

A Lifetime of Difference

NESTA DEVINE

Auckland University of Technology, Aotearoa New Zealand (nesta.devine@aut.ac.nz)

In this memoir I track the people, events and influences which have had a bearing on my ability to work alongside Māori and Pacific students and academics. From a childhood in rural Aotearoa New Zealand, through sporadic and prolonged university studies, to teaching in Schools of Education at the University of Waikato and Auckland University of Technology, I have always been fascinated by the possibilities of thinking differently. This underpins my experience in supervising and supporting Māori and Pasifika academics, at the post graduate level and as early career researchers.

Key words: difference; postgraduate supervision; Māori philosophy; Pacific philosophies

I am flattered and touched by a request from the editors of this journal to write a memoir.

Yet, I have found this one of the most difficult papers to start that I have ever written.

After a lot of reflection, I think it is because the paper itself contravenes two of my rules-for-myself. One is that I do not write, unless requested, in the ‘indigenous’ space. This is not for me, as a pakeha/palagi person—it is hard enough for indigenous people to get published without people like me taking up their space, and at the same time making claims to ‘know’ that which almost by definition they cannot know.

The second rule-for-myself which this paper runs the risk of transgressing is that I refuse to get involved in the ‘whiteness’ industry. There are far more important things to be done than a kind of narcissistic gazing at one’s own wonderfulness.

So this paper is a challenge. I trust the editors’ judgement however, and clearly they have thought something useful might come out of a kind of introspective memoir on how I came to be involved with the support of Māori and Pacific researchers.

I ask myself why? and the answer I give myself, which will construct and constrain the elements I choose to make up this memoir, is that it is because somehow I have become a pakeha/white person who is an ‘ally’ to indigenous and Pacific people in my country without becoming a white saviour. That is a tricky position to attain—and maintain—and was never a ‘goal’—rather a position I have come to by happy accident.

This memoir will not be a history of my acquaintance with great thinkers or notable philosophers, except perhaps in passing. As is the case for many women, my joy in ideas came from my family and English literature—George Eliot, Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, Toni Morrison, Patricia Grace, Sia Figiel, Simone De Beauvoir. I have generally been a bit dismissive of the great philosophers, as too misogynist, and too bound by their own cultural outlook(s). Even Plato, (mea culpa) I read as a novelist, telling me stories about Greek society and particularly Socrates, and one who falls into both the misogynist and racist trap.

So, having made my philosophic confession, I will try to explain how I arrived at the particular mentality that I have. It is this mentality, or disposition, I think, that has impelled the journal's editor to invite me to write this paper.

My father was a self-taught socialist, son of generations of Mersey-side dock workers and seamen. My mother's family was similar, from the English Midlands, but not so poor. Both families were part of the nineteenth century Irish diaspora, the consequences of the Great Famine. For us, the primacy of the working-class, the proletariat, was a matter of common sense and conviction. So all my leanings come out of this primary, prior semi-marxist position.

This *whakapapa* (loosely to be translated as genealogy) does not in itself mean anything: many people from similar backgrounds went to the colonies and were only too glad to find themselves elevated to an 'elite.' In New Zealand in the 1950s and 60s there could be no doubt that to be white, or 'pakeha' was to enjoy a privileged position. I was a bright, studious child, and could easily have slipped into common assumptions about the nature of New Zealand society at that time. My father however was rigorous in his thinking and ethical in his behaviour: he formed a role model that I think enabled me to escape these straits. I was conscious, when few other young white people around me were, that the land we lived on had been confiscated from Māori; that the New Zealand land wars of the 1860s were indefensible land grabs, and that the attitude of teachers to Māori students was often patronizing at best and dismissive or downright punitive at worst. Alison Jones has written a brilliant memoir of how it was to grow up in Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1960s amid the prejudice of that period, and my life was not dissimilar (Jones 2020).¹

However, I think the golden moment for me came when I was 12, just newly arrived at secondary school, and struggling to grasp a totally new and apparently impenetrable language: Latin. My teacher, patiently and laboriously, explained the relationships between the verb, the subject and the object in a Latin sentence, and suddenly—quite suddenly—I got it. This was not a matter of translation: this was a matter of thinking differently. This moment of insight colours all my subsequent thinking; while the common view among my peers and even teachers was that Māori were deficient in some regard, I held onto that perception, of difference not just in colour or even habits but in the actually forms of thinking, the philosophical stance from which people view the world.

