

Editorial

Sipping Tea and Sharing Kōrero: Reflections on 'Activating Collectivity: Aroha and Power'

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Grab a mug, your favourite mug, and come join us for a cup of tea. This is not a formal introduction to who we are, not a how-to for conference organisers, not even a detailed overview of everything that was 'Activating Collectivity: Aroha and Power'.¹ It's not a 'standard' opening piece for a special issue of an academic journal, but rather a creative challenging of so-called 'standards' and a push to do things differently, relationally, collectively. It's an invitation to sit down with us, to get comfortable, to hold your storied mug in your hands—stains, chips, and memories welcome—to laugh, cry, reflect, share, and see what comes when we create the spaces we want to be in, the spaces we need.

We'll take a moment to pause before we start, a moment to collect ourselves, to settle, and to momentarily release whatever heaviness we may be carrying, so that we can savour the short time we have together, sip by warm sip.

Take the time you need. We'll put the tea on. When you're ready, we'll get started.

1 As conference organisers and co-authors of this piece, we'd also like to acknowledge our fellow conference organiser, Tarapuhi Vaeau, who was an integral part of planning and holding the conference in 2020.

We find you here in the *after*, months after our social movements conference was held in Te Whanganui-a-Tara; months after we met at the Aroha and Power Pā, complete with virtual and physical spaces for coming together, spaces for sipping tea and sharing kōrero, spaces for rest and reflection; months after being both challenged by, and motivated in, collectivity. The *after*, we've found, is just as important as the *before*, just as important as the *during*. In fact, it is in the *after* that the strength of the conference is tested. It is when we can see if its impacts continue to be impacting and if its inspirations continue to be inspiring.

It is from here, in the *after*, that we gather to share a bit of our collective story as a group of people who were brought together to create something new. This is a story about what we learned, about what moved us, about what we want to pass on, not so that what we created can be duplicated, but so that others can be inspired to create in relationship with their own collective authority. This is about empowering them, or you, to create your own spaces, trusting in the collective energies and ancestries of those you choose to work with.

This is a story about giving us all the permission to be what our communities need, to create not what academics say are 'appropriate' conference spaces, but what we want and what can respond to the times and challenges we face. This is about modelling and reflecting the futures we want to see, where everyone has a voice, where we can laugh, cry, rest, breathe, and create in the moments in between, where cups of tea provide spaces for radical conversation, and where there is room for tear-filled, deep belly laughs that make us ache and momentarily forget the fights we fight, or rather, that give us the motivation to keep fighting them.

This is a story about the work that goes into creating the spaces that to others may seem incidental, accidental, or simply 'meant to be'. It is about the thought that goes into every detail, from how we adorn our spaces with decorations and soundscapes to how we feed people, physically and otherwise, to how we think about songs that match occasions, peoples, and histories. It is about the intentionality of aroha, how sometimes it hurts, how sometimes it's issued with stern challenges, how sometimes it's felt in warm

hugs, and how all of these expressions are necessary for our collective growth.

This is a story about joy. It is about how work is joyful, or at least how it can be, or how it *should* be, when it is purposeful, when it is intentional, when it is about ensuring that we have the energy and the drive to keep going. It is about cultivating hope, about giving us something to hope for, or to find hope in, so that we can continue to create the futures we want. It is about giving our activists, artists, creators, thinkers, organisers, and leaders the space to breathe in relationship, reminding them/us/you that we are not alone.

Finally, this is a story about the intimate memories and moments that only a few of us may understand, but that will sustain our movements forward: stuffed-dolls recovered from the trash, sharp weapons turned moon paths, birthdays and readings, and mysterious portraits capturing brown beauty and love. This is a story told in an unconventional way—through lists, reflections, memories, and challenges—to both capture a bit of what was created while also motivating us to continue to do the necessary, and hopefully joyful, work in the *after*.

Sip. Savour. Enjoy.

Before progressing, a bit of background may be useful, especially for those of you who are joining us for the first time. The conference we've been referring to was the fifth Social Movements, Resistance, and Social Change (SMRSC) conference held in Te Whanganui-a-Tara from 11–14 November 2020. Our theme, 'Activating Collectivity: Aroha and Power', was initially inspired by the Indigenous-led movements of 2019 that were based on aroha, aloha, alofa, and love as forms of power that generate both theory and practice. The theme, however, also provided space for responding to social issues and movements that unfolded around us through 2020, including the global pandemic and the need to navigate physical groundedness on uneven terrain, and the Black Lives Matter movement and the work of confronting racism while also seeking to expand networks of solidarity. Our theme asked us to consider how our imaginings of collectivity, aroha, and power have been activated and constrained, and how we can extend

them as a basis for liberation.

