

## *Book Review*

### *Being Maori in the City: Indigenous Everyday Life in Auckland*

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## Book Review

*Being Maori in the City: Indigenous Everyday Life in Auckland* by Natacha Gagné. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. 368 pp. \$32.95 paper.

*Being Maori in the City* by Natacha Gagné attempts a comprehensive examination of everyday life for Maori (Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand) living in the country's largest city, Auckland. The author identifies herself as *Québécoise*, a resident of the province of Quebec, Canada, of French and Indigenous ancestry. She has produced a thorough and well-theorized piece of work that will serve as a useful introduction to anyone interested in the identities and politics of Indigenous people living in an urban setting. She outlines the events that led her to journey to Aotearoa New Zealand, and acknowledges those with whom she worked and from whom she took advice. As a non-Maori and an outsider to New Zealand society, she describes important details in her acknowledgements that clarify her motivations and, more importantly, her mandate for doing this work – all important considerations, particularly for Maori people who may read the book.

The book draws on research conducted through a series of visits to Aotearoa New Zealand from 2001 to 2011. A number of data sources is drawn upon, primary among them a series of interviews Gagné conducted with 108 Maori residents of Auckland. Other kinds of data include field notes from visits to *marae* and other important sites, along with a range of academic and fictive literature that speaks of Maori experiences in an urban setting.

The book begins with a comprehensive summary of important events occurring in the early 2000s that were shaping Maori in various ways. The social and political machinations that were key at this time are covered in good detail, while the narrative also sets out what readers can expect to find in each chapter of the book. Gagné also introduces her interpretive frame and primary thesis – “universes of meanings” – and seeks to elucidate this thesis through key Maori social structures: *whanau* (in its broadest interpretation, family) and *marae* (an esteemed gathering site).

Chapter 1 gives a succinct description of Aotearoa New Zealand history. This sets the context for future analyses and covers key political episodes (for instance, the Treaty of Waitangi, the Land Wars, *Kīngitanga*, and Maori political representation). This chapter is particularly focused on the “urban drift” of Maori from rural to urban areas after WWII. While there have been critiques of the passive nature of these changes (as opposed to more active forces such as a conscious decision or forced migration), the mass movement of Maori people for better employment and educational and social opportunities is well-documented – and as the author points out, continues still.

Chapter 2 describes in depth urban Maori developments and the complexity and adaptability of the Maori social structures that facilitate them. Here the author also begins to introduce her research data with important and appropriate supporting comments. Maori, and indeed many urban-based Indigenous people, will find these excerpts warm

and familiar. Of particular interest are the nuanced analyses surrounding the concepts of “home” and “comfort” as experienced by research participants.

Chapter 3 begins to explore the complex albeit commonplace presence of marae in urban settings. Again, this will serve as a good introduction to the concept of marae for those unfamiliar with that cultural setting. The vast utility of marae – as meeting place, as symbol, as landscape, as sanctuary, as community hub – experienced and enjoyed by most New Zealanders, Maori and non-Maori, is explored here. Again, participants’ talk is employed appropriately to give nuance and dexterity to the key points.

Chapter 4 continues on the theme of the importance of the “house,” broadening out from marae as sites of formality and ceremony to informal and more regularly occupied spaces of everyday life. The overlapping natures of the urban family house and the conventional marae in performing certain cultural functions of meeting, sheltering and sharing are particularly interesting and germane.

Chapter 5 entails a thorough exploration of the concept of *whanau* (family). Maori understandings of whanau are explained in good detail and with the broadest interpretations. Recent conceptualizations of whanau as not just collections of genetically related individuals (*whakapapa whanau*), but those connected by a *kaupapa* or a common purpose (i.e., members of sports clubs), are also discussed. There are informed and accurate descriptions of key values (i.e., love, guardianship, care, reciprocity, responsibility), as well as patterns of language and behaviour that govern family life for Maori whanau.

Chapter 6 explores the “universes of meanings” ideas in more depth. Detailed background information about the anthropological use of this phrase is included in the Introduction, and rereading it may make this chapter easier to understand for the uninitiated. Perhaps as a member of Maori whanau myself, I find the explanations and definitions as well as the offered example scenario familiar and rather common-sense in nature. Nevertheless, the “universes of meanings” approach seeks to focus a nuanced set of cultural meanings on particular issues, in this case on the issue of resolving whanau conflict.

The challenge posed by articulating Maori and “mainstream” universes of meanings as inherently distinct from each other is taken up in Chapter 7. The detailed accounting given of *kaupapa whanau*, its similarities to universes of meanings for *whakapapa whanau*, and the distinction between these and Pakeha universes of meanings attempt to explain this through a “politics of differentiation.” Also discussed are the ways in which official policies of biculturalism in Aotearoa New Zealand have increased the importance, visibility and symbolic power of Maori universes of meanings, and at the same time enabled racial resentment and a backlash against Maori initiatives, often reinforcing a politics of differentiation. Other than the cultural authenticity arguments (who is and is not a “real” Maori), which the author does explore, this sets up a key problematic in that the politics of differentiation tend to focus on the party perceived as “different.” The “mainstream” then often remains unexplored, the implication being that it is universal, rigid and unchanging. The critical question then becomes, “Different from what?”

The book is well-written and, while the language is quite academic, it is relatively accessible. It will appeal to any reader with an interest in urban realities for Maori people specifically and Indigenous people generally. Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, students, social science educators, tribal leaders, urban planners and Indigenous leadership in urban settings will all find this book illuminating. There is, however, no active engagement in the book with Indigenous methodology development, a well-established movement in the conduct of research and the delivery of services in Aotearoa New Zealand, commonly known as “kaupapa Maori.” This may lessen the book’s utility to Indigenous scholars and students interested in these epistemic developments.

The coverage of the relevant issues and events of import to urban Maori is comprehensive, so my suggestions regarding what might have strengthened the book are relatively modest. Nonetheless, giving greater emphasis to the “cultural renaissance” and in particular to the movements of *Nga Tamatoa* and the key events in which they participated would have been welcome, as they were crucial in identifying and cementing identity markers of urban Maori. This culminated in what Nairn and McCreanor (1990, 306) identified as an emerging discursive trope for the non-Maori public that could polarize Maori people as either “good Maori or bad Maori.” Good Maori were those who were happy with their lot, did not complain, and were law-abiding, polite, and hard-working. From the mid-1970s, these articulations began to be used much more widely to describe rural Maori people. Bad Maori were often differentiated from these people and were considered poor, lazy, young, aggressive, inclined to protest and unrest – and, increasingly, urban. These representations of Maori as good or bad continue to this day, with the more recent addition of a cultural authenticity trope (i.e., that rural Maori are “real” Maori and urban Maori are not).

The participants, data and analysis are very focused on Maori who are relatively recent migrants to the city, either having arrived there from rural environments themselves or being children of migrants. This does tend to overlook the experiences of many whanau who have resided in Auckland for upwards of four generations. Greater exploration of what changes over time may have meant to these whanau might have broadened the analyses.

Overall, this is a comprehensive examination of everyday life for Maori whanau living in urban Auckland. *Being Maori in the City* provides an informative and useful introduction to the lived experiences of urban Maori. The nuanced explanations of key concepts like home, comfort, family, identity, and group solidarity will not only assist readers in understanding Maori people, but also give useful insight into the lives of Indigenous people in similar urban environments. Readers interested in how social, political and cultural adaptations may have an impact on cultural identity for the increasing number of Maori moving to and currently residing in Australian cities may also find this book insightful.

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