

Becoming Tangata Tiriti: Working with Māori, Honouring the Treaty.

By Avril Bell.

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Avril Bell's *Becoming Tangata Tiriti: Working with Māori, Honouring the Treaty* arrived at a moment when the political ground it described was actively shifting. Published in August 2024, it appeared as the incoming coalition government's Treaty Principles Bill was generating fierce public debate in Aotearoa, and just months before over 40,000 people – many of us identifying as Tangata Tiriti – marched on Parliament to protest it in the hīkoi mō te Tiriti in November of that year. In the months that followed, I recognised one of Bell's central arguments in news and social media commentary on the coalition government's hostility to Te Tiriti o Waitangi: that non-Māori (Pākehā especially) need to learn the art of stepping up and stepping back as we work with Māori toward a Tiriti-based society.

Becoming Tangata Tiriti draws on interviews with twelve non-Māori New Zealanders – professionals, activists, educators, most of whom are Pākehā – who are doing the slow, relational work of decolonisation. Te Tiriti o Waitangi is the foundation rather than the object of analysis, with Bell's sociological perspective evident in the stories she chooses to foreground. The interviews are organised thematically into eight chapters that trace a journey of becoming, from first encounters with te ao Māori and relationship-building, through the work of engaging with Māori and other non-Māori, to the central paradox of stepping up and stepping back, and finally to questions of identity and belonging as Tangata Tiriti. Within each chapter, Bell places her interviewees' stories in conversation with one another and relevant scholarship, an analytical choice that draws out patterns and invites readers into an ongoing, un-settled conversation.

Bell writes beautifully and her accessible arguments will be immediately useful to the audience she has in mind. Her discussion of 'Pākehā paralysis' in chapter two – the anxiety, the fear of getting it wrong, the tendency to avoid rather than act that might also apply to other non-Māori, but 'is particularly a Pākehā problem' (p. 24) – will be recognisable to anyone who has watched students or colleagues struggle with exactly this. Drawing on Alex Hotere-Barnes, Bell frames experiences of paralysis as prompts for self-reflection and 'catalysts to go further' (p. 26). The chapters that follow offer a range of ways that her interviewees have sat with, and worked through, discomfort.

In chapter three Bell introduces the concept of stamina as a method for overcoming Pākehā paralysis, utilising American sociologist Robin DiAngelo's white fragility framework to explain why Pākehā freeze and retreat in conversations about racism. It is a generative concept and Bell engages DiAngelo carefully, distinguishing her interviewees' discomfort from white fragility and adapting the concept to a New Zealand context. For Bell, stamina is built through discomfort rather than despite it; her interviewees model a patient, mistake-laden commitment to relationships that is itself the work of decolonisation. I noticed a quiet contrast with the local instances of stamina also present in the book: that of many Māori, who persist generation after generation in efforts to

get the Crown to honour Te Tiriti and endure the ‘endless blunders and insensitivities’ (p. 34) that her interviewees describe throughout; and that of her Samoan and Chinese interviewees, whose positionalities require different work. Tangata Tiriti, especially those from the dominant Pākehā group whose values are the norm, can choose to step up. Those who do will likely recognise the asymmetry as they see themselves in the stories Bell has curated.

I kept returning to a question the book opens but does not fully answer: what else is at stake for Pākehā in the fear of getting things wrong? Former New Plymouth mayor Andrew Judd, one of two identifiable interviewees, reflects on the privilege of being able to walk away from Tiriti work, of having the option to ‘just forget it’ because, as a Pākehā, ‘there is no consequence’ (p. 68). If there is no consequence to giving it up, what generates the paralysis? One possibility is that engaging risks something social – belonging, comfort, the ease of moving through the world without having to see yourself as ‘white’. That is whiteness as a structure, and it is something we Pākehā tend to avoid discussing in Aotearoa. Bell’s interview with Heather illustrates this tension. An activist working for a Māori-led research centre, Heather distinguishes between ‘Pākehā’ – a ‘heart and soul place’ associated with Tiriti work and her family’s seven generations in Aotearoa – and ‘white’, which takes her to a ‘head space’ of privilege, power, and structural injustice (pp. 112-113). Bell analyses this with care, noting that for Heather, whiteness is what Pākehā fight against, while ‘Pākehā’ is the positive relational identity we fight for. I would have liked to see Bell hold this tension and lean into the structural analysis of whiteness that ‘white’ points toward.

Becoming Tangata Tiriti is a welcome resource for Pākehā and other non-Māori who are at the beginning of their journey, or who are looking for language for work they are already doing. It is what I will assign to undergraduate Pākehā students struggling with Pākehā paralysis and wondering what they can do in pursuit of decolonisation and social transformation. A future book might extend this conversation to the experience of migrants who are not yet New Zealanders, whose relationship to Te Tiriti is newer and less settled – people for whom the ‘becoming’ has a different starting point.