

In this chapter, I will first examine how group fitness fosters whanaungatanga through relational well-being, demonstrating how Māori cultural values shape and enhance these communal fitness experiences for Māori participants. Additionally, I will explore the role of Manaakitanga in creating a supportive environment that contributes to long-term commitment. By drawing on scholarship and ethnographic fieldwork/observations, this chapter seeks to understand if participants are able to connect in group fitness communities that aim to foster such values. I argue that group fitness gyms serve as sites for this expression and reinforce concepts of whanaungatanga, manaakitanga and relationality.

Whanaungatanga

The Māori did not think of himself, or do anything for his own gain. He thought only of his people, and was absorbed in his whānau, just as the whānau was absorbed in the hapu, and the hapu in the Iwi.

(Papakura, 1938, p. 39)

It starts on Friday night. Phones are charged, alarms set, and messages start to circulate in the team group chat, urging each teammate to remember “*Don't forget our team take over on Saturday, don't forget to book fam*”. During the 8-week challenge season, the gym's Saturday morning classes fill exceptionally fast, running only 4 morning classes. During challenge season, it can take just minutes for each class to fill up with limited spots available in the actual class and on the waitlist. Each class can hold between 30-40 people, with a waitlist of around 20 spots, depending on the layout and purpose of the class. On this particular Saturday, our team wanted to do what is referred to as a “takeover”, where many team members get into a certain time slot to be able to train together to build team morale and overall ‘togetherness’.

The 8:20 am class on Saturday mornings became a part of my weekend routine. I am not a morning person, which meant this was the best option as it was the latest available. By the time we arrive at 8 am, the corner by the gym is already alive. From the intersection, I observe members exchanging high-fives, protein shakes and pre-workout in hand and the loud music from the speaker pushing out R&B tracks. The group gathers some stretching, some catching up, and others just standing close to watch the workout from the class before, getting a gauge for what is about to happen.

This is the only session some members share all week, due to the differing schedules, so for many, these Saturday sessions are a chance to catch up and check in with friends. As I walk up, someone claps me on the back, “You’re here!” she says. “Yes, yes, I’m here,” I reply sarcastically. At this point in the challenge, many of the friends I had made had observed that I was not, in fact, a morning person.

Moving inside, the body heat and smell from the previous class are strong. With the space being so compact for this number of people, it is hard to navigate the sea of bodies without brushing up against a sweaty arm. I moved to check in, being greeted by name at the counter by the trainers, “Morena Cyd”, they say “, Morena team”. I observed that for many members, simply being greeted by name brought a smile to their faces. I find a spot in the group and observe the most hectic part of the morning, which is the classroom. A sea of bodies moving in and out of the front and back door, friends seeing friends, often sharing a kiss on the cheek or a hug, lots of smiling and laughing happening; whanaungatanga in motion. Once the buzzer goes and the countdown begins the class moves quickly to ensure we start and finish on time, talk-time begins “Kia Ora Fam welcome to cardio”, the trainers go through the workout for the day; around the room, I observe friend groups sitting together some are still whispering but one quick ‘shh’ from the trainers and the rooms goes quiet again. Others are waving to each other from across the room, trying to quietly set up their workout pods before being numbered off by the trainers. Other members are sitting attentively, listening to instructions, ensuring they won't be lost when the workout begins.

“Ding”, the demo screens change from the explanation to the warm-up, and the majority of the class gets into it, while others gingerly make their way onto their feet. “Let's go”, the trainers shout, trying to encourage the talkers to hurry up the pace for their warm-up, but more

often than not, it goes unnoticed. As one trainer walks around the room, they announce, “If you have someone you want to go with, stand by them” Small groups start to form, indicating who wants to work out with whom. To my surprise, I note that many members are fine to be numbered with anyone. Saturday morning classes are more often than not a ‘mixed’ class which means there are elements of cardio and weights-based exercises, this particular class was ‘strength endurance’ which has alternating stations of cardio exercises, such as bionic bike, running, rower, etc and strength training exercises, such as dumbbell lunges, kettlebell swings, all programmed to increase your endurance.

