



Nā Holly Bodman

Ko Whaea Kēkē te uku | Aunty Ally: The Māori Unicorn

At the top of the book pile on my bedside table is *Becoming Tangata Tiriti* by Avril Bell. Launched in August, it's a treasure-trove of wisdom for non-Māori – and particularly Pākehā – allies who are “seeking to contribute to a treaty-based transformation of Aotearoa New Zealand.”[1] The book draws on material from interviews Bell conducted with 12 non-Māori New Zealanders around the motu who are doing Tiriti-honouring mahi in fields spanning local government, the arts, tertiary education, and activism.

The book is written thematically, and while at times I wanted to read more about the unique stories of the participants, the thematic approach is gold: Bell distils different aspects of participants' experiences into concepts and metaphors which gives us tools to understand our own experiences as tauiwī, and the language to articulate and navigate ally-based work.

One of the gold nuggets is the metaphor of the Māori unicorn, attributed to Aroha Gilling (Te Whānau-a-Apanui). The Māori unicorn speaks to the “cultural heavy lifting”[2] that Māori are often required to do in working for non-Māori organisations. Gilling shares, “Being a Māori unicorn means you're the only source of Māori knowledge in your office or area. You field all manner of enquiries, some appropriate, some appalling, and you spend a great deal of time and energy navigating through these situations. You weigh up interactions, gauge intent and understanding, pick your battles and try to maintain mana and integrity. You are, in other words, expected to be an extraordinary creature of myth and legend.”[3]

This metaphor gave me cause to reflect on past interactions with Māori colleagues within school-based contexts. Looking back, I can see that while I consciously brought attention to my interactions with external Māori organisations by applying *tītautaka* (tea towel tanga) – the principle of reciprocal relationship-building which happens when we pick up a tea towel on a marae – I undoubtedly contributed to the cultural heavy lifting of *kaiako hoa mahi* (teaching colleagues). I can recall numerous instances when I expected colleagues to help me with things such as translations or *mātauraka* relevant to a new unit I was designing, or with co-designing and co-facilitating workshops on culturally sustaining pedagogy for beginning teachers. No doubt they tolerated me because they saw value in the work I was doing, but my requests were clearly outside of their job description. In focusing on what I wanted to achieve, I completely lost sight of the impact on their workloads.

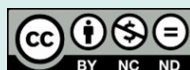
While the Pākehā world conditions us to prioritise the aims of a project, the Māori world prioritises the relationships with those we work with. As Bell summarises, “from a Māori perspective, the relationship is the thing, the project is a focus for building and maintaining the relationship rather than vice versa.”[4] In working for *Kōia te Mātauraka*, I'm privileged to have the opportunity to practice placing relationships at the centre, and my hope is that through taking on the heavy lifting of curriculum design I can share some of the cultural load with my colleagues, rather than adding to it.

[1] Bell, A. (2024). *Becoming Tangata Tiriti: Working with Māori, Honouring the Treaty*. Auckland University Press, Auckland. p.2.

[2] Ibid, p.36.

[3] Ibid, p.37.

[4] Ibid, p. 29.



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