

Mitzi Nairn



Mitzi Nairn is a Pākehā woman. She was the Director of the Combined Churches of Aotearoa New Zealand's Programme on Racism, and has been active in anti-racism initiatives since the 1960s. She has been involved in Treaty education since its inception. She continues her work in this area in various ways and is currently active as a member of Tamaki Treaty Workers and as President of AWEA. She lives in Tāmaki-makau-rau with her partner of 50 years, Raymond, and spends most of her time cooking, gardening, writing and 'wondering about stuff.'

How did the ideas of Paulo Freire intersect with your work in the anti-racism movement?

I was part of the Student Christian Movement (SCM)¹ and right through the mid to late 1960s it was doing stuff about revolutions and social change. A lot of it was coming out of the liberation struggles in South America and I certainly knew that, because there were students who studied with Gutierrez² and others. I don't think I heard about Freire as a name necessarily. When you went to international SCM conferences there were people talking about things that they hadn't written their theses on yet. So you were getting the ideas while they were still fairly raw. One of the things that the South American theologians and students said over and over again was, 'Don't copy us. You have to do your own thing.' We knew when Freire's book, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, came out in Portuguese. The English translation came out in 1972 and he came here under the auspices of the Church and Society Commission in 1974.

That was when ACORD (Auckland Committee on Racism and Discrimination) and New Perspectives on Race³ were just beginning to sort out their methodology, processes and structures. There was a lot of pain going on in the fledgling movement over whether you all did everything together or whether separation of Pākehā and Māori was better. There were different positions and different factions on that. I ended up believing that a certain amount of separation is actually healthy. That is partly because of my experience in the Women's Liberation Movement. Freire helped quite a lot with our thinking about that issue because we asked about it at one of the meetings with him.

Freire's English was very good, but very formal. He was very charming and reassuring. You felt, 'Yes, we have done right to trust this guy,' partly because he put things back to you. He often re-said things, and put them back to you so the next time you responded you were closer to answering your own questions. He actually used his own methodologies.

So it was clarifying, having these debates about working separately or together?

Yes. There are separate tasks, but there are also joint tasks and monitoring tasks that keep those processes honest and going in the same direction.

Did you find his book difficult to read?

Not really, because at that stage I was really in practice at reading philosophy and theology and Marcuse and people like that. So I can't say I found it particularly difficult. Now when I read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* I think, 'Oh god, if only someone would do a non-sexist translation, it would be a whole lot better.'

¹ See: <http://www.scm.org.nz/>

² A Peruvian theologian and priest, regarded as the founder of Liberation theology.

³ A group set up to provide anti-racism workshops in churches, community groups and government departments.

The actual language of the book was really interesting, because it tied in with another of the Student Christian Movement interests which was whether you need a special religious language for religion, or whether you actually should be able to say everything in ordinary language. If it doesn't use ordinary language then it is referring to something that is imaginary.

Freire sat really well in that respect, because a lot of his language is actually quite poetic. When you have tidied up the sexist language and you substitute 'humanity' for 'man,' he is actually talking about human identity and human aspiration, and how the world should or could be—without having to talk about 'the kingdom of heaven' or anything like that. He actually filled a big hole in the language.

Was Filip Fanchette's visit a continuation of these ideas for you?

I wasn't in the loop for Filip's first visit. The work that Freire and Fanchette did was really for the oppressed. To get the funding to bring him here, church men had to be in the loop. He did some good work with Māori groups, but Filip ended up having to do a hell of a lot of work with white male dominated groups. Initially the only women who were allowed in were those who were willing to set aside a feminist analysis and go with the class analysis. Women who wanted to take their reasonably newly developed feminist analysis and work on it along with some kind of class analysis were not really welcome. People like me who had already made a commitment to the anti-racism aspects and had already sort of specialised weren't welcome.

I did end up going to workshops during Filip's subsequent visits and I found some of the analytic resources really helpful. The class analytic resource was helpful to me when I was allowed to hold the handle and apply it myself, rather than have someone else keep on explaining that the way I was holding it was wrong. You know how if you get a tool, you just want to go out and do a little weed eating by yourself?