After nearly two years of planning, the conference was held both in-person at Te Herenga Waka, Victoria University of Wellington's Rutherford House in Pipitea and online using a platform called Hopin. Over the four days of the conference, participants and attendees engaged in deep kōrero about constitutional transformation and the questioning of place and privilege; positionality and trans-national and trans-Indigenous solidarities; classism, colonialism, militarism, and structural violence (including violence maintained in institutions like the university itself); how to organise new groups, how to care for self, family, and others to avoid burnout, and how to tend to and love whenua fiercely. There were spaces for creativity, for movement, for deep introspection, for grabbing a cup and sharing a laugh or a cry, for being nourished by thoughtful and intentional kai, and for thinking about the world and ourselves in relation to it.

Over the four days, the university setting was transformed. Spaces were given new names, each corresponding with a place on a pā: waharoa, wharenui, ātea, whare kai, te kāuta, kōhanga reo, awa, and mārā. Panels, workshops, presentations, and demonstrations were placed into the spaces that could hold each individual contribution:

- The waharoa became the entry point at which all newcomers and conference returnees were greeted and updated on daily movements throughout the pā.
- The wharenui became a place for large gatherings, for keynote panels, and for coming together to discuss, debrief, and set the intention at the start and end of every day.
- The ātea became a place where debate and robust conversation could take place in the open, where even confronting and challenging topics were given the necessary space to be discussed.
- The whare kai became a place where people could come together around a long, communal dining table to discuss important matters while also building and nourishing relationships.
- Te kāuta became a place for doing, for grabbing the tea towel to dry the cups for sustaining the work ahead, and for engaging

hands and minds in important mahi.

- The kōhanga reo became a place for focusing on youth, on the future, and on the important role that children play in our activism and social movements.
- The awa became a place where we could unwind and talk about self-care and healing, where we could cater to our mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical wellbeing.
- The māra became a bountiful and beautiful place, complete with art, invitations to make collages or to craft flowers out of paper, and opportunities to sit, talk, share, laugh, reflect, eat, and have many, many cups of tea. It was also where participants and their children could find a blanket fort, made comfortable and welcoming with soft cushions, beanbags, and aroha.

Those who joined us online, while unable to sit in the physical spaces we created, were able to experience the virtual Aroha and Power Pā, moving between spaces that were built and cared for by our online team, complete with opportunities to grab their favourite mugs at home and engage in conversation with others joining virtually. They were invited into every keynote, every session, every panel, and every workshop where hybrid delivery was possible, and therefore became an integral part of the conference space, expanding the boundaries of what we initially thought possible and extending the concepts of, and commitments to, aroha, power, and collectivity far beyond the physical spaces we transformed.

The articles and reflections that follow in the rest of this special issue will give you the chance to revisit those spaces or to step into them for the first time. They will also provide a glimpse into some of what was discussed, learned, experienced, and activated at the conference. There are transcriptions from two of our keynote panels, the first on constitutional transformation and the second on caring for whenua. These pieces will invite you into the wharenuī where we first sat down with our speakers, sharing cups of tea (some virtually), and talking about our movements for change. There are also reflections from conference participants who moved

through various spaces on the pā. Each will offer different insights on their experiences, their personal take-aways, their hopes. There are also critical pieces highlighting some of the thought-provoking and activating ideas presented at the conference, including critical considerations of solidarity and Critical Race Theory. In addition to these pieces, other contributions showcase some of the work in the *after*, where the tea keeps getting poured to sustain critical kōrero about our movements, our resistance, and our collective power. One piece, for instance, brings different conference participants together—three who attended in person and one online—to reflect on their positionality, a theme that ran across various sessions *during* the conference while also pointing to the important work to be continued in the *after*.

Whether you were at the conference, in-person or virtually, or are joining us for the first time, we'd like to invite you to be part of the conversation with us, to be part of the movement with us, to contribute and challenge, to reflect and question, to dream of and build better futures. This opening piece, after all, is less of an introduction than it is an activation of collectivity.

