

“Trans-ancestral Māori are Māori!” An alternative history

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[Image credit: David Walker/Stuff]

There is a class of people who suffer from psychiatric disorders to do with their body or appearance. Those with ‘body integrity identity disorder’ suffer the desire to amputate healthy limbs. Those with ‘body dysmorphic disorder’ suffer from obsessive thoughts about their bodies or appearance; this disorder can lead to obsessive compulsive disorder and eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia. Those with ‘gender identity disorder’ (reclassified as ‘gender dysphoria’ in 2013) suffer the desire to change their primary and/or secondary sex characteristics, or gender expression.

Now imagine – contrary to the facts – that one disorder that also existed in this class was ‘ancestry identity disorder’. Those with this disorder, imagine, suffer from the desire to change their ancestry. There could be a group of Pākehā people who have this disorder, and therefore strongly desire to become Māori. Indeed, some might express this desire by saying that they are already Māori, and are frequently socially wronged because they are not recognized as such. Some might say they have always been Māori, even if they’ve lived as Pākehā for their whole lives and only just ‘come out’ as suffering from ancestry identity disorder.

Let’s imagine what things would be like, in New Zealand, if the debate over such people’s rights were unfolding in the same way as the debate over transgender rights.

In this alternative history, up until a few years ago there were very small numbers of people who suffered from ancestry identity disorder. Clinicians tried a variety of approaches to help those people, and nothing much worked, except for social transition. This was a high-cost treatment, because it involved expensive and difficult surgeries to modify skin colour, hair, and facial features. But such transitions generally brought a very high rate of satisfaction. ‘Detransitioners’ – people who transitioned from Pākehā to Māori but then came to regret it and transitioned back to Pākehā – were rare.

Then, recently, there was a social movement to ‘de-pathologize’ ancestry identity disorder. Campaigners argued that people should be free to express themselves as any ancestry they like, and that ideas about rigid ancestry categories were outdated and constraining. It shouldn’t matter whether a person suffers from ancestral identity disorder; everyone should be free to claim the ancestry that they feel is the best fit for them. Biologists took to the internet proclaiming that ‘ancestry is a spectrum’. There are not just Pākehā people, who have no Māori ancestry, and Māori people, who have at least one Māori ancestor, they argued. Rather there’s a whole rainbow of people who are more and less Māori. Whether you are Māori should be more a matter of how you feel than what the facts are.

Campaigners proposed that the legal category of Māori ancestry be removed in law, and replaced with ancestry-identification. This would have the effect of making people free to choose what their ancestry is. It would also have the effect that legal provisions put in place to mitigate the historical oppression of Māori people, and to advance Māori interests in New Zealand, where they experience a range of negative social outcomes, would then be open to Pākehā people who feel Māori; even if they do not speak the Māori language, have no understanding of Māori traditions or culture, and have no Māori family, friends, tribal affiliation, or community. “Trans-ancestral Māori are Māori!”, campaigners chanted at protests, insisted on social media, and plastered around the cities and towns of New Zealand on posters and stickers. Trans-ancestral Māori adopted traditional Māori names, and campaigned to make it a hate crime for anyone to refer to them by their English names.

Pākehā people who did not suffer from ancestry identity disorder were quick to show support for their trans-ancestral Māori comrades, insisting that Māori people include trans-ancestral Māori in all Māori activities and events. Any exclusion was heavily socially sanctioned, with accusations of trans-ancestral-phobia, hatred, and bigotry. Some campaigners claimed that Pākehā people suffering from ancestral identity disorder were actually more oppressed than Māori, because they were oppressed in all the same ways as Māori people and had to suffer the added indignity of not being recognized as Māori. Many Māori people agreed with this, perplexingly, and joined the large contingent of Pākehā activists angrily insisting that trans-ancestral Māori be included in all Māori activities and events.

