‘Just another way of wriggling off the hook’?[1] Exploring the construction of identity in Pākehā memoirs

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Abstract
This article examines four memoirs that explore Pākehā identity: Peter Wells, *Dear Oliver: Uncovering a Pākehā history* (2018), Alison Jones, *This Pākehā Life: An unsettled memoir* (2020), Richard Shaw’s *The Forgotten Coast* (2021) and John Bluck’s *Becoming Pākehā* (2022). Each writer engages with history – and their predecessor Michael King – to contextualise their personal stories, work through their discomfort at being part of the dominant group, and participate in creating a more just national discourse. However, their centering of histories of individuals simultaneously engages with and disavows the racialised power structures rooted in the past that still shape the present.

Since the 1970s, histories of the colonisation of Aotearoa New Zealand have been officially inquired into by the Waitangi Tribunal and literally negotiated through the Treaty settlement process. Increasingly, for individuals and communities, these processes raise questions about the ways in which *personal* relationships with the past are negotiated. Flashpoints of recent history, including the foreshore and seabed controversy and Don’s Brash’s Orewa speech of 2004, have increased the urgency of this task. In 2005, Patrick Snedden – one of several Pākehā writers who sought at that time to explore their familial origins and explain the importance of Te Tiriti o Waitangi | the Treaty of Waitangi to a Pākehā readership – wrote in light of his wide community engagement “[f]undamentally, we had to start talking as Pakeha New Zealanders about our claim to ownership of the right to be here”.[2] To achieve a “transformation [for Māori] of enormous benefit to all New Zealanders”, Snedden asserted “we must all face, and creatively deal with, the fundamental truths of our history”.[3]

Since the mid-2010s, Pākehā writers have not only taken up this challenge, but also sought to discern the uncomfortable truths of their own familial histories. In a 2023 article, historian Keri Mills describes a “nascent movement among Pākehā scholars and public figures to confront the violence in our family stories”.[4] Mills summarises several such interventions made between 2017 and 2021, including those by Ōtorohanga College student Leah Bell, journalist Tim Watkin, environmental studies scholar Amanda Thomas and historian Miranda Johnson.[5] These examples join a longer list of Pākehā writers who have explored their family origins. Though the extent to which all of them confront colonial violence is variable, this ‘movement’ can be traced back to Michael King’s ground-breaking work *Being Pakeha* (1985).

This nascent movement has a practical purpose: to lever out the author’s own genealogy as a way in to engaging critically with an uncomfortable past. By sharing what they find with an assumed Pākehā readership the aim of such work is to educate, open a space for reflection and to play a part in constructing a more just future for Aotearoa New Zealand. This purpose was well-expressed in 2001, when, writing in support of Pākehā Treaty educator Robert Consedine’s book (written with his daughter Joanna), *Healing our History*, Sister Pauline O’Regan emphasised the “vital importance” of Pākehā “bridging the knowledge gap about the Treaty of Waitangi … and come to terms with the facts surrounding it”. Until then, O’Regan continued, “neither Maori nor Pakeha can fully heal their relationship with each other”.[6]

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This article focuses on four books by Pākehā writers who undertake this work and explores them in dialogue with each other and with King. They are: Peter Wells, *Dear Oliver: Uncovering a Pākehā History* (2018), Alison Jones, *This Pākehā Life: An Unsettled Memoir* (2020), Richard Shaw's *The Forgotten Coast* (2021) and John Bluck's *Becoming Pākehā* (2022).[7]

Before turning to examine these books more closely, it is useful to start with how the authors define the term 'Pākehā'. The *Te Aka Māori Dictionary* defines the term, in noun form, as either "foreign or alien" or "a New Zealander of European descent - probably originally applied to English-speaking Europeans living in Aotearoa/New Zealand". *Te Aka* further notes that "[d]espite the claims of some non-Māori speakers, the term does not normally have negative connotations".[8]

King defined Pākehā in *Being Pakeha* as being constituted in a relation with 'Māori': iwi and hapū of Aotearoa defined the more recently arrived 'pakepakeha' (fair skinned folk) as different from 'tangata māori' (ordinary people). He added that "Pakeha – a word whose origins are contentious – defines non-Māori New Zealanders".[9] King's definition is interesting in that it does not identify the 'non-Māori' New Zealanders by their race or ethnicity: they are not white, European, or from the British Isles.

Wells does not provide a succinct definition, but does object to the term 'non-Māori', which King used, writing:

> Pākehā stand in a strange and controversial relationship to history in Aotearoa. In my lifetime we have gone from being slightly unreal heroic 'pioneers' to villainous exploiters of Māori culture and thieves of Māori land. Today we live with the psychological displacement of being defined by what we are not. We are no longer 'pioneers', 'settlers' or 'colonists'; we have been stripped of identity and returned to the present simply as 'non-Māori'. This negative tautology expresses our predicament. Effectively, it delivers us back to a psychological homelessness. We are no longer Pākehā with whom Māori had their first few centuries of contact, the outcome of which created the contemporary world in which we live. We're the shape of a silhouette without a face.[10]

Wells continues, speculating that one of the motivations for writing his book is 'maybe … my wish to paint this face in, to personalise a little of our Pākehā past'.[11] In attempting to 'paint this face in', Wells explains the Pākehā condition in terms of psychic dislocation and a shared story.[12]

In *This Pākehā Life*, Jones expresses her liking for the term Pākehā, in contrast to the racialised term 'whites'.[13] She describes not initially knowing what the Māori word, 'Pākehā' meant, "but I was not "European" and I had never been to Europe. As a Pākehā, I felt lucky to have a place in the Māori world – even if only by name". This name gave her "a solid sense of arrival in taking up that name and identity" as it "anchored me in this part of the globe, in a permanent and necessary relationship with the indigenous people – even if I was not yet sure what that relationship might be".[14] She later defines the term as meaning "to be permanently oriented to Māori, to be peculiarly related here and to be knowledgeable about our historical entanglements".[15]