As the clock winds down, everyone makes their way to their stations, setting up their sweat towels and drink bottles wherever there is space. The pace is brutal, but even so, the support is still there. I catch moments that might be missed by anyone not paying attention: a nod between two wāhine as they trade places on the rower, an encouraging “You’ve got this” as they try to hit their PBs (personal best), a subtle high-five at the end of an exhausting set. When the class ends, members linger to greet those who are booked in for the next class. No one rushes to leave, and members gather their belongings, which are often strewn around the room. The trail of jerseys, water bottles and sweat towels tells the story of a workout well executed. As I walk to the door, I hear talk of changing weekend plans, and whānau trips, weekend sports and whānau BBQs. In the far corner of the room, others gather around for photo ops while other members head to the cafes around the community for breakfast.

As the changeover is happening between classes, I notice that each member is greeted by name by the trainers, a small but significant gesture. A member commented to me “The first time one of the trainers greeted me by name I was taken back a little, in a good way! I’ve always gone to regular gyms where you’re just an ID card”. As more and more members enter, conversations

spark up around the room, members catching up on how their day went, their family life and overall hauora. One member sits next to me and as our conversation sparks up, he says, “I had Māori friends at school, but as we grew up, you know. . . We lost touch, and in my everyday life, I didn't have many interactions with Māori, so I lost touch with the small things that I had learned. Being at a gym that has so many different cultures, but especially Māori, who are so proud and you know very open, does that make sense? It has helped me to reconnect and reminds me of those friends I had that accepted me when I first moved to Hamilton”. For myself, these small interactions open the door to a deeper understanding of the importance of relationship building and finding a community that they feel comfortable enough to learn from.

In discussion with members about what creates a good gym environment, many recall the phrase: “Come for the fitness, stay for the people”. This concept reflects Muriwai et al. 's (2022, p. 96) idea that exercise usually arises as a by-product of the feelings of belonging that members frequently feel in spaces such as these. Muriwai et al (2022) discuss the idea that some participant-collaborators expressed that structured exercise and performance outcomes felt secondary to broader aspirations of Mātauranga; for them, the movement was not merely about physical gain but a deeper showing of whanaungatanga and manaakitanga.

I interviewed Madisyn, a proud Ngāti Porou and Tainui wahine and a former member of BFT Palmerston North. Madisyn is not a member of BFT Hamilton East. However, I felt it was important to include her perspective, as she offered thoughtful reflections on both the strengths and limitations she observes within franchised gym spaces. Madisyn shared her reflections on her group fitness experience:

"They (trainers) make sure everyone feels comfortable, valued, and encouraged, no matter their fitness level. It's not just about the workout; it's about the people. I found myself going to the gym to see everyone, not just to work and get fit. I wanted to experience that feeling of connection and acceptance in a space that I felt comfortable."

Madisyn's experience encapsulates her view of the significance of social connection within this group fitness community. Her perspective aligns with many other participants' viewpoints, who likewise emphasise the gym as a place of belonging alongside well-being. Her experience also differs from those whom I interviewed at BFT Hamilton East, as she has moved away from Auckland and Hamilton, where she and her husband's close whānau are located, to Palmerston North and is isolated from friends and family. Madisyn and her small family moved from Auckland to Palmerston North because her husband serves in the army, while raising two young children, she joined the gym when her friend encouraged her to join alongside her.

A friend of mine who lives nearby had been part of the gym about a year earlier and was keen to rejoin. We decided to motivate each other and took the plunge together during a lunch break. I was a bit too nervous to go by myself, but having her there gave me the confidence to give it a go. Now, I'm so glad we went together because it's been a game-changer for me.

In speaking with her, Madisyn found the gym not only to improve her physical fitness but also in hopes of creating relationships outside of her immediate family, relationships that she had missed while living in Palmerston North. Madisyn explained that being a young mama and far away from her family, she was pushed to build those relationships in a new community, and the

gym was a way for her to do those things while also focusing on her health and well-being. While she does not attend the gym as frequently now, she emphasised that.

“Group fitness can be a great space for strengthening Māori identity by promoting these values like whanaungatanga and manaakitanga. It creates a sense of unity and connection that aligns with Māori cultural principles. For me, it’s also about setting an example for my tamariki—showing them the importance of health and well-being. Showing them different ways of connecting with others, and if the gym intentionally incorporates more Māori elements, it could become an even stronger space for cultural expression and pride.”

Madisyn's experience highlights the possibility that group fitness spaces can function as a platform for strengthening their members by cultivating those values. She notes that working out is important to her because it helps her to set an example for her tamariki (children), reinforcing the generational influence of gym spaces, where participation in fitness is not only about one's health but also about encouraging and modelling well-being as a collective responsibility.