Therefore, before speaking to specific aspects of the conference, like our guiding values, and before sharing what we learned, what inspired us, and what we hope you take away from the conference, from this special issue, and from our time together now, we'd like to invite you to take a moment to reflect on the spaces where you've felt most supported, the spaces where you've felt you could release a little, breathe, and sit both in purpose and in anticipation for better things to come. Reflect on that space below. May we all be inspired to create these kinds of spaces in our lives and to be and to build what our communities need.

A place where I've felt supported in my mahi is:

Sip on the memory of that place. Hold it near.

In the *before*, in the many months and meetings before the conference, we met weekly to both envision the spaces we wanted to create and to do the logistical work necessary to make them a reality. In early meetings, we knew that we had to establish protocols for our coming together, guidelines and expectations for how we would care for the *vā*, or the relational space between us. If we were going to create meaningful, caring spaces of *aroha* for the conference, we knew we needed to create those spaces for ourselves, that our relationships needed to be strong, and that we needed to model and reflect what we wanted to see, what we wanted to experience.

At the start of every meeting we checked-in with one another. We gave each other the space to talk about how we were feeling, what we were carrying, and what was going on in our lives. Over many months of meetings, we shared joys and frustrations, we celebrated new life and lives passed, we listened as some shared both the weight of carrying *kaupapa* and the personal journeys we must embark on to find ourselves in our movements. Though this part of our meeting could take a lot of time, it was critical to the way we came together. Over time, our relationships grew, deepened, and were sustained by our ability to see each other, not just as fellow conference organisers, but as people with full lives, sometimes hopeful and sometimes heartbreaking, but always dedicated to our shared vision.

We share this part of our process not because it presents a roadmap that all groups should follow, but because we believe that deciding upon shared values and sticking to them—even when it slows the process

down—is essential. Our weekly check-ins, which became daily morning and afternoon check-ins during the conference, were our backbone. Over time, checking-in with one another became commonsense, something we did naturally so that we could tend to the collective. Over time, we built trust and came to experience the joy in our relationships.

The many months of planning in the *before*, and the days during the conference, were guided by the same values, which were also actions that required doing. They were (and continue to be):

- Honour Te Tiriti.
- Have generosity of spirit and respect for diverse identities.
- Respect whenua/place.
- Nurture relational space.
- Create space for mana-enhancing knowledge sharing.
- Enable holistic accessibility

Bringing people together both physically and virtually required that we be aware of the relational space between us. It also required that we remember that each individual person coming to the conference brought with them thousands in the ancestors they carry, in the whānau they represent, in the teachers who've mentored them, in the students they teach, and in the children they raise. Our values therefore challenged us to think about the many people who would be gathering and how we could create spaces in which everyone could feel welcomed and comfortable while also still being accountable and mindful of place, of history, and of responsibility.

Throughout the planning process, and throughout the conference itself, our guiding values gave us something to continually return to. When we needed answers, we returned to the source, to what we established as a group in the *before*, knowing that it would lead us through the *during* and long into the *after*. They also gave us, and continue to give us, something to stand for. As a collective, we'd like to imagine an Aotearoa where these kinds of values are embraced by all.

Thinking about the future of Aotearoa, the decolonised future you dream of, what would you like to see valued? What values would you embrace and return to for guidance, strength, and sustenance?

Trust your values. Let them be your backbone.

The preparation in the *before*—including everything from deciding on our values to coming up with a theme, from inviting keynote speakers to calling for contributions, from preparing the programme to organising the spaces, from calling for volunteers to beautifying and building a blanket fort, from discussing safety and wellbeing to the many hours of conversation about each and every detail down to koha and kai—allowed us to truly savour the *during*. In May of 2021, about six months after the conference, we spent a few days revisiting ‘Activating Collectivity: Aroha and Power’. Together, we reminisced and reflected, writing our thoughts on colourful sticky notes, laughing, and smiling through the memories that brought us joy, and thinking critically about how we’ve grown and about how any and all difficulties and challenges experienced will help to sustain our movements going forward. It is in the spirit of learning and activating collectivity that we share some of the lessons we learned and some of the moments that inspired us.

Lessons learned:

- Prepare well. Pay attention to detail. Work with intention and set the intention for the ways we come together. Be mindful of space. Hold space.
- Prioritize the people.