Shaw is less explicitly concerned with identity in *The Forgotten Coast* than in tracing how three of his key ancestors are implicated in the history of the dispossession of Taranaki iwi and

in the wider story of colonisation. Their Irish Catholicism is an important part of the story he tells, similar to that of King's ancestors. He does comment towards the end of the book that Pākehā "search elsewhere for the best of ourselves and for our origin myths" and that part of this process involves amnesia, "not so much lest we forget … as best we forget".[16] Like Wells, he expresses a desire not to tell a "familiar settler narrative"; unlike, Wells, his narrative is "more concerned with figuring out the *un*settling effect that arrival of my ancestors on the Coast had on the people who were already there".[17]

Bluck is the only writer of the four to refer to himself as white, describing himself in his youth as a "skinny white kid" and more recently as an "old white man".[18] Noting that the term 'Pākehā' is ambivalent, having suffered from "rumours that it began as a swearword", Bluck characterises it instead as a "beautifully balanced three-syllable word gifted by Māori", commenting "to see the word as a gift makes all the difference. It involves a relationship between the giver and the receiver". More factually, he defines the term as meaning "fair-skinned people who make their home here regardless of ancestry or birthplace", referencing an implied whiteness that is not necessarily dependent on British antecedents.[19] Bluck explores other terms, including tangata Tiriti (people of the Treaty), tauiwi (landing / foreign people), manuhiri (visitors) and non-Māori, but rejects all of them, concluding "I think we're stuck with Pākehā. It's as much about relationship as it is about identity. It's a word used nowhere else in the world, about no-one else" – though this is arguably true of other te reo terms too.[20] More convincingly, Bluck describes Pākehā kawa as a means of being defined by what you do, in this case "a highly structured way of behaving properly, at first defined by social class but quickly adapted as settlers rewrote the rules".[21]

Four Pākehā memoirs

The earliest of the four books, Wells' *Dear Oliver*, largely focuses on the author's maternal family and their place in the developing colonial society of Hawke's Bay. Wells' focus is on the "very ordinariness" of his family's letters, offering "the history of a family not noted for anything in particular – except its quiet genius in being itself".[22] He describes the "ur-journey" of his forebears and his exploration of it as a kind of "Pakeha cliché".[23] Wells' explicit themes are class mobility and the psychological impact of migration and exile on the people who were to become Pākehā. He touches on his role in the queer liberation movement and the need to leave home to come out, which he does by letter back to his family in the early 1970s. The Oliver of the title is his infant cousin, as well as the device through which he pieces together his epistolary meditation on the past for the future.[24]

Reflecting on why he wrote the book, Wells writes: "'White people don't know their history', James Baldwin has asserted, and I believe this is true for Pākehā in Aotearoa New Zealand".[25] Commenting further, he draws on the thoughts of historian Richard Holmes that to reach back to the past is an act of human solidarity, "in its own way an act of recognition and love". Wells comments that "Pākehā on the whole do not love ourselves". One of his aims then appears to be to 'speak shame', both for his family and more widely for Pākehā, an echo of the process of coming out, and to begin the work of "personalising a little of our Pākehā past".[26] In doing so, Wells touches on flashpoints of colonial history, including his forebear's military involvement at Mohaka and Ōmarunui. Part of his work rehabilitates the pioneering Pākehā experience, asserting that "there is a kind of quiet heroism in the endurance [it] required".[27]

Jones, while eschewing an easy and redemptive narrative in *This Pākehā Life*, nonetheless picks up on Wells' point that "we rarely write in positive terms about being Pākehā", and notes "that, too, is changing as we being to face our relationships with Māori".[28] Her own memoir

offers many stories of personal discomfort in her encounters with Māori since childhood, both real and occasionally misremembered. She describes her own education as she becomes active in the feminist movement, and works with and is challenged by Māori colleagues. In learning through these processes, she describes the way in which she comes to think like a "proper Pākehā", by which she means, "[i]f Pākehā exist in terms of our relationship with Māori, then we have to be able to think with a Māori-informed point of view".[29]

In the course of her family research, Jones is "utterly surprised" by a newly revealed whakapapa connection to New Zealand. Initially seeing herself as the child of English immigrants in the 1950s, she discovers that she has ancestors that lived in Aotearoa in the nineteenth century, with relatives who were directly involved in planning attacks in Taranaki and the Waikato and an "even more remote relative [who] was at the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi".[30] In finding a past connection to Aotearoa, she writes:

> I had found an embodied nineteenth-century stake in this place. I had feelings that were very mixed but, strangely, largely positive. I felt that, somehow, if I had a claim to our past, I also had a claim to our future.[31]

While noting feelings of ambivalence, hurt and discomfort, Jones also writes of excitement, liberation and arriving at a "deeply rich sense of myself".[32]

In *The Forgotten Coast*, Shaw explores his connections to the Taranaki coast and to Parihaka in particular. He follows the lives of three of his Irish Catholic forebears, unpacking the tangible and intangible privileges that his family gained through the government's ruthless suppression of Taranaki Māori. He attempts to work out whether his great grandfather Andrew Gilhooley was in fact part of the Armed Constabulary that invaded Parihaka on the 5th of November 1881. This is juxtaposed with the story of his great uncle, who died young of tuberculosis after having pursued his vocation as a Catholic priest in Rome, and the story of his own father. "This book", Shaw offers, "is my attempt to fill in some of the silences that surround these men, and in doing so to better understand things that I am still trying to figure out for myself".[33] It is his attempt to both "discover" his ancestors and to "bear witness" to what happened in Taranaki.[34] Shaw writes of "possible futures" as being inextricably linked to his meditations on the past and present, in a similar way to Jones.[35]

