

## Moving toward collective responsibility: Beyond Pākehā as 'punisher'

Lorena Gibson and Rachel Fabish

**T**HIS IS A response to Murdoch Stephens' article 'Pākehā as Punisher', published in Counterfutures Issue 4. We (Lorena Gibson and Rachel Fabish) began by having a conversation about the piece at Lorena's Victoria University of Wellington office, and continued to pick up lines of thought via email. Below we reflect on our reaction to Stephens' piece and discuss how Pākehā might move beyond punishing behaviour to engage in acts of solidarity with decolonising struggles.

Lorena Gibson

Shall we start with what we thought of the author's argument about Pākehā as punishers?

Rachel Fabish

My first response was that the term 'punisher' invokes ideas of discipline, violence, and injury. It's almost a form of deficit thinking, which made me cringe a bit and think of prisons and retribution.

LG

Yes! Rachael Selby's book *Still Being Punished* came to mind too.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, I thought the piece itself felt a bit 'punishing'. It's written for Pākehā, but framing it as a form of conversational and cultural abuse might not feel like a productive starting point for 'that guy', as the author puts it, or a way for punishers to be able to recognise that behaviour in themselves, let alone wider society. Also, what do you think the difference is between being punished and 'mansplaining'? That women can do it too?

RF

In the activist spaces that I occupy, we already use mansplaining to describe women's behaviour sometimes. Although maybe it's useful to have a word that isn't specific to male domination.

LG

And the author does say the word 'punisher' recognises the impact on the person who's on the receiving end of it.

RF

It's an interesting idea. I quite like the fact that it is naming

1 Rachael Selby, *Still Being Punished* (Huia, Wellington, 1999).

a *behaviour* that goes beyond the person doing the punishing, who might not necessarily know that they are enacting that sort of behaviour. It's describing that feeling of being punished during a conversation, which I think is quite useful. In that kind of conversation, you might even be in total agreement with what the person is saying, but the communication doesn't feel equal, empowering, or fun. Another term I have often heard used is that you're 'teaching at' me.

LG

Yes, I've also heard 'lecturing at' me.

RF

I kind of get it. It sounds like he's describing an activist hui. In activist space, there is often a combination of self-righteousness and wanting to prove that you're a better activist than everybody else, and if you're not right in all the areas then you do need to be punished or pushed into a better way of thinking. In those spaces, people often police each other's behaviour, and they police their own behaviour so they can say and do the right things.

LG

It reminded me of certain people in activist spaces who can 'talk the talk' but don't necessarily 'walk the walk'. People who pay lip-service to activism, like the various forms of allies critiqued in that zine *Accomplices Not Allies*,<sup>2</sup> and some of the people you've written about in your work on activists within the Wellington anarchist community.<sup>3</sup>

2 'Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing The Ally Industrial Complex – An Indigenous Perspective and Provocation' (version 2). 2014. Indigenous Action Media. <http://www.indigenouaction.org/accomplices-not-allies-abolishing-the-ally-industrial-complex/>

3 Rachael Fabish, *Black Rainbow: Stories of Māori and Pākehā Working Across Difference*. PhD thesis, Cultural Anthropology (Victoria University of Wellington, 2014).

RF

Those are the people that I think he's describing. At the base level, he's talking about not being equal in the conversation. Someone's voice is being pushed down and made invisible. And that's what happens in wider society as well. If we can understand what it is to be punished—and for someone to be a punisher—in individual conversations, then we can also think about the fact that Pākehā are part of a dominant culture and are doing this all the time. This is something Moana Jackson points out in his work on how our Pākehā criminal justice system punishes Māori.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of whether we consider ourselves as punishers, we are unconsciously working in a system that acts as a cultural punisher. In recognising that, we can then work to unravel it in different ways. We also need to be aware that we've got to sit with this as well. It's not going away in a hurry.

LG

Yes, he's taking the concept beyond the personal to highlight the ways the physical and social spaces we live in are punishing. I think it's useful to draw our attention to larger political and institutional structures, but as you say they're not going away in a hurry and that can make you feel pretty powerless.

RF

Yes, it can. This is something I experienced when I went from university into the work that I do now in the sexual violence prevention sector. In hindsight, perhaps I was a little naïve. I had the attitude that 'okay, we just need to work out the good ideas and the right way to do things and then put them into practice'. But when you're actually *in* it, you realise that the system is

4 Moana Jackson, *He Whaipanga Hou: Māori And The Criminal Justice System – A New Perspective* (Ministry of Justice, Wellington, 1988).

a big, jumbled mess of competing agencies at the NGO and the government level, all with their own agendas and personalities. It's not a simple system to navigate.