At BFT Hamilton East, the inclusion of tamariki into the culture of the gym is noticed in attendance at the 9:30 am class. The owners have designated a separate space, doubling as a kitchen and child care area. Located in the back corner of the gym, from 9:15 for about an hour, it turns from a plain kitchen space into a place of safety for the tamariki with toys scattered all over the place, little feet running back and forth and a few tamariki laughing as they played. While their parents train, the tamariki are watched over by carers, and it is common to see kids standing at the gate, waving to their parents mid-set, watching and taking it all in. This commitment to including tamariki in the gym space supports the idea that the gym can be a

whānau-centred space, where responsibilities are shared and maanakitanga is seen as a priority. The need to separate family life from fitness is reduced as these ‘Mums and Bubs’ classes make it possible for these two strands of life to be woven together. When sharing this observation with Madisyn, she recalled that having a dedicated, safe space for toddlers would make things “a lot easier for parents like me, something as simple as a small playpen area would be a game-changer.” The importance of communal engagement in physical activity at BFT Hamilton East is given further context by the arguments from Severinsen and Reweti’s (2021, p. 529) study on Waka Ama, which illustrates how Indigenous fitness practices create strong social bonds. They state:

"The social cohesion created among paddlers inspires confidence in individuals and provides a source of resilience against the pressures of life. This demonstrates how utilising local environments and ways of knowing based in Te Ao Māori can provide systems to improve the Hauora of both tangata (the people) and Taiao (the environment)."

Utilising culturally grounded practices such as waka ama serves as a vehicle to strengthen whanaungatanga and shift the focus to include the collective. Severinsen and Reweti's (2021) exploration of Waka Ama offers insight into what makes the inclusion and perpetuation of Te Ao Māori values so grounding for participants. By connecting the sports and gym communities, we see how both activities contribute to the strengthening of participants' confidence in their cultural identity. In many commercial gyms, the spatial design with segregated workout zones and equipment, paired with the use of headphones, reinforces a culture of personal focus and minimal social engagement. Social interaction is often need-based, where others may give advice or need a ‘spot’. In Edmonds (2019, p. 199), “*Geographies of (Cross) Fitness: An Ethnographic Case Study of a CrossFit Box*”, members describe the CrossFit box as a place where they will find

community and people who genuinely care about their well-being. In this sense, the “community” that emerges is often conditional, built on proximity or mutual fitness goals. The “community” aspect in group fitness gyms is often pushed as a key draw card for potential members, with an interview stating, “We come for the community, to be a part of something”. Jonathan, a proud Ngāti Kahungunu tāne, describes his experience with mainstream gyms.

“When I was at City Fitness, it was just me. And it was almost boring. Yeah, whereas if I was going to these group fitness communities, it was very lively, everyone was stoked to be there, and you weren't just by yourself. Yeah. You were always with someone.”

Jonathan's reflection highlights his experience at CityFitness as ‘boring’, pointing to the noticeable difference that he experienced across both types of gym spaces. His comment implies that for some people, fitness doesn't solely rely on results but also on the social and relational aspects of group environments. Often absent in large commercial gyms, where minimal interaction and a focus on self-directed workouts can create a sense of detachment. The significance, then, is that these gyms may prioritise profit over people, but rarely develop a sense of belonging or care for members, or because of sheer membership numbers, it is difficult for large commercial gyms to foster the same communal environment. Jonathan’s boredom, then, becomes less about the workouts themselves and more about the absence of social connection and engagement.

Kaupapa Māori principles and group fitness communities can reinforce Māori culture and identity, helping to promote that Indigenous knowledge systems remain crucial to today’s society. Through the meaningful inclusion of cultural values, activities and language, participants can continue feeling a part of a community that celebrates their uniqueness. This perspective of

intentionally including the community resonates with many Indigenous worldviews globally and highlights how physical activity has historically been woven into the rhythms of daily life, not as a separate concept of ‘exercise,’ but as an intrinsic part of community life and well-being. In Warbrick et al. (2016, p. 5), “*Provider, father, and bro – Sedentary Māori men and their thoughts on physical activity*”, they found that:

During childhood, sport was a focus, so being physically active was a default and being sedentary was abnormal. Participants also felt that childhood physical activity was required for entertainment, transport, and even contributing to daily living (such as gathering food).