The most recent book of the four is Bluck's *Becoming Pākehā.* A retired Anglican bishop, broadcaster, and writer, Bluck has spent decades living in different communities around Aotearoa and internationally. Beginning with his childhood in Nūhaka in the 1950s, Bluck attempts to account for the way Pākehā used to be, and how this worldview was increasingly challenged from the 1960s. He wants to build bridges and find common ground, noting "the common space that Pākehā share with Māori is volatile and often fraught".[36] Appearing to directly address those Pākehā who may feel some hesitancy and concern, his tone is encouraging and fatherly:

> if you sense that there's still some unfinished business to becoming a New Zealand where Māori and Pākehā can co-exist … then this might be the book for you. … It's also for those New Zealanders who may not be comfortable about calling themselves Pākehā, and are open to exploring why that's so, but are also bothered by the way in which Pākehā and Māori talk about and to each other.[37]

In each book, the writers traverse their personal history, the history of their families in Aotearoa New Zealand and their interaction with Māori. Each has a confessional aspect to it, as the

authors share family secrets and personal experiences to illuminate the process of becoming Pākehā.

It is in Shaw's *The Forgotten Coast* that the extended metaphor of the hook, used in the title of this article, is deployed. At one point, Shaw refers to the

> special hook reserved for those whose forebears were members of a military force which invaded a village, raped women, looted taonga, destroyed hundreds of hectares of crops, stole livestock, transported prisoners far away and introduced pass laws restricting Māori movements into, out of and within Parihaka long after the invasion.[38]

At various points in his narrative, he reflexively interrogates his own motivations as he researches his family's history in Taranaki. Initially relieved at not being able to definitively place his ancestor at Parihaka, he works out that on the balance of probabilities he probably was there, "so there it is – I am right back on the hook".[39] A misspelling of his great-grandfather's surname presents him with "a gold-plated chance to get off any number off hooks", but "it is not an opportunity I wish to avail myself of".[40] Still later, once he accepts that his ancestor was likely at Parihaka, Shaw comments that there is no point judging him, as "the only thing that would be generated by blaming Andrew is the sense of self-righteousness and absolution that comes from passing judgement on others. That is just another way of wriggling off the hook".[41]

Shaw's extended hook metaphor provides a useful way to navigate these works that engage with what it is to be Pākehā and deploy both their own family and wider New Zealand history for the purposes of constructing a more just national narrative. Each in its own way marks an attempt to work through the discomfort generated by the awareness and acknowledgement of the writers' membership of the dominant group, and, in some cases, to confront the colonialist violence present in their stories of the past. In engaging with their own family's pasts, producing what educationalist Christine Sleeter calls "critical family history",[42] these writers also participate in another genealogy, one complete with its own founding ancestor: Michael King.

Michael King as founder of a discourse

In the early 1980s, during a period of convalescence, journalist and historian King, who had introduced histories from te ao Māori to a wider audience since the late 1960s, started to write a book.[43] In doing so, he not only wanted to explore his own identity but also to respond to criticism of his work that rankled him, including challenges to whether he, as a Pākehā, was the right person to be telling Māori stories. The resulting memoir, *Being Pakeha*, was an innovative attempt to situate a story of a Pākehā life in relation to Māori. King observed that:

> The return and rise of mana Maori had consequences for Pakeha as well as for Maori. For the first time since the mid-nineteenth century, it led to widespread Pakeha awareness of Maori values and aspirations as being often separate and different from Pakeha ones. It impelled Pakeha to examine their consciences and their institutions to see if New Zealand was indeed, as many Maori alleged, a racist society. And it required adjustments in New Zealand life: a restructuring of institutions to accommodate Maori needs and values, and a preparedness to share decision making with people whose criteria were not Pakeha.[44]

King describes his intervention as "one Pakeha's eyewitness account of the events which generated these issues …. In describing experiences common to most Pakeha New Zealanders, it tries to place these experiences in cultural and historical context".[45] In his view, the "key to

redressing imbalances and reconciling past misunderstandings is knowledge; and the first step towards knowledge is self-knowledge". This is the essential reason why he begins "with an account of Pakeha origins" and ends with what he aims to be "a ground for a closer understanding between Maori and Pakeha".[46]

In a revised version of the book, *Being Pakeha Now* (1999), King appears more defensive, asserting that "the fact that one group has been here longer than the others does not make its members *more* New Zealanders than later arrivals, nor give them the right to exclude others from full participation in the national life".[47] Writing "to be Pakeha on the cusp of the twenty-first century is not to be European … It is to be another kind of indigenous New Zealander",[48] King advocates for a Pākehā indigeneity that now seems problematic, as critics such as Lydia Wevers have noted.[49]

Through these books, however, King essentially 'founded a discourse' in New Zealand letters, in the sense that the French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault meant that term. Foucault wrote that:

> In the sphere of discourse one can be the author of much more than a book – one can be the author of a theory, tradition or discipline in which other books and authors will in turn *find their place*.[50]

Such founders of discursivity create "a possibility for something other than their discourse, yet something belonging to what they founded".[51] Importantly, re-examining the founder's texts modifies the discourse that they established.[52]

Several Pākehā writers, including those discussed in this article, have distanced themselves from King's attempt to claim indigeneity, thus introducing difference within the discourse he established. But in positioning him, consciously or not, as a founding ancestor, they have found a place within his discourse, and, in finding a place, have staked a claim to finding a place within *this* place and its history.

While Shaw and Wells mention King briefly, Bluck effusively entreats readers of *Becoming Pākehā* to look beyond King's more controversial statements to his wider body of work, and describes King's 1985 book as "a benchmark in our bicultural journey".[53] In *This Pākehā Life,* Jones makes explicit her inheritance from King, writing:

> It was not until the Pākehā historian Michael King encouraged us in 1985 to identify ourselves as Pākehā rather than European New Zealanders that we have been trying on the term for size.[54]

While acknowledging King as her predecessor, she nonetheless distinguishes her approach from his:

> King wrote with an historian's sensibility and a certain masculine detachment … My own writing in *This Pākehā Life* … is not so detached or confident in tone. I am not an eyewitness so much as an uncertain participant in my relationships with Māori. … My modest aim in giving attention to my own everyday engagements with Māori is to give shape to one New Zealand experience of the latter half of the twentieth century.[55]

As the founder of a modern discourse on being Pākehā, King may be said to haunt the work of his descendants – and these works are haunted by more than just King.