Other useful approaches included learning to trust the group and its knowledge. That has stood me in good stead ever since. If you are going all right with a group it will fix itself. If it is not going all right they could be watching Jesus and Buddha sliding down a moonbeam and they wouldn't be convinced by your explanation. So you take less responsibility yourself and expect the group to be responsible. To me that was revolutionary.

That is the Freire model of learning. Instead of pouring the water into the glasses, we're saying that most of the knowledge is already there. The facilitator might contribute one or two pieces of information or a question, or a way of putting two of those pieces of information together and opening it up again. So my understanding of facilitation and learning processes changed during that time. Not solely from the influence of Freire and Fanchette's work, but clearly that was part of it.

Because of my class origins and my class position, as I analyse it, I saw that most of what we were getting from Fanchette was actually a tool for the oppressed. It is not a tool for a group that is tangled up in, or part of, the historical oppressive group. I have never been comfortable working with working class people—I don't mean from a personal discomfort—it's that there are power issues, and appropriateness issues. And that applies to working with Māori groups too. I have worked with Makareta⁴ at times, because I totally trust Makareta's judgement to say, 'I am calling you in and this is what I want you do.' But if anyone else calls me I am inclined to say, 'Why exactly are you calling me in? Are you sure I am the person you want? What do you want me to do? Are you sure? Couldn't you do that better yourself?'

And also of course, the feedback from groups like Ngā Tamatoa⁵ was we need you to work with your own because you understand them in a different way and you can get to places we can't get to, and you can get alongside things that are just puzzling beyond belief.

You would have been one of the first people to take up that challenge, the first of the Pākehā people? Was that a lonely task at the beginning?

No, because I did it out of the base of ACORD and of SCM so I was never in isolation on this.

And what did you actually do once Ngā Tamatoa had said, 'Okay, you work with yours, we'll work with ours?'

We, ACORD that is, did a lot of research to apply a racism analysis. In the early years we were a group-action action group in that everybody in the group took part in all actions as a group. And our work was geared towards action and change. It was a praxis model basically. You thought about things, you did things, and then you worked out what to do next.

We did our first anti-racist workshops in 1974/1975. The Treaty didn't really appear as part of the substance of our anti-racism workshops until the early to mid-1980s, though Ngā Tamatoa was working out of Treaty from the beginning. The person I trace the anti-racism analysis back to, is somebody like Don Borrie,⁶ because around that time you had the slogan coming out in theological circles of 'God's preferential option for the poor. God is really interested in poor people.' One of the things Don used to ask over and over again is, 'Who are the poor in New Zealand?' And the more you looked at the statistics, the more you could see Māori were over-represented among the poor.

⁴ See interview with Sister Makareta Tawaroa in this series.

⁵ Formed in the early 1970s, Ngā Tamatoa was a group that advocated for Māori rights, language revitalisation, and for racism and injustice against Māori to be addressed.

⁶ General Secretary of SCM in the late 1960s.

ACORD spent about a decade checking out the relatively new analysis of racism as an institutional systemic thing, documenting it across institutions and taking action around incidences and cases. Those were some of the things that structural analysis fed into—it gave me skills to put into that process. I never considered myself a person who could go and run a structural analysis workshop.

Are there some things that you found really worked for you that you do use regularly or confidently?

I can't now really be sure where the origins are of some of the things I do. You know how when you have got everything in one of those big hurdy gurdy washing machines and you think, 'God, I think I have left a hanky in the pocket of my striped sweater.' And you keep waiting for a bit of your striped sweater to appear. My process is like that. I use a lot of images like that washing machine one because I did quite a lot of my early education for groups of women and I thought, 'Why shouldn't we have our own illustration?' If I am doing a workshop for a group of business people, I wouldn't dream of using an image of a washing machine, I must have some other way of explaining it. Communicating is more important than saying what you consider to be the magic words. Sometimes you test out groups to find out what sort of groups they are. I was working with this student group on Wednesday and I said 'bugger' twice, on purpose to see what the reaction would be. It was just to try to find out, 'What sort of group is this? Where have they been living their lives? Have they been in the 20th century at all? Do they intend to come into the 21st century at some stage?'