The authors highlight how physical activity was once a culturally embedded rather than a structured or individualised choice, like going to the gym. Over time, the shift away from those active lifestyles toward more passive routines reflects broader social and cultural changes where attending the gym needs to have more meaning than just getting fit.

These gym spaces became more than sites of physical training. In this study, participants described that they were sites where friendships were formed, identities were celebrated, and whanaungatanga thrived. Shared experiences of challenge and perseverance create bonds that mirror Māori notions of collective strength and interdependence, reinforcing the idea that success is not an individual pursuit but a collective journey. This collective journey reflects manaakitanga, the practice of care and support that enhances the mana of both the individual and the collective and reimagines how cultural identity and health can be nurtured through community and Kaupapa Māori principles.

While not all members experience the space in the same way and not all are Māori, the gym has the capacity to create a relational environment where people of various backgrounds come together and experience aspects of whanaungatanga. This captures the phrase “Come for the fitness, stay for the people”, reflecting how connection and belonging become central to the gym experience.

Manaakitanga

This Māori word, manaakitanga, is commonly translated as “hospitality,” or showing care and respect for others. If one breaks the word into its constituent parts, mana, the spiritual force within a person, place, or thing; aki, a verb meaning to encourage; and tanga, a suffix designating a process, we then see within manaakitanga the process of encouraging the spiritual force of others toward life-affirming ways.

(Larsen et al. 2017, p 159)

In this section, I write about the experiences of gym members and my time participating in gym activities. I believe that Manaakitanga can only be fully understood through the experiences of people. By being a part of the everyday rhythms of the gym, I wanted to see and experience how Manaakitanga shows up in meaningful ways. During my research, I participated in a Team challenge day. I would soon come to realise that these days brought a renewed sense of nervousness to the space that I was not prepared for. The challenge had been set forward by the head trainers. It was to make as many over-the-shoulder ball tosses as you could do in 80 seconds with Wahine lifting the 15kg ball and Tane lifting the 25kg ball. As the class progressed, with more and more people nervously anticipating their turn, I could see that these challenges brought not just a sense of excitement but also panic, with participants not wanting to let their team down. As the bell signalled the start of each round, participants moved through the stations,

inching closer and closer to “go time”. I hadn't been that nervous in a long time! Throughout the day, team members had been sending encouraging messages in the group chat to each other, simple affirmations like “Do your best!” and “Give it your all!”. Yet despite the encouragement, there was still panic in the back of my mind because I did not want to let them down.

When my partner took her turn, cheers of encouragement broke out around the room from fellow members: “Kia Kaha!”, “Go Ora!”, “Almost there!”, as she finished, I saw the look of relief and exhaustion on her face. When it was my turn, the intensity of the moment took over, but it was the surrounding voices and the presence of my teammates that pushed me through. As I lifted, spun, and then lifted again, I began to feel dizzy, wanting to stop and regain my composure, but the collective encouragement of the group reminded me that this wasn't an individual test, but a shared effort. Just as the class had cheered for others, they would also cheer for me: “Go Cydney, you got this!” “Karawhiua”, “Kia Kaha”, and then it was done. The room was still spinning, and I fell to the floor in exhaustion. The class continued, with each “tribute” stepping forward, supported by a chorus of encouragement, and those participating giving each other tips on what techniques succeeded and which ones failed.

Each week, I would see the same effort to ‘push’ each other to do their best. But what I would also see and feel was the mounting pressure and guilt that these days contributed to when one wasn't able to live up to expectations or ‘do their best’. I am a naturally competitive person and therefore want to do my best at every opportunity, and so for me, these challenging days would bring on a sense of anxiety. I found myself becoming more and more nervous as the day went on, almost consumed by the thought of letting my team down. During class, we wear heart monitors to track our progress, also known as cubes. These cubes connect to a screen on the wall and indicate your heart rate. When I arrived at class on one particular day, mine was in the

orange, and I hadn't even started class yet, my nervousness already manifesting itself before I had said hi to anyone inside. 'Just breathe, you can do this,' one member said. She smiled at me, and then we both laughed. Suddenly, a thought came to my mind, something my little cousins used to say when they were scared: 'Ha ki roto, Ha ki waho,' which means Breath in, Breath out.