Unquiet ghosts and the discomfort of memory

References to the dead and to ghosts are threaded throughout these books. Shaw's *The Forgotten Coast* is explicitly conceived as an answer to Rachel Buchanan's question in *The Parihaka Album:* "What stories do your dead tell you? How do you see your past?"[56] More immediately, it was written in response to the death of his father – this personal loss informing a wider meditation on "[f]athers, sons – and further back, behind those things, land, belief, and belonging".[57] Wells too is motivated by the illness and death of a parent: that of his mother, Bessie. Near the end of *Dear Oliver,* he writes, "I did not understand that I was writing the book to commemorate her life until a few days after she died".[58] Unwittingly, both Shaw and Wells here follow in King's footsteps, as the death of a relative also catalysed his meditations on being Pākehā.

In *This Pākehā Life*, Jones writes explicitly about ghosts:

> I have always been haunted by ghosts of the dead … My ghosts inhabit the strong positive core of me. My ghosts were present before my birth. Some came to this place with my parents, some were already here.[59]

Meanwhile, Bluck draws on his faith to understand the Treaty and te ao Māori in *Becoming Pākehā*, and invokes the idea of "thin places" – naming the Treaty as one – where "the veil between what is scared and what is secular, ordinary and extraordinary is easier to see".[60]

Ghosts have unfinished business that stops them resting in peace.[61] And, as in the play *Hamlet,* these spectres, "ghosts of past injustices … demand a reckoning".[62] Sociologist Avery Gordon summarises that "to be haunted … is to be tied to historical and social effects".[63] She describes the uncanny effects of haunting as:

> when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future.[64]

Distinguishing haunting from trauma, both areas subject to much critical focus since the 1990s, Gordon notes that the former produces the need for "a something-to-be-done",[65] a point to which I will return towards the end of this article.

Being haunted is a discomforting experience – and discomfort, or its close synonyms, including 'unease', 'unsettling' and 'anxiety' – are deployed frequently throughout these books. Jones writes in *This Pākehā Life* about the discomfort of meeting and talking to her childhood Māori friend Maria again and of realising she had mostly herself constructed their remembered friendship. She describes the difficulty of their conversation:

> I had taken Maria onto territory she did not readily enter; I felt uneasily like an exploitative researcher, mining other people's discomfort for my own benefit. But neither of us pulled back from the conversation.[66]

In *Dear Oliver,* Wells reflects often on the anxieties and fears of the early European settlers, imaginatively putting himself in their shoes, and experiencing the "shock of reality" in encountering historical documents.[67] Bluck describes being appointed as the Anglican Bishop of Waiapu on the East Coast as "the most intense in my bicultural education".[68] This time was "a mixture of comfort and acute discomfort".[69] Shaw frequently refers to his state of mind at various points in *The Forgotten Coast*: he has an "unexpectedly strong" reaction to finding out the topic of his great-uncle's thesis – "The essence and intrinsic evil of a lie".[70] He feels

"unquiet", as if "something inside my head slipped its moorings", when he discovers evidential links between his great-grandmother's farm and the dispossession of Taranaki Māori.[71]

Pākehā and historical guilt

Exploring Pākehā relationships with colonialism, which generate haunting feelings of discomfort, raises the question of guilt, both individual and collective. Guilt is focused on specific actions or behaviours and specific feelings of regret or remorse, that can positively lead to a desire to atone or make amends for those actions (the "something-to-be-done"). It is focused on a separation between actions and the Self – a 'good' person can do 'bad' things – and remorse can be a spur to action to right the wrong that was done. Guilt contrasts with shame, which is more Self-centered in that it is a sense that one *is* bad or inherently flawed because of what has been done.[72] Both of these emotions are at play in the work of Pākehā writers about colonisation.

The authors of the four books discuss guilt in slightly different ways: Wells probes the notion of historical guilt, while also retreating from it and, at times, disavowing it; Jones writes about guilt on an individual level in relation to systemic privilege; Shaw reflects on guilt about the past as a spur to reflection and action in the present; and Bluck exhorts the need for guilt to be expiated by acknowledging the past and embracing the Treaty. Of the four, Shaw and Bluck – one from a Catholic background, the other an Anglican bishop – write about guilt in a way that is less tinged with shame and more about what can be done to atone for the harmed caused.

Wells, for example, writes: "[t]he question of historical guilt interested me as I interrogated the degree to which my mother's family, the Northes and Northeys, had been implicated in the injustices of nineteenth-century Aotearoa NZ. They were essentially a military family – of a lesser sort, definitely not of the officer class".[73] Here, he is not dissimilar from Shaw's efforts to uncover his family's relationship with colonialism. However, he retreats from these searching questions, posing another instead:

> But how specifically did they contribute to, say, the land confiscations that so plagued Māori in the nineteenth century? Not one piece of land the Northes bought was purchased illegitimately or through improper channels. You cannot say the family contributed in any active way.[74]

At most, he describes his forebears as part of an enabling culture that allowed "others" to actively perpetrate injustices: "you could say they contributed a kind of opinion from which these unjust decisions arose: they held the tacit and sometimes vocal opinions that allowed these injustices to be created".[75] Quoting King on the next page – who wrote "the past can only be understood in and on its own terms. People are always limited by the viewpoints of their age" – Wells appears to conclude on the question of guilt that one cannot judge the actions of the past by the standards of the present.[76]

Alone of the three, Jones does not overtly engage with the question of *historical* guilt, instead focusing on guilt at the (contemporary) individual and systemic level – the privilege she writes about, however, is an ongoing legacy of the country's colonial history. In her critique of the term "whites" as opposed to "Pākehā", she describes the former term as going nowhere "with us Pākehā" resulting instead in "anxiety and guilt".[77] She later describes how her interactions within te ao Māori led to her decentering herself as a Pākehā, writing:

> I was simply being the tragedy queen of my own universe – self-absorbed, inward-looking. This tendency to feel guilty about my own privilege had little value, I soon

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> discovered. I learned to identify, then laugh and dismiss my own self-focused anxieties, while never forgetting my social power and the benefits I get from it daily.[78]

In each part, Jones appears to wish to avoid guilt as either non-productive or Self-centred, when perhaps the more accurate term would be shame.

