

Book Review

Melinda Webber, *Walking the Space Between: Identity and Māori/Pākehā*.

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Reviewed by Karlo Mila-Schaaf

Walking the Space Between is one of those rare scholarly books that moves effortlessly between the political and the personal, the academic and the intimate, the theoretical and the freshness of actual lived experiences. What does it mean to be Māori in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand? What does it mean to be Pākehā? Perhaps the most interesting and problematic question of all is what does it mean to be both? Melinda Webber takes the reader through six personal stories of people of both Māori and Pākehā heritage. A key strategy of the book is to reproduce these identity stories in a largely word-for-word way, thus they comprise a core component of the book.

It is the distinctiveness of these voices and the personal stories, which in a sense “speak for themselves,” that stayed with me long after I had read the book. Although as a sociologist I am tied to my own canon and its ideas associated with similar territory and my “preferred” theorists, Webber has an easy touch and a skilful way of working through the literature that has amassed in the area. While the theoretical component is not dense or detailed, it feels right for the size and style of book and friendly for the lay reader. Webber moves with ease through the literature, settling definitively and purposively in a place that values mutuality, connection, and inter-relationship.

While the theoretical material and associated literature is reviewed swiftly and skilfully, it is the small hurts and victories within the personal stories that stick. The identity anxieties, the crushing realisations, the pragmatic decisions, the many compromises, as well as the self-determined commitments to conscious positions of identification, leave an imprint long after the book has been read. To choose relatively full accounts of identity stories was a wise strategy on Webber’s part. It enables the distinctive personalities, voices, and life stories to emerge. There is something about using people’s own words and ways of sequencing and ordering experiences that leaves a very clear impression of both highly individualised experiences as well as common issues and themes. The narratives are rich enough to provide a sense of how participants contextualise their own identity resolutions and the ways they give meaning and coherence to their choices.

The narratives are foreshadowed by Webber's own lived experience and personal story as a person of Pākehā and Māori descent. Her own identity story begins the book and frames all that is to follow without forcing it to walk the fine line of her particular lived experience. The personal stories that follow emerge from quality conversations with Webber, who as first audience was able to create conditions of comfort and openness so that people could talk freely and intimately about their own experiences.

Webber is unapologetically present in the text without appearing intrusive, but is clear about and conscious of her own position and the way the material ought to be organised. Her personal positioning was reassuring to me as a reader. I did not feel that I was reading anything held at arm's length, feigning objectivity, or that it was interpreted in a manner that was out of kilter with what was said or felt. The book feels tight. The issues feel nailed, although deliberately unresolved where complexity and what Appadurai (1991) calls the "woof of human motion" do not allow simple or static resolutions. Webber does not miss a beat. Importantly, while it is clear that she is aware of the issues in an almost inside-out kind of way, she creates space for the contradictory to be present alongside the common refrains.

Webber names the themes that emerge elegantly, writing of maintaining borders, building bridges, and naming self. The whole book in a sense is a project of naming self, naming something that transcends the binaries between Māori and Pākehā, the lived experiences and embodiments which trouble influential ethnic categories that seek to "same" and "other" us, connect and divide, and culturally organise New Zealand both on the ground and in our imaginations.

The blurb on the back of the book points out that at least one in ten of us now identifies with more than one ethnic group. What does it mean to be Māori and Pākehā in Aotearoa New Zealand today? As one participant put it, for him being Pākehā meant the opposite of being Māori. We do live in a country where much societal discourse (particularly in the media) tends to polarise Māori and Pākehā as separate interest groups that are often politicised and presented as oppositional and exclusive. Therefore, to write and speak openly about the experiences of being both is threatening. It is threatening in the way it disrupts powerful binaries that culturally organise much of who and what we are as a nation. In many ways, we rely on these binaries to inform our beliefs about the nature of our (ethnic) self and the (ethnic) other. The penalties associated with disrupting these well-established polarities—to confuse the matter, to mix it up, by being both (or to playfully misquote Shakespeare, to be and not to be), at the same time, in the same body—is a large part of the focus of the book.

In many ways this makes it an important book, more important than it might at first seem. The subject and language of half-castes, miscegenation, hybridity, and race-mixing has had a long history of being taboo, shrouded in silences, with few terms considered appropriate for current usage. Webber nominates hybridity, believing it capable of explaining the unique position of those who are of Māori and Pākehā descent in Aotearoa today. However, it is worth noting that five of her six participants identified themselves solely as Māori, and only one identified in an openly hybrid or hyphenated kind of way. Still, even as I write the seemingly definitive and singular category, “solely Māori,” I am aware of the mixture of experiences, emotions, and descent lines that sit under this umbrella term. My acute awareness of this is in part due to Webber’s skilful exposé of the complicated and entangled experiences that can lead to this identification. If Webber’s aim is to render what it means to identify as Māori as more complex, then she succeeds, even though I did not come away completely convinced that hybridity would serve as the term of choice to capture this. However, I acknowledge that semantics are a very small part of a very rich subject area.