One of the key reasons group fitness environments successfully foster long-term memberships is not solely based on the additional amenities they offer, but the presence of collective motivation, peer support and shared goals. Eggleton, Stewart, and Kask's (2018) paper entitled "*Ngātiwai Whakapakari Tinana: strengthening bodies through a Kaupapa Māori fitness and exercise programme*" discusses the ability of an exercise program grounded in Kaupapa Māori principles to help Māori adults lose weight and form meaningful relationships. In relating this article to group fitness gyms that intentionally celebrate Māori identity, the overarching idea of whanaungatanga creates accountability and may result in participants persisting with activity because they have the support of others and a mutual commitment to support these others (Eggleton, Stewart, Kask, 2018, p. 26). This peer support was found to be significant among interview participants during this study, with many explaining that, unlike solo training, in conventional gyms, this particular group fitness environments that they found at BFT Hamilton East provide a structured physical regime with planned daily workouts and a social environment that celebrates Māori culture and identity. Interviews voiced their appreciation for the effort to incorporate culture through the use of te reo Māori when welcoming participants, and that during the explanation and demonstration of the day's workout, which is also known as 'talk-time', staff are encouraged to include values such as whanaungatanga and manaakitanga, in trying to create a whānau-like atmosphere for members.

During the most recent 8-week challenge that I was able to be a part of, one of the key community aspects of these challenges was the team group chats. These group chats serve as a way for coaches and team members to keep in contact in regard to announcements of team challenges, which would often be announced weekly through social media and serve as a platform to keep each member accountable during these 8 weeks together. Participants post daily food photos and motivational quotes, along with the usual banter that goes along with group chats. There would be group members setting up times for opportunities to exercise outside of the gym together, whether that meant going for a walk or run together and strategising for upcoming mini-challenges with other teams. The coaches would assign each member a specific day during the 8 weeks, where they would post one message of encouragement or advice for that particular day. These group chats became an integral part of team challenges, providing each member with a form of support outside of the physical gym space. Levi, proud Ngāti Toarangatira and Ngāti Kahungunu tāne and co-owner of BFT Hamilton East, shares his perspective:

"Group fitness helps you community-wise because you're surrounded by other people at the same time that may have similar goals. One of the things I love is that when you are in a class environment, you have other people to feed off and a lot of encouragement around you."

Participants in the gym that I spoke with consistently mentioned the importance of social relationships in their continued engagement with the gym. It is important to note that, of course, most group fitness communities, even in Aotearoa, are not Māori-led. Many mainstream fitness spaces offer group classes and strive to create positive community dynamics, even when not grounded in Indigenous values. What I argue distinguishes Māori-led or kaupapa

Māori-informed fitness spaces is the intentional inclusion of relational values such as manaakitanga and whanaungatanga.

These values are expressed in moments of ‘showing up’ for each other, when members think and explore how the gym can serve as a space of connection, support, and strength, where these values are embodied through movement. Levi’s kōrero reflects the deeper significance of "showing up" for one another, not just in exercise but in the broader sense of communal care and accountability. The act of pushing through physically demanding workouts alongside others fosters a sense of kotahitanga (unity), reinforcing the belief that the well-being of one is tied to the well-being of all. I am reminded of a traditional Whakatauki (proverb) which reads "Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini"; when translated, it means "My strength is not mine alone, but it is the strength of many". This notion is deeply embedded in Māori cultural practices, where strength is measured not only in physical ability but in the capacity to uplift and sustain those around you. As Marian explained:

The eight-week challenges are a really good example of it because they put you into teams. And then so it's like they become your whanau, right? So it's like getting to know them, building relationships with them, looking after one another.

Marian's reflection highlights the idea that collective sources of encouragement and social support are crucial factors in long-term membership and supports the existing research on whanaungatanga and accountability in fitness communities (Eggleton, Stewart & Kask, 2018). This sentiment shared by Marian reflects the potential transformative power of group fitness communities, plus the added influence that manaakitanga (support) has to change not only physical training habits but shifts in mindsets. While many mainstream gyms now emphasise

community and well-being, the support found in Māori-led spaces is grounded in Kaupapa Māori values like manaakitanga and whanaungatanga. The connection, care and accountability are integral to the gym's success.