In reckoning with the fact his great-grandfather was likely at Parihaka, Shaw turns to the uncompromising words of French priest and theologian Michel Quoist, quoting "it matters not whether you are among those who hit or among those who watch, among those who perform or those who let it happen. You are all guilty, actors and spectators".[79] Shaw recognises that some if not most Pākehā prefer to see these events as "ancient history", exhorting us to "all move on" because they gain something from it – "peace and ease of mind: that lightness of being and tacit sense of relief that comes from avoiding something you know is going to be painful to confront". He acknowledges this temptation and that it is "much easier" to do so, rather than "having to reach an accommodation with a history … of the social, cultural and economic damage that has been visited upon Māori".[80]

Perhaps fittingly as a religious man, Bluck believes in the possibility of expiating guilt at the collective level: "To achieve that decolonising, that restoring, Pākehā have to start believing they can be free from all the guilt and angst that flow from denying and pretending that their history didn't happen and the treaty wasn't really sincere".[81]

From 'Being' to 'Becoming' Pākehā

A sense of working through guilt and other unpleasant feelings is discernible in the memoirs' more tentative use of 'becoming' alongside or in preference to King's more assertive 'being' Pākehā. This is most noticeable in the title of Bluck's book, *Becoming Pākehā*, which directly references King.[82] Shaw also invokes the notion of becoming, referencing John Newton's reflections on becoming Pākehā, as a riposte to King,[83] writing:

> [It] clarifies what you need to figure out and what it means to be of and from a colonial settler family, particularly one implicated in the things described in these pages. That understanding doesn't just fall into your lap. … it has to be actively sought and pieced together … I am always in the process of getting there and never arriving … I realise that arriving is not the point.[84]

Wells and Jones take a slightly different tack and aim for a becoming that *does* arrive somewhere: to endure a discomfort that arrives at a place of, if not quite comfort, then "completeness" or "liberation". Wells writes in *Dear Oliver* in relation to coming out to his parents via letter as a young man in the 1970s:

> At twenty-seven you think you know the world … Today I see life is a constant state of becoming, of essentially coming to terms with unexpected changes that go on throughout life.[85]

He comments elsewhere in the book that "[w]hen we fit into our skins it's strange how all the things that seem and look out of alignment suddenly slide together and, for the first time in our life, we look complete".[86] Jones invokes both terms in *This Pākehā Life*, writing that "[t]his book is about my making sense here, of my becoming and being Pākehā'. She adds, emphasising the end state rather than the process, that "[e]very Pākehā becomes a Pākehā in their own way, finding their own meaning for that Māori word".[87] Her own journey, after "more than sixty-five years of becoming Pākehā," has moved into a "strangely liberated" phase in which she has learned to live in a place of "permanent lively discomfort … eschewing a single

resolution of our relationship with Māori".[88] She invokes a joy in this process of becoming, asserting that "it requires and nurtures a *doubled being*: a sense of shared humanity with Māori as well as a deep sense of otherness." This fundamental tension is where she feels "truly alive, and where I make sense".[89]

The shift from 'being' to 'becoming' – or in Wells' and Jones' case, between the two terms – is philosophically significant: it marks a move away from an essentialist conception of identity – what you 'are', which is unchanging – to one that is constructed and always already in process. Rather than a fixed and natural essence, 'becoming' is a recognition that identity is constituted by linguistic, cultural and historical processes – and because these are processes of change, so identity is always in flux. The concept of 'becoming', which owes a debt to the philosopher Friedrich Nietzche, is about a critical engagement with the self in order to consciously create our lives and futures.

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche wrote, "we, however, *want to become those who we are* – the human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves". [90] Read one way, this philosophical concept of 'becoming' resists an Edenic version where if we do the work we will attain the "just and joyful future" of which Bluck writes.[91] In remaining always already in process, Pākehā strive for a horizon of a just future that can never be reached, always on the ubiquitous 'journey'. This journey is not geared towards a final destination or goal; there is no point at which one has finally 'become what they are'.

However, Nietzsche's thoughts about 'becoming' also set up another way to think about these texts that is in tension with the first reading. If 'becoming Pākehā' is about an act of Self-creation, it also runs the risk of redefining the construction of Pākehā in a way that is flattering to the person who constructs it, one that will make them 'feel better' – or "liberated" or "complete" – in their foundational relationship with Māori. This second reading opens a space to think about the limits of the work these four writers undertake.

Pākehā as a racial and cultural identity

Critical theorist and activist Mahdis Azarmandi, in her 2022 analysis of Pākehā Treaty work, argues that such work focuses on Pākehā as a *cultural* rather than a *racial* identity. The shift away from the term 'white' to 'Pākehā' could be read as providing a way for Pākehā New Zealanders to "wriggle off the hook" of acting to eliminate racial injustice, while at the same time continuing to underscore their centrality to the national narrative. Azarmandi notes that this focus is turned towards "*finding a place* for Pākehā, rather than being concerned with how to dismantle white supremacy."'[92] Azarmandi continues:

> Whiteness is in fact constitutive of Pākehā-ness, even if it is not its main feature. Understanding the politics of whiteness, rather than just one's own subjectivity, is crucial to understanding the oppressive system that racism entails.[93]