Another thing that I have learned—it is particularly strong for men but it functions for educated women as well—is that it is not actually very respectable to change your mind or your position. You can't do it without a loss of face. The only dignified reason to change your position is that you now have new information. So it is really, really important to structure some of your presentation as information that 'May be new to you.' This gives people a way to change. They can say, 'I learned a lot this weekend. Now I have been thinking about this and ...'

Has your political thinking changed much since those days of Fanchette and Freire?

I think we have done extraordinarily well to survive fifteen years of counter thrust—which is really what the economic policies towards globalisation have been. We have survived all that community destruction, all that divisiveness and we still have got a Treaty movement moving forward. I think it is bloody marvellous—the Treaty does its own work.

There are very rich veins of Pākehā support and insight that actually surprise me and then I feel quite embarrassed to be surprised. Some years ago, when there was a whole lot of stuff happening about land leases in Taranaki, I was asked if I would speak to the

dairy section of Taranaki Federated Farmers. I was asked by some of the local Treaty educators in Network Waitangi, so I said, 'Why do you want me to do this?' And they said, 'Well, we want to do some work with them and we want someone to go in and take the temperature while we watch. So I said, 'Sure, I'll take the shit when I leave.'

It was one of those typical things when you have got 40 minutes and by the time they have greeted you and settled down, and put out their cigarettes and so on, you haven't really got 40 minutes. I just said a few things—I did my rural background and made some connections. I didn't say very much at all, except that when things are unjust they have to be settled eventually and maybe it never feels fair for the people who are in the situation at the time. Then I just threw it open for discussion. The first guy that got up, in a towelling hat and singlet, said, 'You are quite right. When things are unjust they have to be dealt with sooner or later. And I believe sooner is better than later.' And they all went 'Mmm.'

They had actually worked through a hell of a lot of stuff, because another of them got up and said, 'I reckon the government keeps trying to make us see that Māoris are the problem, but actually the government's the problem.' Then he laid it all out. He said, 'We and the Māori, we could come to an agreement about the time frames and everything, but they are not budgeting enough, and they are putting unreasonably low valuations on all our improvements for the compensation.' They had really done their homework and I felt so ashamed of myself for not having expected that and trusted them to have done that. Another thing one of them said was, 'Of course the media ... you saw that thing on the news the other night. I don't know how long it took them to scrounge up a Māori and a Pākehā farmer who would say opposite things because none of my mates would have said any of that.' So they actually had done the analysis.

Quite often, and this I know from the church settings, the most open minded and thoughtful people are the elderly women and they are the ones who have actually opened their minds and thought about stuff. And they actually could be quite influential. I used to spend quite a lot of time telling them, 'I hope you say this at dinner parties.'

You have had to work on developing a part of Freire's analysis that he didn't develop, by looking at the 'haves' and how to do structural analysis and conscientisation work with that group.

In our population we have a small elite, a thumpingly large middle class or auxiliary class, and a relatively small working class. I think that makes the obligation on people like me to work with the auxiliary class greater because the auxiliary class can vacillate—it can identify upwards or downwards. Part of what I am trying to do is prepare the auxiliary class to identify with the oppressed groups, or at the very least, to understand where there are overlaps of interest.

As I see it, my job with the auxiliary class is to suggest to them that they detach their interests from the elite and try to make a sort of common cause with the majority. Also, the auxiliary class is not the class that actually initiates revolutionary change. What you want is for people to be waiting and listening so that the top of their head responds when change happens—to be constructive rather than defensive or destructive.