- While lulls are part of the creative, collective process, don't let the space be filled with doubt. Trust in the collective wisdom of your group, make decisions, and keep going.
- Enjoy the wānanga and go deep. Even when the conversations are difficult, know there are many important lessons to be learned from them.
- Act and relish the change. See it, live it, be it.
- Resource the centre (your centre and the collective's centre). Keep the centre strong.
- Honour imaginative power by putting in the hard preparation and love required to see things into fruition. Make what you want real by doing the mahi.
- Remember that you are worthy of the effort and the work that needs to be done. Remember that we are worthy of the effort and the work that needs to be done.
- Don't run away from the personal. Remember that the personal is always present. We bring ourselves, our ancestors, and our whānau into everything we do. Be aware of that. Lean into it; denying it is futile.
- Continually ask yourself, and ask your group, 'What is power without aroha and what is aroha without power?' We need both. Sustain and nurture both.
- Remember that sometimes even confident people need encouragement and that sometimes even leaders need the space to follow. Remember that even those who are always asked to speak might sometimes revel in the chance to rest and to see others step into their own leadership potential. Provide that space for them.
- Have trust. Trust is beautiful. Imagine what is possible when you invite people to be their whole selves, to stand in their own power. Let them do so.
- Being afraid is good. Jump into it!
- Sometimes you might have to do something you're unfamiliar

with. In these times, you might feel like you're building the waka on the water, troubleshooting on the fly. Remember that this is our whakapapa, that we've always been innovative, ready for change, adaptable and resilient.

- Trust yourself. Trust what you can bring. Trust what you're bringing.
- Rumble. Recover. Restore. Repeat. Experience the uncertain and ride the challenge. It may be a rumble, but you will recover, you will be restored, you will be able to repeat the process stronger.
- There is growth in action, but remember that stillness, too, can be an action. Sometimes growth comes when we give ourselves the chance to catch our breath.
- Activate and create.
- Flip the script. If you want to see change, be change. If you want more Māori and Pacific wahine to lead, for instance, be Māori and Pacific wahine who lead.
- Define your role in relation to others and trust in the collective wisdom of your group. Collectivity is the source that will sustain you.
- When people respond to your invitation to contribute with a 'no', saying that they need a break or need the time for themselves, celebrate that and celebrate them.
- Remember that doing the work together that helps you get through what comes next is what will nourish what comes next.
- Dish out critique only if you will be there for solutions. Be there to do the work in the after.
- Always ask where the aroha/aloha/aloha is and then be there to nurture it.
- Reclaim the power of the learner. Remember that you don't have to know everything, that being the learner and sitting confidently in that role allows others to do the same. There is mana in being a learner.
- Don't just name it, be it. Be your kaupapa. Be aroha, power, and

collectivity and always go back to the source. Trust the source. Trust your values.

- Working against dehumanisation means giving ourselves the permission to laugh. So, laugh and laugh hard!

The conference created a space for learning. No matter our background, our experiences—whether we were seasoned activists or organisers, or brand new to presenting our work and speaking in front of audiences—it allowed us to come together and learn collectively, with and from each other, while also providing the space for deeply personal reflection. The lessons shared above were collective and individual, expansive and intimate. While it is not an exhaustive list of everything learned, it is some of what we will take away from the conference, and, importantly, what we will carry with us as we continue to work together and as we continue to support each other in our individual mahi.

Thinking about your experiences at the conference, what did you learn? If you were not at the conference, think about a meaningful experience where you came together with people for the same kaupapa. What did you learn as you activated collectivity?

Sip on those lessons, feel them move to your belly and settle. Let them guide you.

Thinking forward, and moving forward in the *after*, it's important to hold on to the moments and memories that inspired. As we sat down in May 2021 to talk about the conference and share what we were most moved, captured,

and motivated by, we realized that our mahi needs joyful reflection. Our movements are heavy enough. The challenges we face are hard enough. It is therefore important that we have a collection of positive reminders of the transformational impacts our movements can have, structurally, personally, and collectively.