Azarmandi's emphasis on Pākehā concern to 'find a place' is significant. This concern is about both claiming a location and subject position as 'Pākehā', of constructing a place to speak from and about a place, and to take up space that could be more fruitfully held for others – not only tangata whenua, but also tauiwi of colour. Her critique here also speaks to the limits of memoir as a vehicle for activism: a focus on the individual runs the risk of leaving intact oppressive systems, which provide that particular individual a privileged place from which to speak. As lawyer and advocate Moana Jackson has commented, focusing on individuals can obscure the deeper beliefs, systems and structures that drive colonisation, which is "a *process* of

dispossession and control rather than a historical artefact" that continues in the present in "new forms".[94]

Indeed, it is possible to read parts of some of the books as almost an apologia for Pākehā. Wells, for example, in *Dear Oliver* appears to defend 'traumatised' Pākehā in his summary of the Waitangi Tribunal's findings on Ōmarunui, writing "it absents from the picture the psychological reality of the situation for Pākehā" in which anxieties had been "whipped up … to an unprecedented level". In a moment of self-reflection, he adds:

> But then I'm a descendant of one of the men who fought at Omarunui and perhaps I'd be expected to intuit how this incursion would be seen from my ancestor's point of view – a perspective entirely lacking in the Waitangi Tribunal historical assessment.[95]

Jones also provides an example in *This Pākehā Life*. Recalling her past experiences of political activism, she describes herself as wary of the term 'whiteness' in a New Zealand context, noting that it had "become weaponised as describing unavoidably and downright *bad* people, and as such the term so often worked merely to close things down". Her preference for 'Pākehā' was because it was a "relational term that opened up rather than suppressed possibilities". In her view, it also took the conversation beyond racial equality and into "Māori authority and mana in their own country".[96] Bluck is more blunt, writing in *Becoming Pākehā*:

> It's easy to colour our history white with racism to explain past wrongs, but it's much harder to find effective ways to change that legacy. The racism tag can become a recipe for paralysis and resentment. Pākehā won't join the bicultural journey until they see it's as good for them as it is for Māori.[97]

Alongside this, there is an effort to engage with and work through the legacy of colonial violence. In *The Forgotten Coast*, for example, Shaw acknowledges that the invasion of Parihaka was about more than 'just' acquiring the land:

> Parihaka was invaded because it was potent: a powerful centre of Māori authority, autonomy and protest. It was not to do with the appropriation of land (you cannot confiscate for a second time something you have already taken). The intention was to bludgeon Māori into submission. … The taking of the land was far from the least of it; but introducing pass laws, a rogue government arbitrarily suspending the rule of law, suppression of the press and the destruction of indigenous communities and their political structures: these are the acts of a government bent on annihilation.[98]

He is also careful about how he approaches the topic at all, noting:

> I need to be very careful not to treat Parihaka as an extractive industry, there to be mined for personal gain. I have learnt that we cannot 'simply help ourselves to whatever stories we like the smell and taste of', and have become familiar with the uncomfortable sensation of not always knowing where the lines are.[99]

Just another way of wriggling off the hook?

To return to the question posed in the title of this article, is this relatively recent focus on interrogating Pākehā family histories "just another way of wriggling off the hook" as Shaw puts it? Reading these four memoirs suggests the answer is both yes and no. As any Catholic (recovering or otherwise) would know – and writers with Catholic backgrounds, including King, Snedden, Consedine and Shaw, make up a significant minority of writers in this discourse on being and becoming Pākehā – the aim of confessing is to rid oneself of sin, to get rid of the guilt and resultant discomfort one has experienced, and perhaps even caused. Read in this way, one purpose for these memoirs is to provide a kind of absolution from the original

sin of foundational colonialist violence. Wells particularly can be read in this light, as he calls in *Dear Oliver* for "a widening of a lens" on our history, to make it "more empathetic to the early European migrants … and to the journeys that brought them here".[100] These types of memoir therefore run the risk of Pākehā or white people continuing to centre themselves in the national narrative and to leave existing power structures which perpetuate white supremacy intact. As Azarmandi urges, we cannot "reduce anti-racism to cultural difference, to cultural competency, or to individual decolonisation journeys and moral awakenings".[101]

However, confession is not only about 'telling the story', but also about a "something-to-be done" that expiates guilt through actions of atonement. Atonement is not, however, meant to be easy. Bluck writes of Pākehā needing to be "nudged and pushed" as well as encouraged in order to arrive in a bicultural future: "the nudging and pushing will come from the shifting landscape that they will have to accept".[102] It also involves "owning a history that requires repentance as well as pride".[103] In *This Pākehā Life,* Jones, quoting Rewi Maniapoto, writes, "[a]s New Zealanders, we are all in that eternal struggle, whether we like it or not. And we all create the nature of that struggle; it is our engagement and our challenge".[104]

Both of these things can, of course, be in play simultaneously, and speak to the central tension within this work of trying to find a way into – and start making amends for – a *collective* experience of colonisation from an *individual's* point of view. Shaw touches on this tension when he explores the question of an apology towards the end of *The Forgotten Coast*. Given his ancestors' history he feels that he needs to do something in response, writing:

> Apologies by the Crown … are one thing. But what of a descendant of a man who participated in te pāhua and benefitted from the confiscation of land? What is the process through which I apologise? Is there one? Should there be?[105]

Despite Waitangi Tribunal reports into claims by Taranaki Māori,[106] several Treaty settlements in the area,[107] and a separate reconciliation process for Parihaka outside the Treaty settlement process,[108] Shaw still feels that he, as an individual, needs to make some kind of act of atonement. By the end of the book, he has not yet determined what, if anything, this might be, and eventually lands on the need to sit with the uncomfortable feelings his research has generated, writing: "for the moment I accept that I need to live with and in the uncertainty and the discomfort. Given everything, it seems little enough to ask of myself".[109]

What other action he – and others – will take in light of this reflection remains a question to be resolved in the world outside the book. Not only Shaw, but also contemporary Pākehā readers are left in a space of ambivalence, haunted by the questions he has posed and still needing to figure out the 'something to be done' by which individual Pākehā can start to come to terms with New Zealand's colonial past. For Shaw, this has since taken the form of a further book, *The Unsettled* (2024), which tells further stories of his own and other 'long-settled' Pākehā in relation to the New Zealand Wars.[110] What else can be done still remains to be written.