It becomes increasingly clear that identifications as Māori involve complex and changing negotiations of self with many others. The politics of authenticity rears its head early on in the book: “Who is a real Māori?” What are the repercussions, should you operate in ways that divert from salient ethnic markers? What is to become of the person who confounds the ethnic categories and must walk the thin line between essentialist identities and separate ethnic projects? Many decades after “race” has been scientifically discredited, the pervasive and enduring significance of phenotype and biological appearance is clear. While ethnic identities are supposedly more about choice these days, Judith Butler’s (1995) observation that identity carries the burden of recognition holds true.

While many of the participants might choose to identify as Māori, their “Pākehā-looking” appearances meant that in many cases, they were not identified back. Many also pointed to the rigid range of ethnic markers which were considered to be authentic indicators of being Māori, in particular te reo and the ability to speak the Māori language fluently. Many had to manage the consequences of what it meant to be different, or to be outside the range. As one participant said, “I don’t fit into that stereotypical Māori mold.”

To break the mold, blur the boundaries, to render the stereotype as the impoverished and unimaginative image it really is, means challenging some powerful and pervasive ideas about what it means to be Māori and what it means to be Pākehā. At its most raw, this is a dynamic of who is in, and who is out, and the largely

unexamined rationale of “why?” The murkiness and discomfort of having to wade through the often-unexamined why, or choosing to skirt some of its edges, or selecting a vantage point or specific battleground, form the identity territory covered in the book. Webber has chosen people who have often navigated the space in-between by walking different lines at different times of their lives. One participant, Matt, talks of deliberately avoiding or eluding a Māori identification, choosing to illuminate another part of his heritage (Tahitian, Rarotongan). But as he learns, “To be ashamed of a part of your life is *mamae*” (pain). He later chooses to wear a *moko* and tattoo his identity visually on his face so that it cannot be hidden.

It is to New Zealand’s discredit that these identity stories do encapsulate so much *mamae*. The message that participants heard and felt from a very early age outside of safe family environments was that to be Māori was to be something undesirable, something not worth being. Colour-blind or empty ethnic choices of neutral nothingness were often easier in hostile environments. As self-esteem survival strategies, a number of participants chose to be Māori at home and something else at school. Many school environments were not enabling or equipping. The role of tertiary institutions as more positive and informed spaces, providing valuable knowledge often withheld at a school level, came to the fore in a number of stories.

Ultimately, these are identity stories of negotiation, dependent on knowledge and resources, showing that identifications changed over time and were fluid and flexible, although always subject to the politics of recognition. As one participant said, she has “much more *whakaaro* [thought] behind” what it means to be Māori after a lifetime of negotiating and having to deal with and react to what, after reading through the stories, clearly strikes you as being “other people’s stuff” (and problem). To be privy to the way people have thought through these issues, educated themselves in different ways, informed their thinking, and found ways of interacting with dignity in contexts of often overt hostility and racism feels like a privilege. The conversations feel precious. I pay tribute to Melinda Webber, whose role as primary researcher (and more importantly, primary audience) feels pivotal to the success of the book. Her calm, clear, conscious presence can be felt throughout the text, from the first page to the end.

Webber walks the right line of in-between. She reveals without revealing too much. While the participants are present, almost breathing off the page, they do not feel vulnerable or exposed. Still, we rarely talk freely or openly about these issues in our country. Pondering this, one has to speculate that possibly it is a rarity for us to collectively create conditions of safety for these conversations to be spoken into. So it

is hard not to feel lucky to be the proverbial fly on the wall, eavesdropping on insider talk about what it means to be both Pākehā and Māori. The quality of the conversations, and the fact that participants felt a high level of comfort to talk in relatively unfettered ways about the issues associated with dual heritage, as well as Webber's own clarity and consciousness about the issues, are what makes this book successful.

One of the chapters is headed with the whakataukī (proverb): E mihi ki te iwi. Nō rātou tēnei kōrero. This translates as "Acknowledge the people. This story is theirs." This, for me, was the resounding moral and message of the book. In a context of colonisation, what it means to be indigenous is highly contested and often under attack. What it means to be Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand is contested in all sorts of ways, and subject to many external ideas, many of them negative. Therefore, to be internally divisive and, in particular, to openly identify with being Pākehā, means to disrupt and perhaps disappoint an important ethnic project. Once again, the conversations and theme of the book can be perceived as threatening in the way they might be seen to undermine a unified and exclusive Māori cultural imaginary.

Webber sidesteps much of this potential political fall-out by reimagining and reconfiguring the boundaries between cultural imaginaries as inclusive and interdependent, emphasising the spaces in between, as many theorists before her have, most notably Bhabha. More than most, Webber constructs and creates this in-between space as shared and characterised by mutuality rather than as a border zone of identity conflict where ethnic differences are rehearsed and boundaries fought over. One comes away with a feeling of both—mutuality as well as battleground. One gets a sense of what it means to be so close to the firing lines of the identity action, as well as a sense of the skill and choices involved in walking the fine line of in-between.

References

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