Marian continues, “It changed my life, I feel. Even in like my perspective on things, like giving things a go, you know, because you're working with others and everyone's trying to be their best, there's that, so you want to match up”, her desire to “match up” is understood in the gym community as rising to the occasion and pushing past those mental barriers through the positive reinforcement of the coaches and peers. This supports whanaungatanga in the way that personal growth is not isolated but nurtured. Affectionately and dramatically referred to as “dying together”, these often intense workouts strengthen bonds among participants in the gym environment, generating an atmosphere that encourages people to push through the physical and mental barriers that hold them back. Waiora, a proud Tainui and Tuwharetoa wahine and current member at BFT Hamilton East, explains that

Of all the gyms I've tried over the years, I've never stuck to as long as this. I think I've been here nearly 3 years now. It's just different, better! Having people beside me supporting and cheering me on is probably one of the biggest reasons I'm still here. People who I've never met have cheered me on, and I also love seeing everybody's dubs! When one wins, we all win.

Waiora's experience illustrates her perspective of the collective care she gains from this space. Continued support from others, especially from those who were previously strangers, displays how whanaungatanga extends beyond kinship ties to include gym members as a form of chosen whānau. In this form, whanaungatanga can include non-kin relationships that have

become whānau-like (Kukutai et al., 2016). Through this, we see that contact with and among participants is invaluable in terms of at least one important outcome associated with exercise, and judging by the present results, it is also clear that contact in the form of a close-knit, cohesive group represents the optimal context for members to thrive. (Burke et al., 2005, p. 23)

The idea that “When one wins, we all win” reflects the communal support that participants miss in mainstream gym environments. This is not to say that personal achievements are lessened in this environment; instead, it collectively ties each participant to one another through relational accountability. Participants benefit most from physical activity when they are given the opportunity to interact with others; peer support does not manifest itself only through verbal encouragement. Papakura’s (1938, p. 59) classic ethnography of Māori kinship and culture explains that a great deal of conversation with relatives or other loved ones is carried on without words, but by gestures, expressions of the face, and by inarticulate sounds, these gestures such as a smile, a nod or a thumbs up and the simple act of participation can often encourage others to push through difficult workouts. In the Māori gym space, similar non-verbal forms of encouragement and care include laughter, shoulder tap, a subtle raising of the eyebrows with a closed-lipped smile, a quick nod or a “bro-shake” (part hand-shake, part-hug).

Through the creation of social bonds, peer support often extends beyond the gym walls, fostering deeper relationships that contribute to long-term membership and sustained participation with meaningful connections outside the fitness space, connecting in person or through social media. Participants highlighted that these new friendships often result in long-term relationships and membership at the gym, as members create more meaningful relationships that motivate them to continue to “show up and show out” when exercising. As a result of this, attendance and motivation are not solely driven by personal fitness goals but by a

sense of responsibility, accountability and shared experiences. We see this dynamic reflected in Māori relational ties more generally, where everything becomes connected.

Whanaungatanga [relationships] and manaakitanga [generosity in relationships] practised in sport at all levels increase the mana of, and can be embraced by, people of all cultures. The absence of these values is a key point of difference between Pakeha-dominated sport and a culturally competent model of sport. (Hippolite & Bruce, 2014, p. 95)

For many Indigenous communities, the colonialist viewpoint of individualism is contrary to the values of the collective. This concept of community-centred life reflects the value of relationality and the importance of healthy relationships to encourage cohesion in the community. When relating this to group fitness communities, it shows the value of members not training alone but instead uplifting each other and ensuring that everyone progresses together. This supports the Kaupapa Māori approach, where cultural continuity and communal upliftment are representations of manaakitanga. Muriwai et al.'s (2021) conclusions regarding fitness as a byproduct or incidental outcome of cultural practices can reflect that participants' drive to see these activities as more than a space to engage in physical fitness; the drive could then evolve from the support and engagement that attending classes and training sessions give members. For Māori gym members, this dynamic can be deeply intertwined with cultural practices such as whanaungatanga and manaakitanga, while also helping them to recognise their personal fitness experience within the collective, helping them to see the foundation of how fitness is experienced and valued.

The role of manaakitanga is essential to the success of these spaces and emphasises the encouragement that individual members receive from others, especially those in leadership

positions such as coaches and/or owners. Manaakitanga enables an environment where individuals feel respected and supported, which may not lead to what others may see as immediate or ‘obvious’ changes in their physical fitness. Levi shares that ‘everyone's needs and wants are different’. Displays of Manaakitanga ensure that care is shown both to the individual while remaining connected to the group. The communal aspect is highly important for Māori participants, who may view the space and people as an extension of their whānau. The action of manaakitanga reinforces the vision that fitness is part of a broader relational framework, not merely an isolated activity. Ice reflects on engaging in Manaakitanga with new members:

“I feel like the biggest aspect for me is when you get brand new people coming in. So, people that haven't participated in exercise or haven't done it in a long time get to be a part of their journey from the very start. And you get to see them progress through, and then the big change through that, through their confidence in movement, confidence in lifting weights, that's the aspect that I enjoy.”