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[1] Richard Shaw, *The Forgotten Coast* (Auckland: Massey University Press, 2021), 45.
[2] Patrick Snedden, *Pakeha and the Treaty: Why It's Our Treaty Too* (Auckland: Random House, 2005), 15.
[3] Snedden, *Pakeha and the Treaty*, 16.
[4] Keri Mills, 'The Bones in the Closet: Colonial Violence in Pākehā family histories', *Aftermaths: Colonialism, Violence and Memory in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific*, eds. Angela Wanhalla, Lyndall Ryan and Camille Nurka (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2023), 49.

[5] Mills, 'The Bones in the Closet', 53-4.
[6] Sister Pauline O'Regan, 'Foreword', in Robert Consedine and Joanna Consedine, *Healing our History: The Challenge of the Treaty of Waitangi*, (Auckland: Penguin, 2001), 19-20.
[7] Shaw, *The Forgotten Coast*; Peter Wells, *Dear Oliver: Uncovering a Pākehā history* (Palmerston North: Massey University Press, 2018); Alison Jones, *This Pākehā life: an unsettled memoir* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2020); John Bluck, *Becoming Pākehā: A journey between two cultures* (Auckland: HarperCollins, 2022).
[8] 'Pākehā', *Te Aka Māori Dictionary* (John C. Moorfield, 2003-2025). Accessed at: https://maoridictionary.co.nz
[9] Michael King, *Being Pakeha: An Encounter with New Zealand and the Maori Renaissance* (Auckland and London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), 12; Michael King, *Being Pakeha Now: Reflections and Recollections of a White Native* (Auckland: Penguin, 1999), 10. Anthropologist Anne Salmond has outlined differing accounts of where the term originated, ranging from a misunderstanding on the part of Captain Cook, a type of flax, an ancient people who had arrived from the sea, from a haka, or a distinction made between the world of people and the world of the atua or gods. She says that 'from the outset … Māori people were forming guesses about the nature of their extraordinary visitors … [and] it is unlikely that unanimity was quickly achieved". However, these accounts 'share the supposition … that these new arrivals were not "maori", or ordinary'. Anne Salmond, *Between Worlds: Early European Exchanges Between Maori and European 1773-1815* (Auckland: Viking, 1997), 22.
[10] Wells, *Dear Oliver*, 12.
[11] Wells, *Dear Oliver*, 12.
[12] Wells, *Dear Oliver*, 12, 33.
[13] Jones, *This Pākehā life*, 137.
[14] Jones, *This Pākehā life*, 141.
[15] Jones, *This Pākehā life,* 190.
[16] Shaw, *The Forgotten Coast*, 211.
[17] Shaw, *The Forgotten Coast*, 17-18.
[18] Bluck, *Becoming Pākehā*, 13, 172.
[19] Bluck, *Becoming Pākehā*, 160-61.
[20] Bluck, *Becoming Pākehā*, 170.
[21] Bluck, *Becoming Pākehā*, 174.
[22] Wells, *Dear Oliver*, 2018),11.
[23] Wells, *Dear Oliver*, 11.
[24] Wells explains the relationship in this way: 'When I was wrestling with the problem of how to make this book speak to the future, I found myself writing a letter to the newest member of the extended family … His name is Oliver and he lives in San Francisco, and he came, with his two mothers, to Napier. His grandmother is my cousin. My mother is his great-aunt.' Wells, *Dear Oliver*, 26-7.
[25] Wells, *Dear Oliver*, 312.
[26] Wells, *Dear Oliver*, 12.
[27] Wells, *Dear Oliver*, 313.
[28] Jones, *This Pākehā life*, 9.
[29] Jones, *This Pākehā life*, 190.
[30] Jones, *This Pākehā Life*, 173, 175.
[31] Jones, *This Pākehā Life*, 181.
[32] Jones, *This Pākehā Life*, 10.
[33] Shaw, *The Forgotten Coast*, 19.
[34] Shaw, *The Forgotten Coast*, 22.
[35] Shaw, *The Forgotten Coast*, 19.
[36] Bluck, *Becoming Pākehā,* 2.
[37] Bluck, *Becoming Pākehā,* 3.
[38] Shaw, *The Forgotten Coast*, 41-2.