I think my style has changed a lot over the years. This is partly because initially, having been brought up to be such a nice, middle class Pākehā girl, I had to learn to be rude and aggressive and a whole lot of other things. I used to be shaking just to make myself be as loud as I needed to be. I taught myself to behave badly. I went through a very confrontational period because our early experience of learning had been confrontational. I later came to understand that it is the ideas that shout, not the people that are telling you.

When we first started doing education, we tried to replicate what had happened for us—which of course included a lot of shouting and general bellowing. Then I moved into a more reasonable mode, which I think has worked fairly well. What I do now is use more humour than I used to. I think that what Pākehā people need at the moment is to enjoy doing Treaty. I think they need to have a good experience, to enjoy it and think, ‘I can do this. This is fun. This is good stuff.’ Let’s not be too grim about it.

I believe you have to facilitate as yourself and I don’t really care what the best technique is. In the end you have to develop your own style and your own favourite material, and your own examples and images and stories. In the early days, what I gave the movement was that it is all right to cry. Lots of women have said to me, ‘You showed me that I can actually take part in these discussions, because if I cry I just go on talking. I learned that from you.’ If I let crying stop me, then I would never say anything. How can we know the things we know and keep telling others if we don’t understand what they actually mean? Sometimes it is anger, sometimes it is grief, it is sorrow, it is regret, it is pity—those are all appropriate emotions around the material we are dealing with. So you have to go near that edge and sometimes you slither over it. To me that is actually quite healthy; it shows that the ideas are still alive and rooted in the nervous tissue.

Early on I was attacked quite a lot by men for showing emotion. And I would just say, ‘I still know what these statistics mean.’ ACORD prepared a paper on children in state custody, which Zeta Anich⁷ and I delivered at the UN National New Zealand Conference on the Year of the Child. At the end of the presentation they attacked it both as ‘statistical mumbo jumbo over-intellectualising’ and as ‘emotional clap trap’. Zeta stood up and said, ‘Thank you. You have put your finger on it. We deliver statistics with passion.’ And I have never forgotten ‘statistics with passion.’ We had several long discussions in

⁷ Another ACORD member who was an educational psychologist.

ACORD, about the dangers of the way Pākehā use statistics to distance themselves and to de-personalise what happens. Betty Wark, a community activist, came up to us afterwards at that conference and she said, ‘That’s right. Never forget, people’s kids went through hell to create those statistics.’

All the discourse around decolonisation I understand in a Freirean frame of reference. Although I say I am an educator or a facilitator or whatever, I really understand it as consciousness-raising, or conscientisation. You know, the descendants of the colonisers have different decolonisation tasks from the descendants of the colonised. The tasks of decolonisation are grouped in stages but you very seldom complete any of those tasks. They are lifelong tasks. And sometimes people get into a later stage before they even know what the other bits were and have to go back and do some of the other things.

Conscientisation or consciousness-raising is generally in the first stage. It brings to light what has been hidden, to notice what has been ignored and to admit what has been denied. Those are the three things. At the very beginning comes a fresh look at the process of colonisation, putting imperialism back into the picture. Because one of the things that I really notice is that imperialism has kind of dropped out of our historic picture of ourselves. It often shows up when we examine language and standard stories. For the colonised who experience the violence of the process of cultural invasion and dispossession, the denial, destruction and domination has been hidden. It has been so well hidden that even just revealing it is incredible to a lot of people. People don’t believe it when you tell them that in order to justify taking all the Indian cotton and silk to England to be processed in the factories in the industrial revolution to be then exported as cloth back to India, they broke the hands of the weavers in India to stop them from weaving. The systems and institutions of the colonised have been ignored.

Then we get into a more critical look at history, continually asking suspicious hermeneutic questions such as, ‘Who is telling this story? Whose version is it? Who is absent? Whose point of view is absent? Whose interests are served by this version?’