Ice’s experience highlights the deeply relational nature of group fitness and supports the idea of peer support and collective encouragement. The focus on supporting new members and witnessing their growth primarily aligns with whanaungatanga and manaakitanga and reinforces the idea that fitness can be a collective journey and reflects the holistic nature of hauora (well-being), which encompasses mental, emotional and social dimensions as well as physical health in contributing to a person's overall wellness. As we see, Ice’s explanation emphasises the power of culturally grounded fitness communities in fostering long-term membership and collaborative empowerment. The gym, as a space of support and care, enables deep whānau-like relationships and strengthens personal growth while encouraging members to lift those around them.

Conclusion

*Being a part of group fitness lets us all
express and share our authentic selves and values with everyone in the room who also
pass on what they learn to more whānau at home.*

(Waiora, interview)

At the heart of this research lies the recognition that group fitness environments can be far more than a site of physical training. They can become a space of cultural reconnection and relational wellbeing within which Māori participants thrive. Māori participants do not leave their culture at the door; rather, we carry it with us, expressing values such as whanaungatanga and manaakitanga, shaping the space around us and creating communities that uplift each other/our community.

By drawing on Indigenous autoethnography, participant observation, qualitative interviews, and grounded in Kaupapa Māori research, this study affirmed that movement is not separate from identity, but a continuation of it—a lived expression. In this light, even mainstream gym spaces can become sites of Indigenous renewal where Māori are able to reclaim their place within them, on their own terms, in ways that uplift both self and collective. I also want to acknowledge that these experiences may not be universally shared amongst all Māori; it would be unwise of me to think otherwise. Not every participant will encounter these spaces as welcoming, empowering, or healing. Power dynamics, differing fitness goals, personal histories, or even discomfort with cultural protocols may shape individual experiences in more complex ways. Yet, such variation does not diminish the broader cultural and political significance of

these spaces. Rather, it highlights the dynamic and layered nature of Indigenous wellbeing in contemporary contexts.

I argued that the existence of Māori-led fitness spaces, gym wear brands, and the inclusion of Māori values signify broader themes of autonomy and economic empowerment that Māori gymgoers are collectively working toward. As Māori anthropologist Ngapare Hopa (1988, p. 11) reminds us, “While political channels can be forced open to admit Māori people and/or their identity revitalised, if they do not control their own resources, they are destined to remain disadvantaged and unable to shake the shackles of dependency.” This highlights that matters of Māori culture are not separate from their economic concerns. Hopa advocates for the liberation of Māori not only politically but also affirming that if Māori do not have control over their own resources, such as land, money, institutions, and decision-making power, they will remain dependent.

This dependency keeps Māori in a structurally disadvantaged position and prevents true self-determination; this insight emphasises the value of spaces that encourage self-determination. Self-determination must be not only in cultural expression but in ownership and governance of the spaces and systems that shape Māori wellbeing. Culturally grounded fitness initiatives, then, are not only about physical health; they are also about reclamation, independence, and a reimagining of what Indigenous success looks like on our own terms. Indeed, physical health and Indigenous success are not separate but go hand in hand.

Future research could expand on these findings by exploring how Māori and other Indigenous peoples are reimagining wellbeing across different kinds of group fitness spaces. I will say that through my experience, the inclusion of Māori values in a commercialised space

such as BFT Hamilton East hasn't taken away the inclusion of other people. Nor has it been met with resistance from members of different ethnicities. Especially in cities such as Kirikiriroa, Hamilton, where these spaces, such as gyms, club sports teams, kapa haka, community groups, and corporations, are increasing in popularity, there is a space for research to be done that explores how and if these spaces become transformative for Māori and non-Māori. Comparative studies between Indigenous and non-Indigenous experiences in shared gym environments could offer further insights into the cultural dynamics of belonging and exclusion. Finally, there is potential for more collaborative, community-led research projects that evaluate how gyms and movement spaces might intentionally support decolonising and Indigenising efforts, from the design of programmes to the language, imagery, and values embedded in the space.

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