Some Māori were unhappy about this proposal. They said that Pākehā people who feel Māori are not Māori. They expressed puzzlement about what it could even mean to ‘feel Māori’, and worried that some of the trans-ancestral Māori expressed their ancestry-identity in a way that resembled culturally offensive stereotypes. Some suggested that we shouldn’t call such people ‘trans-ancestral Māori’, because this conceded that they were in some sense Māori, and should instead call them ‘trans-ancestrally-identified Pākehā’. Others said that they could not in good conscience call Pākehā people by traditional Māori names, because they felt the adoption of a Māori name to be a form of cultural appropriation entirely in keeping with colonial appropriation of indigenous cultures, and they wouldn’t be made complicit in it.

A few said that they didn’t see any difference between trans-ancestral Māori presenting as Māori and ‘blackface’, the racist practice where white people dress up as people of colour for parties or parades (‘our identities are not costumes!’, they say). Some worried that there was ‘social contagion’ around being trans-ancestrally Māori, and that this would lead to higher rates of detransition than we’d seen in the past. Medical technology does a somewhat clumsy job of transition; it’s even clumsier at detransition. Some of the effects of transition are irreversible, and leave detransitioners very badly-off. Others worried about taking Pākehā children’s claims about feeling Māori too seriously. After all, children go through stages, and especially young children don’t have a firm grasp on what’s possible. Merely seeing lots to admire about Māori culture doesn’t necessarily mean that Pākehā children are Māori. That Pākehā culture is impoverished makes it understandable that some people would want to opt out, but why not work to transform Pākehā culture, rather than claim that everyone unhappy with it must be Māori?

Yet others simply wanted to hold off on legal changes in New Zealand until there was a better understanding of the impacts of ancestry-identification replacing ancestry in law. Perhaps, they suggested, ancestry-identification could be one category, and ancestry in the traditional sense could be another, and there could be a clear set of cases where Māori would not be expected to include trans-ancestral Māori? Perhaps, they suggested, scholarships reserved for Māori people, or marae-based housing, or the ability to register on the Māori electoral roll, should remain exclusively for people with Māori ancestry, but other events and activities could be opened up to trans-ancestral Māori?

If you’re reading this and thinking that these all sound like perfectly reasonable concerns, then congratulations! – you’re the equivalent of a ‘TERF’ (this was historically an acronym used in place of ‘trans-exclusionary radical feminist’, but has taken on a life of its own in contemporary usage as a term of abuse for gender critical people and people opposed to self-identification for sex, whether they’re

radical feminists or not). Indeed, if you agreed that there's good reason to say 'trans-ancestrally-identified Pākehā' rather than 'trans-ancestral Māori', you're on the side of one of the most controversial 'TERFs' in the world, Meghan Murphy of *Feminist Current*. Murphy has just been permanently banned from Twitter for misgendering Jonathan Yaniv, the Canadian trans woman extorting compensation from beauticians who refused to give him a Brazilian wax (the editorial policy of *Feminist Current* is to use 'trans-identified male' in place of 'trans woman').

You can try to wriggle out of your newfound status as a 'TERF' (or 'TERF' sympathizer) by arguing that race and gender are very different, but this will be a challenge.

One difference between them is that gender has a more solid biological basis (in sex). Sex is bimodal (almost everyone is straightforwardly either male or female), and female people are gendered by others as feminine, male people as masculine. Race is more elusive: researchers have found that there is more variation within an apparent racial group than between two apparent racial groups. This difference in naturalistic basis suggests that race is a better candidate than gender for being a matter of self-identification. Yet progressives tend to have exactly the opposite intuitions about this: there is something seriously objectionable about racial self-identification, but gender self-identification should have our unwavering support.

A second difference is that gender dysphoria is a real condition, while ancestry identity disorder is not. But not all trans people have gender dysphoria, just as in our alternative history, not all trans-ancestral Māori have ancestry identity disorder. For those who do, this would seem to justify accommodations such as sympathy and understanding, and adequate provisions for safety (such as third spaces), not necessarily exceptionless inclusion in women-only spaces and access to women-only legal protections and provisions (in Māori activities and events, and access to legal protections and provisions for Māori people). For those who don't have dysphoria, it's not clear that a mere preference that a male has for being a woman (that a Pākehā person has for being a Māori person) justifies anything at all.