Another part that I think is in the first stage of conscientisation is admitting how prejudiced, diminishing and demeaning a great deal of Pākehā language towards Māori people actually is. The first step often is a tendency to identify the bigotry of the rednecks and talk back radio. But when I examine the language resources that I use I am finding more and more pinpricks in it. The languages of science, fine arts and of ‘progress’ are all very fraught areas. If you listen to the discourse around airwaves for example, or the educational theories of cultural capital, there is very, very disparaging language. Tim McCreanor and Ray Nairn⁸ have done a lot of work on the language resources of racism and the standard stories of racism. Underlying this language are

⁸ Activist academics, currently working out of Whāriki Research Centre, Massey University, Auckland.

unexamined assumptions based on 19th century theories such as Social Darwinism, or the even older ladder of development. ‘We are the best. Our stuff is best. Māori are jolly lucky to get the chance to become more like us.’

To complete the framework of the first stage there is an honest look at the present situation—the gaps, the statistics, and what Bob Scott used to call ‘hearing the cries of pain without blaming the victims.’ This is looking at the figures in the light of the process and experience of colonisation and the ensuing damage. This may well bring on an attack of denial. Consider for example the responses to Tariana Turia’s address to the New Zealand Psychological Society.⁹

I would say that the next stage of the consciousness raising process for Pākehā is marked by listening more carefully to Māori voices, and hearing their critiques and aspirations more clearly. We choose to give up the labels, such as radicals, troublemakers, stirrers, that we have used to distance those voices. This stage usually involves actions and statements in support of Māori goals. People begin to interpret those Māori voices to other Pākehā. They begin to model different responses. They begin working for institutional support such as policy development or education.

Then you get a burst of identity work that intensifies. People start considering, ‘Who am I? Who are we now? We are Pākehā. How can we be honourably in this place? How do we give up the habits of conquerors? What are the important values to me? What is my relationship to the other official language? Who are my people? How do I take responsibility for them? How do I work collectively with other Pākehā?’ This is a good time to visit liberation theologies, particularly feminist liberation theologies, because they lay out bloody brilliant strategies.

A later stage is entered into when a person finds other people to work with who have also accomplished and taken on board some of the previous tasks. They look to perform decolonisation in whatever institutions they can reach and in the public political arena; for example, seeking a political constitution and arrangement that gives priority to tino rangatiratanga. Pākehā in this stage listen for, and respond to, Māori decolonisation developments. They recognise the fluidity of the situation and the range of Māori opinions and decolonisation stages. They realise that they have to do their own analysis of situations—checking out with Māori whom they trust—because they cannot simply just jump up in the air when and if any and every Māori voice says jump.

One of the tricky things for Pākehā is working out which Māori you listen to most or you ultimately refer back to, because it does call for making judgments and it is really hard to be sure that you are aren’t making contaminated judgments. It is no good just saying, ‘I

⁹ In this speech Tariana Turia referred to the holocaust experienced by Taranaki iwi at the hands of the colonisers.

won't listen to the Māori who are saying the things I want to hear, I will listen to Māori who are saying things I don't want to hear,' because they could be way off the pace too. That is another reason why you need other Pākehā—to help suss out what the silences from Māori mean, never mind anything else. Is this a 'Don't go there' silence or is it a 'Fine, get on with it. We'll let you know if there is anything more we can tell you' silence.

You simply can't just jump around. When Rob Cooper was working for Te Rūnanga Whakawhanaunga i Nga Hahi o Aotearoa (the Māori Council of Churches), he said to me, 'I have seen all your tricks. I have sat in on your workshops. I trust you to get on with it and if there are new things that come through and information that I think may help you, I will give you a copy or mention them. I don't want to know every detail of everything you are doing. If anything happens or comes up that you have never seen before, by all means come and ask me about it. Then he said, 'Also, if I see you going in a dangerous direction I will not watch you go over the cliff. I will actually call you back.' I thought that was actually a wonderful relationship to be offered. I mean, what a gift. 'I trust you. Get on with it and I won't let you do anything really stupid.'

Is there some way you could sum up how you use Freire now?

I still read Freire and I still enjoy his thinking and his expression but at the same time I am really aware that I am looking into somebody else's world—my task isn't to take over or even necessarily adapt, but to ask, 'What is the complementary response?'