

## **Interview with Marewa Taiapa Shields (postgraduate student in Politics)**

*Rachel Billington is an Auckland born, PhD candidate at the University of Otago in Dunedin. She has a Graduate Diploma of Science (Psychology) and a Bachelor of Arts (double major in Philosophy and Art History) as well as a Master of Politics (Distinction). Rachel's PhD thesis topic encompasses identity, affect and recognition online to explore how young New Zealanders find belonging in virtual publics. With this, she also uses her interest in how exposure to specific social networks may affect identity formation.*

**Q1:** *Where are you from?*

**Rachel:** I was born and raised in Tāmaki Makaurau, my family marae is there as well. My parents live there now, and my grandparents and uncles and aunties live there too so I spend a lot of time there as well to go and help out on the homestead.

**Q2:** *Where in the world would you like to visit and why?*

**Rachel:** I would love to go to Japan. Also, I'd really love to go to China. I want to go somewhere where I have no idea what I'm doing and as intimidating as it is, I feel like you have to put yourself in that position to really overcome the challenges sometimes. Japan, I love the culture, I love the food, I would love to see the landscape. I would love to spend some time there. And, China for different reasons, I really love the history and the story of China and I just would love to go and see it and be in such a different culture and to be immersed in it. I'm not sure what else I'd do, I've just always wanted to. You'd need a tour guide or somebody who knows the country. I have a really good friend in Vietnam and I'd like to get there before he leaves because he's a local now and it's a good excuse to go. We don't learn much about it because it's so separate from the Western canon.

**Q3:** *What inspired you to choose your thesis topic?*

**Rachel:** The topic itself inspired me, I think the reason I'm so passionate about what I'm doing is because the research is driving me. It's not that I just want to be in academia, I think this work is really important so what really sparked it was my MPols dissertation about social media, disinformation and the rise of the alt right. And, I feel like I was little bit ahead of the curve with my interest in this stuff. I was seeing it happen and I started before the Christchurch massacre and it all just kind of proved my point about why this a really crucial thing to be studying and to understand what's happening here. One thing throughout my study I've really noticed that there is nobody looking at the impact on young developing minds. We are all living in this bubble, this changing information ecosystem. What does it mean to be a young person growing up in those spheres? There is nothing about that. There's a lot about how you look at Youtube and there's this pathway to radicalisation through the algorithms and yada yada yada. But you and I are people who have a worldview and we have a world that we exist in and are a part of but what about the people who don't have that and also young people who don't have a real sense of who they are and what they believe and all of that stuff becoming part of their developing worldview. It's really important to consider the impact of the social messaging and information landscape for young people.

I was a very early adopter of social media, I was on MySpace, before Facebook. And, it became such a huge part of my identity and the friendships that I cultivated in the spaces that became such a core part of myself and my sense of humour and all these things that, when you're young, they're really in flux and can go in any direction.

*Q4: What do you enjoy most and/or least about being a PhD candidate?*

**Rachel:** I love most that you're self-directed and completely in charge of your own schedule but that can also be a challenge. The bad things are also the good things. It's learning to manage them and I'm really glad I'm doing it at this point in my life and I've had a lot of experience and I know what works for me now. It's learning about what things I can do in the day and being gentle on myself.

*Q5: What is your favourite thing to do in your spare time?*

**Rachel:** I love reading. When I'm researching I'm reading all day, but it's a different kind of reading. I love to read for leisure, so I like Sci-Fi and I'm getting into magical realism as well which is a genre I really like. If you like reading, I would highly recommend it. That's the kind of fiction that I really get into. I really want to escape into it, but I find I'll read a book quickly and it's heart breaking when you're done reading the book and then you have to find a new one. I love to read. That's my most joyful past time.

*Q6: What advice do you have for undergraduate students and/or postgraduate students?*

**Rachel:** My advice would be to follow your interests, follow your passions. Also, be gentle on yourself, don't beat yourself up as much as possible. For that first one, if you're not interested in what you're doing, you're just following a path you're never going to be interested in, but if you're interested in what you're doing, you're always following a thread of joy and that's important. For the other advice, learning self-kindness is important. Treat yourself as a friend would and speak to yourself like a friend would. For people studying, there's such high pressure and it often feels like high stakes. And it is, but also it's not everything.