I think that action and change often happen through relationships, and this becomes difficult when you have people who don't want to speak or listen to one another. When you're dealing with government officials, for example, two things can happen. Some of them will say: 'yes, we understand why Kaupapa Māori should be prioritised, but our bosses don't and we're powerless'. Others simply don't get it. They'll say, 'can you explain it to me again?' or 'we know that what we're doing now works'; they don't *want* to hear what you have to say. They don't create space for it. On top of that, you have a restructured system where all the government agencies run as businesses serving one client—their Minister—and the Minister's attitudes and beliefs become incredibly important. If the Minister can be affected on that relational level, and understand what it means to be in genuine dialogue with somebody, then change might happen.

LG

So there are these different layers of power and control that have to be negotiated.

RF

Yes. In my work, I can see that people are not enjoying the system and that they're doing harm to people who are less empowered in that system. However, they're also being defensive and want to push blame away from themselves on to their particular organisation or larger institutions. This comes down to structural power and our ability to resist or make changes to it. I think people need to recognise their structural power; they need to own it and ask, 'what can we do differently in that space?' Which

brings it back to: what are we trying to do here, in our work?

**LG**

This is something I think about a lot in relation to what I do as a lecturer. I'm inspired by educationalist Paulo Freire's philosophy of teaching and try to bring that collaborative learning approach into the classroom as much as I can.<sup>5</sup> However, there's a fundamental power imbalance between me and the students. University deadlines mean I am required to set the agenda for the course, choose the readings, and set the assignments months before it starts, then I assess their work and award them grades. And I've noticed an increase in the number of students who see themselves as consumers and have a sense of entitlement about what they should be getting for their money. But what I like about teaching is that opportunity to reach even just one or two people who can have 'that moment'—the moment when you suddenly see the world differently and realise that there are other ways of being in it than, say, neoliberal capitalism or punishing Pākehā systems. You might have had 'that moment' too?

**RF**

That's right. University changed my life and way of thinking. I was just talking with someone the other day, a Samoan woman, who was describing how it was a real struggle for her to get to university. So many brown kids drop out of high school before they get to their final year, she said, because there are all these structural factors that say 'this is not for you'. It's often only at university that you learn how damaged the system is, and why it was so hard for you to get there in the first place. There's a lot of opportunity at university to acknowledge structural power and how difficult it is for non-Pākehā to move through a Pākehā

5 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Penguin, London, 1996).

world, but being at university is a privilege in itself.

## LG

Absolutely. As Ani Mikaere<sup>6</sup> has shown, universities are very Pākehā spaces.<sup>7</sup> Have you read ‘White Business Education’ by Pala Molisa?<sup>8</sup> He works here at Victoria University of Wellington, and his critique of how white the Victoria Business School is could easily be applied to the rest of the university, with the exception of Va’aomanū Pasifika and Te Kawa a Māui. This is something I brought up a couple of years ago in a first-year cultural anthropology class I taught. I’d been to a seminar by David Mayeda where he spoke about the ‘I, too, am Auckland’<sup>9</sup> project he was involved in, which documented Māori and Pasifika students’ experiences of racism at the University of Auckland. I showed the short video ‘I, Too, Am Auckland Experiences’<sup>10</sup> to my students in class the next day. In the discussion that followed, many of the Pākehā students were surprised and even shocked by the kinds of issues raised in the video, whereas the Māori and Pasifika students were like, ‘yeah, that’s my experience here too’.

I’m currently teaching a course about anthropology, decolonisation, and liberation, and I’ve been thinking carefully about how to talk to Pākehā students about racism and white privilege. How do I raise the idea that Pākehā live in a settler society where we are benefitting from ongoing processes of col-

6 Ani Mikaere, *Colonising Myths – Māori Realities: He Rukuruku Whakaaro* (Wellington, Huia Publishers, 2011).

7 For a discussion of the experiences of Māori academics at universities in Aotearoa, including how they negotiate discrimination and academic socialisation, see Joanna Kidman, Cherie Chu, Sean Fernandez and Ivy Abella, *Māori Scholars And The University* (Auckland, Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga: The Māori Centre of Research Excellence at the University of Auckland, December 2015).

8 Pala Molisa, ‘White Business Education,’ *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 21, no. 6 (2010): 525-528.

9 <http://itooamauckland.tumblr.com/>

10 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4iKLJTbN7uc>

onisation on a daily basis in a way that doesn't antagonise or alienate? How do I make sure Pākehā students avoid the 'settler moves to innocence' that Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang critique,<sup>11</sup> and have them understand that being 'woke' or critically aware of these issues is no substitute for action? And how do I pitch it as an invitation to step into this space and use the privilege that we have to bring about change?

## RF

I think framing it as an invitation moves it from deficit thinking into something more beautiful and exciting. That sounds self-serving, but it should be mutually beneficial to recognise that we're a Pacific country and to embrace and prioritise the cultures that are indigenous to this area. And it's not just about the stuff we actively do. For me, it's also about recognising that I'm not the expert, it's about letting go of control, and working with people to support them in what they want to do.