[39] Shaw, *The Forgotten Coast*, 44.
[40] Shaw, *The Forgotten Coast*, 54.
[41] Shaw, *The Forgotten Coast*, 45.
[42] Christine Sleeter, 'Critical family history: situating family within contexts of power relationships', (2016) cited in Mills, 'The Bones in the Closet", 54. See also Christine Sleeter, 'Critical Family History', accessed December 29, 2023, https://www.christinesleeter.org/critical-family-history
[43] Michael King, *Being Pakeha*, 7.
[44] King, *Being Pakeha*, 11.
[45] King, *Being Pakeha*, 12.
[46] King, *Being Pakeha*, 13.
[47] Michael King, *Being Pakeha Now*, 11.
[48] King, *Being Pakeha Now*, 239.
[49] Lydia Wevers 'Being Pakeha: the politics of location', *Journal of New Zealand Studies*, No 4/5 (2006): 4-5, accessed December 29, 2023, https://ojs.victoria.ac.nz/jnzs/article/view/104/55
[50] Michael Foucault, 'What is an author?', *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology: Essential works of Foucault 1954-1984. Volume Two*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 216-7, accessed December 29, 2023, https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Foucault_Author.pdf Italics mine.
[51] Foucault, 'What is an author?', 217-8.
[52] Foucault, 'What is an author?', 219.
[53] Bluck, *Becoming Pākehā*, 57.
[54] Jones, *The Pākehā Life*, 8.
[55] Jones, *The Pākehā Life*, 9.
[56] Shaw, *The Forgotten Coast*, 18.
[57] Shaw, *The Forgotten Coast*, 12.
[58] Wells, *Dear Oliver*, 310.
[59] Jones, *This Pākehā Life*, 18.
[60] Bluck, *Becoming Pakeha*, 190.
[61] Catherine Belsey, *Tales of the Troubled Dead: Ghost Stories in Cultural History*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 6.
[62] Belsey, *Tales of the Troubled Dead*, 245.
[63] Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 190.
[64] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.
[65] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* 183.
[66] Jones *This Pākehā Life*, 58.
[67] Wells, *Dear Oliver*, 194.
[68] Bluck, *Becoming Pakeha*, 105.
[69] Bluck, *Becoming Pakeha*, 106.
[70] Shaw, *The Forgotten Coast*, 137.
[71] Shaw, *The Forgotten Coast*, 84-5.
[72] American Psychological Association, 'Speaking of Psychology: What's the difference between guilt and shame? An interview with Julie Tangney, Phd", episode 255 (September 2023). Accessed at: https://www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/guilt-shame
[73] Wells, *Dear Oliver*, 215.
[74] Wells, *Dear Oliver*, 215.
[75] Wells, *Dear Oliver*, 215.
[76] Wells, *Dear Oliver*, 216.
[77] Jones, *This Pākehā Life*, 137.
[78] Jones, *This Pākehā Life*, 162.
[79] Shaw, *The Forgotten Coast*, 44-5.
[80] Shaw, *The Forgotten Coast*, 205.
[81] Bluck, *Becoming Pākehā*, 287.

[82] Bluck, *Becoming Pākehā*, 57.
[83] John Newton, 'Becoming Pākehā', *Landfall* 28 (2009): 38-48.
[84] Shaw, *The Forgotten Coast*, 221-2.
[85] Wells, *Dear Oliver*, 109.
[86] Wells, *Dear Oliver*, 57
[87] Jones, *This Pākehā Life*, 7.
[88] Jones, *This Pākehā Life*, 10.
[89] Jones, *This Pākehā Life*, 12-3.
[90] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), 266.
[91] Bluck, *Becoming Pākehā,* 127.
[92] Mahdis Azarmandi, 'The Limits of Pākehā Treaty work', *Towards a Grammar of Race – In Aotearoa New Zealand* eds. Arcia Tecun, Lana Lopesi and Anisha Sankar (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2022), 141. Italics mine.
[93] Azarmandi, 'The Limits of Pākehā Treaty work', p 149.
[94] See Moana Jackson, 'Understanding racism in this country,' *e-Tangata*, 25 February 2018, accessed December 29, 2023, https://e-tangata.co.nz/comment-and-analysis/moana-jackson-understanding-racism-in-this-country/?fbclid=IwAR2hoI-FdrEmZ6kHFyzqOh14l3DdOYnA76V3ZMynK_uGxCFR-48xDsah7aA Moana Jackson, 'Decolonisation and the stories in the Land', *e-Tangata*, 9 May 2021, accessed December 29, 2023, https://e-tangata.co.nz/comment-and-analysis/moana-jackson-decolonisation-and-the-stories-in-the-land/
[95] Wells, *Dear Oliver*, 284.
[96] Jones, *This Pākehā Life*, 137.
[97] Bluck, *Becoming Pākehā,* 272.
[98] Shaw, *The Forgotten Coast*, 38.
[99] Shaw, *The Forgotten Coast*, 208.
[100] Wells, *Dear Oliver*, 319.
[101] Azarmandi, 'The Limits of Pākehā Treaty work', 149.
[102] Bluck, *Becoming Pākehā*, 279.
[103] Bluck, *Becoming Pākehā,* 8.
[104] Jones, *This Pākehā Life*, 227.
[105] Shaw, *Forgotten Coast*, 218.
[106] Waitangi Tribunal, *Report into the Motunui-Waitara Claim (Wai 6)*, (Wellington: Waitangi Tribunal, 1983); Waitangi Tribunal, *The Taranaki Report: Kaupapa Tuatahi (Wai 143)*, (Wellington: Legislation Direct, 1996); Waitangi Tribunal, *Taranaki Māori, the Dairying Industry and the Crown (Wai 790)*, (Wellington: Legislation Direct, 2001).
[107] See *Ngāti Ruanui Claims Settlement Act 2003,* accessed January 21, 2024, https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2003/0020/latest/whole.html *Ngāti Tama Claims Settlement Act 2003*, accessed January 21, 2024, https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2003/0126/latest/DLM233715.html#DLM233947 *Ngaa Rauru Kiitahi Claims Settlement Act 2005*, accessed January 21, 2024, https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2005/0084/latest/DLM359211.html *Ngāti Mutunga Claims Settlement Act 2006*, accessed January 21, 2024, https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2006/0061/latest/whole.html *Taranaki Iwi Claims Settlement Act 2016*, accessed January 21, 2024, https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2016/0095/32.0/DLM6684825.html *Te Atiawa Claims Settlement Act 2016*, accessed January 21, 2024: https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2016/0094/latest/DLM6460002.html#DLM6460015 *Ngāti Maru (Taranaki) Claims Settlement Act 2022*, accessed January 21, 2024, https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2022/0009/latest/whole.html

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[108] Parihaka, 'Parihaka Reconciliation Process', accessed January 21, 2024, https://parihaka.maori.nz/parihaka-reconciliation-process/ and *Te Ture Haeata ki Parihaka 2019 | Parihaka Reconciliation Act 2019*, accessed January 21, 2024, https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2019/0060/latest/versions.aspx

[109] Shaw, *Forgotten Coast*, p 219.

[110] Richard Shaw, *The Unsettled: Small stories of colonisation*, (Palmerston North: Massey University Press, 2024).