A third difference between race and gender is that when it comes to at least some racial groups, there's such a thing as culture; the practices or traditions that people from that racial group have. The larger and more heterogeneous the racial group, the less there is likely to be a common culture (or the more that such a common culture actually comes from a common religion). New Zealand Māori are a racial group that have a common culture (and this is true even if some Māori people choose not to participate in that culture). This gives content to what it might be that a Pākehā person with ancestry identity disorder identifies with; when she says she feels Māori (or is Māori, or has always been Māori) we can understand her as saying she feels an affinity with Māori culture (or is someone for whom that culture is a good fit, or has always been someone for whom that culture is a good fit). I don't think that's sufficient to make her Māori, which is why even if ancestry identity disorder was a real disorder I wouldn't think trans ancestral Māori were Māori (and certainly wouldn't expect Māori people to accept this claim being rammed down their throats by trans-ancestral activists).

There are, admittedly, many interesting questions to ask here, about the status of Pākehā people who participate in Māori culture. A paper for the Ministry of Social Development in 2004 found that 1% of those claiming to have Māori ethnicity in the previous year's census did not also have Māori ancestry (Kukutai 2004). Who are these people? Perhaps there is a good case for treating as Māori Pākehā people who were adopted by Māori families, or who married into Māori families (some tribes in New Zealand do something like this). This is for Māori communities to decide. But even these cases are very different to cases of Pākehā people who were not adopted, did not marry in, do not speak the language, have no sophisticated understanding of Māori culture, etc. (For a recent high profile case of ancestry without culture, see Astor 2018). This might imply that trans women who transitioned early, and who pass as women, have a stronger claim to being treated as women (because they have spent a longer time being treated as women by society).

Notice that again, race does better than gender in this parallel. There are no practices or traditions that women as a group have, that could give content to what a person with gender dysphoria identifies with. That is why so many women have responded to trans activists' claims with puzzlement: what does it mean to feel like a woman? This is just as there are no practices or traditions that people of a large and heterogeneous racial group – like 'Indians', or 'Africans' – have. Racial groups that don't correspond with cultural groups are just like sex class groups in this respect.

New Zealand Labour MP Louisa Wall has been recorded saying that she doesn't want any 'fucking TERFs' at the Pride Parade (November 2018). She's not the only MP who has been outright dismissive of radical feminists' concerns with the legal shift to sex self-identification. But everyone who thinks it's reasonable to treat 'TERFs' in the same way we treat Nazis or Mens' Rights Activists should consider whether they really want to accept that trans-ancestral Māori (i.e. Pākehā who feel Māori) really are Māori. If they don't, then it remains to be answered why radical feminists should have to accept that trans women (i.e. male people who feel like women) really are women.

In 2017, Rebecca Tuvell's paper 'In Defence of Transracialism' caused a huge controversy. She argued that we should accept transgender identities, and that gender and race are parallel cases. From that, she concluded that we should accept 'transracial' identities. This upset two groups of people. One was people of colour strongly opposed to transracialism (the most prominent case of which was white American Rachel Dolezal identifying as African American). The other was trans people, worried that people would read Tuvell's argument as a *reductio ad absurdum* against trans identities: given that we should be opposed to transracialism, and given that race and gender are parallel cases, we should reject trans identities.

I'm not making an argument as strong as this reductio. I think that so long as we understand trans identities either in terms of dysphoria about sex, or as dysphoria or discomfort about gender understood in some suitable way, we should absolutely accept transgender identities. I just think that we should keep sex and gender identity distinct in law, and not give up sex-based legal categories and protections in favour of gender identity -based categories and protections. The vulnerability of trans women does not displace or outweigh the vulnerability of female people. A progressive society should work to mitigate both the oppression of female people and the disadvantage of trans people, without trading the former off for the latter.

References

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