What inspired us at the conference and inspires us still:

- Spaces to retreat. We need spaces where we can be like children, where we can walk in wonder, play in blanket forts, and find our inner child. We need to remember joy. The revolution needs joy.
- Having a group that gives you the confidence to stick up for yourself.
- Humanising the process so that we can laugh together in awkward moments, recognizing that we all make mistakes, that we all have areas to improve, that we all fall, and that we are all learners.
- Trust: the trust of our volunteers to work with us, the willingness of our attendees to receive, try new things, and bring their best selves; the courage of our presenters to step up for the first time and challenge themselves; the willingness to receive aroha, power, and collectivity.
- Rethinking solidarity, and ‘projectile solidarity’, as keynote panelist, Makanaka Tuwe, spoke of. Rethinking how we stand with and for each other.
- The chance to redefine activism and what it means to be an activist.
- Laughter. Seeing those we look up to have the chance to laugh and explore the pā with wonder.
- Bouncing back with joy. Recognizing that what matters more is how we recover and what we do next.
- Children. They are part of the movement. They care without thinking about it and they remind us that we all have something to offer, even if it’s a picture drawn to make someone smile.
- Redefining the currency of our spaces: connection, collectivity, joy, vegan kai, op-shop plates, and big tables.

- Bringing joy and love into activism and letting them guide our movements and our relationships with one another.
- Holding complexity while also embracing diversity of thought, experience, and positionality.
- Living a different kind of reality. Creating the spaces we need.
- Having joy in the present while also being critically aware of what we're/you're doing so that we can recover well when we need to.
- Being willing to step into uncomfortable spaces and having humility while stepping into them.
- Doing unsexy work behind the scenes, every day. Fighting from where we are.
- Being willing to talk about trauma with our families.
- Being willing to heal and to recover.
- Adorning our spaces, beautifying the pā, giving thought to how spaces receive people, how people add to spaces, how plants and sounds bring the outside in and allow for the inside to travel outward.
- Creative landscapes: art and food in the māra, providing space for creativity and nourishment.
- Being intensely relational and intentional.
- Recognising that any and every new space needs manaaki.
- Challenging the limitations caused by Covid-19 by taking the time to imagine the spaces we wanted beyond those limitations and then creating them.
- Breaking the mould.
- Having art and a coffee cart. Caring for people and nourishing them physically and creatively.
- Finding inspiration in what is old, familiar, and ancestral.
- Seeing the people we look up to, our wahine toa, release, breathe, and momentarily feel cared for and carefree.
- Sticking to our values and integrity even if and when it slowed things down.
- Remembering collective wisdom and collective authority.

- Knowing that the best is when we are all working it out together.
- People listening to and reflecting on kōrero, being willing to arrive, receive, and share.
- Caring for people who need caring for. Nurturing relationships for a better future. Making sure our leaders have the chance to fill their cup and sip some tea.

Like the lessons shared earlier, these moments of inspiration reveal some of what we reflected on, and sat in deep appreciation for, months after the conference was over. If we were to sit together again today, sipping tea and sharing kōrero, and were to list our deepest lessons learned and the moments that inspired us, the list would undoubtedly be different. The list would change, in other words, because we've changed. As we reflected in May 2021, we realized the power of looking back while thinking forward. What we will find most moving about the conference will largely reflect where we happen to be in the *now*, here in the *after*, whenever that happens to be. When we met in May, the themes of joy, collectivity, and trust were prominent. This was both a reflection of the conference itself and where we were as organisers when we gathered together. In other words, it was both a reflection of what we gained from the conference and what we then sought to find, once again, in each other. As we write this, we are aware of the fact that the lessons and inspirations shared will continue to shift and deepen over time as we both sit with the memory of the conference and look ahead, doing the mahi, while also returning to the source of strength that our collective provides.

Thinking about your time at the conference, what is a moment that inspired you? If you were not at the conference, think about a moment you were inspired by in a kaupapa that continues to teach you in the *after*:

Remember that we need moments of inspiration to nourish our movements. Sip and savour them.

When we gathered in the *after*, a few of us reflected on the desire to have every collective feel like the one we created, to have every work experience—while challenging, demanding, and sometimes overwhelming—also contain the joy we experienced in and with each other. While our time together organising the conference is over, we believe it tasked us with the responsibility to be even more fiercely intentional in our relationships moving forward, not only with each other, but with the people we work with, live with, and love. The four days of ‘Activating Collectivity: Aroha and Power’ have passed. The enduring value of the conference will not be in the conference itself but here in the *after*, where we continue to let what we experienced both guide and continually challenge us to shift, change, grow, and become what our movements need, what our futures need, and what our ancestors dreamed of.

Let’s sit with that for a while. The tea is still hot. Stay as long as you need.