## LG

This idea of letting go is important, and it's something that I've had to address in the course as well. For example, I've talked about the history of anthropology in Aotearoa as well as our colonial history, and for some it was the first time they had heard this kind of alternative narrative. This is something Maria Bargh has experienced with Māori students at Victoria University of Wellington, who she says can become angry when they realise what they *aren't* taught in schools.<sup>12</sup> I've had a few Pākehā students say to me that they feel guilty and ashamed by this history, and

11 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization Is Not A Metaphor,' *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-40.

12 Dale Husband, 'Why weren't we taught our history at school? An interview with Maria Bargh,' *E-Tangata: A Māori and Pasifika Sunday Magazine*, 4 September 2016, accessed 5 September 2016 from <https://e-tangata.co.nz/news/why-werent-we-taught-our-history-at-school>



that they don't know what to do with those feelings. I've said to them that it's important to acknowledge what happened, and to carry this weight forward to help us think about how we act in the world.

RF

Yes, it's important not to get paralysed by guilt and shame, or 'Pākehā paralysis'.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, when I was working on my thesis, I found that Pākehā really resisted engaging with guilt. They would say, 'oh, I don't want to get into that whole guilt thing'. I think a lot of the time when people say 'I don't want to get bogged down in guilt', they are not only running from that feeling, but what they are actually saying is 'I don't think I should carry responsibility for what other people have done'—people like our colonising ancestors or more overtly racist white people.

If you can process the guilt and shame, then it is absolutely possible to take collective responsibility for the actions of other Pākehā. The Treaty Worker's Movement (see Ingrid Huygens' thesis)<sup>14</sup> has been focusing on this collective responsibility for years, on the idea of moving together towards different possible futures.

LG

Yes! I've also heard you say before that feeling guilty, or resisting those feelings of guilt, can actually be a way of disengaging from these issues and silencing an important conversation.

13 Martin Tolich, 'Pākehā "paralysis": Cultural Safety for Those Researching the General Population of Aotearoa,' *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand* 19 (2002): 164-178.

14 Ingrid Huygens, *Processes of Pākehā Change in Response to the Treaty of Waitangi*. PhD dissertation, Department of Psychology (University of Waikato, 2007).

RF

Silence is such a fundamental issue in the field I work in now, around sexual violence and emotions. I've learnt a lot about emotions and the way they work, and we don't actually move past guilt and shame without engaging with them. Pushing these emotions down actually makes you more ruled by them, even if you think it doesn't; it just puts blinders around them. You have to go through the shame, or it will come up again and again. This is where the defensiveness can come in, so you need to sit with that stuff, in a private space, so you are not making it everyone's problem, or 'punishing' people. Or you might want to talk with other Pākehā about it. Just don't make it brown people's problem that you're feeling shame. And when you are a Pākehā person trying to work with other Pākehā don't try to elicit or push shame on them.

LG

I like that phrase, 'sitting with'. I wonder if we can play with that? Not just with people, we also sit in places.

RF

True. When you talk about places, it makes me think of Gibson-Graham and their work acknowledging the way that we're impacted by everything around us. We're transformed just by being in a relationship with people and with social and physical spaces.<sup>15</sup>

LG

I'm very interested in how space and place affect us. I'm always thinking about that in a classroom situation. For example, I talk

15 J. K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics*. (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2006).

to my students about how the room we're in shapes their learning experience. This comes from Freire as well. Usually in the first lecture I point out that I'm positioned at the front of the room, behind a podium, facing the audience, with a microphone. My 'expert' voice is amplified and I 'lecture to' faces sitting in rows of desks that can't be moved and where you can't easily spin around and talk to other people. I really don't like the physical setup of this encounter, but there's not much I can do about it.

RF

Space signals to people whether they are welcome here or not.

LG

And how they belong. The places we sit in and live in are important.

RF

Totally. So, to be in solidarity with Māori, and to step into Māori spaces as a Pākehā person, we need to deal with the discomfort that brings, try to get comfortable with it, and just be in and impacted by those spaces without intruding, taking over, or making it uncomfortable for the people who are actually at their centre. Partly we need to just sit with that difference and notice how it feels to be decentred. It makes you realise how much more comfortable you are in other, Pākehā spaces. But we also need to learn just how different and valuable those spaces are.

LG

Thinking about the idea of Pākehā as punisher, can we finish with a comment about how Pākehā might move beyond this behaviour in a productive way?

RF

Well, one of the ways that Pākehā culture systematically acts as a ‘punisher’ is that Pākehā culture under capitalism tends to take an individualistic view (‘I’m only responsible for my own actions’), while Māori culture is much more collectivist and acknowledges that we are responsible for the actions of our people. Sadly, the individualistic voice gets to be much ‘louder’ in wider society. But the more I have worked with Māori, particularly in my work in the sexual violence prevention sector, the more the truth of collective responsibility becomes clear to me. The fact is, whether I like it or not, the way my Pākehā colleagues act towards our Māori partners has a massive impact on my relationships with those partners. So, I see it as important to not only take responsibility for myself (and the privileges and attitudes that settler society affords me), but also to do the slow work of trying to move together with other Pākehā towards more genuine support for tino rangatiratanga.