I can talk about the people I have learnt from, and the philosophers who have challenged or supported my views, but the development of my particular position would not have been possible without that moment of insight, that people can think differently, that we are not all reducible to the same, even if the 'same' is an altruistically perceived other. This perception carries with it the all-important concept of *respect. Fa'alo'alo*. Without respect, allyship is not possible.

My education in philosophy has been patchy and I am conscious of how much I do not know. But learning about Māori and Pacific philosophy has been an education through engagement with people, not with books, although some books—very few—have been helpful. As a consequence of being taught orally—which is, actually, the tradition for both Māori and Pacific peoples, there are very few written works I can refer to, although there are now far more of them than when I started on this journey.

There are many people of course, who have been my teachers, including my Māori and Pacific students and colleagues at various schools and universities. My point is, that these are my philosophic sources.

When I went to university, the curriculum was largely as it had been in school, focused on the history and pre-occupations of the pakeha invaders of this country. The exception, in the History Department of the University of Auckland was Keith Sorrenson, whose lectures were eye-opening with regard to the callous greediness of the settlers and their governments. Auckland Secondary Teachers' College brought me into contact with Dr John Wilcox, who had married into a Māori family and was therefore an excellent guide to *difference*, and Dr Tamati Reedy who offered a view into Māori thought I had never had elsewhere. When I started teaching, Hirini Melbourne, then a student teacher and later Professor Hirini Melbourne of the University of Waikato, who was at the same time an amazing innovator and traditionalist in Māori music, took a class in Māori music with my 15-year-old students, and introduced them, and me, to the world of Māori music and dance. This introduction was to more than 'just' music and dance: Music and dance are the gateways to culture, values, and history.

This introduction proved vital to my next step into the Polynesian world. I moved from a position in a faith-based girls' school in a wealthy part of Auckland to a public school in a much poorer district of the city. Partly because I had some understanding of the significance of music and dance, but mostly because I wanted to learn, I built a relationship with the immigrant Pacific community of that school, at that time mostly Samoan. The rapport was probably not harmed by the fact that my husband and I had adopted a little boy of Pacific origins, and wanted him to understand the fundamentals of Pacific culture. The community were amazing. They took me and my family under their collective wings—we attended all sorts of events, and all these events were accompanied by explanations of what was happening, and why, the philosophical basis for cultural expressions. This was my real doctorate. I cannot express sufficiently my appreciation for the education and support the Samoan community, especially the Si'itia family, gave to me. I have been 'returning' this *mea alofa* (Seuli 2004)² to the Pacific and Māori communities ever since.

Did I read any relevant philosophy in those days, the 1970s? I read an invaluable work on Māori leadership (Winiata 1960), Margaret Mead (Mead 1928), and looked in the local university library for books on Samoa and Samoan culture.³ The library held 6 books on Samoa, mostly concerned with the geography and tourism of Samoa. Perhaps more important were the works of Paulo Freire, from whom I picked up two things: first, the absolute importance of asking: ask the oppressed, don't presume to teach them what they may already know or not want to know, and second, that teaching is above all a political activity, a conscious act of resistance (Freire 1968).⁴

In 1996, while teaching in a different school, but still involved with Pacific and Māori students and their cultures, I read Tamasese et al (1997) 'O le Teao,' the New Morning, a book which comes from the field of Health, particularly Mental Health, rather than Education.⁵ This little book is a paradigm

of research with Indigenous people. The researchers asked how their participants wanted to proceed, and created their focus groups accordingly. To a large extent their findings echoed what I had already learnt, but they gave me one wonderful sentence: *there is no such thing as a Samoan person who is independent of others* (Tamasese et al 1997: 28). At the time I was writing a doctoral thesis on the theories behind neo-liberalism (Devine 2004), which enshrines individualism to an extreme degree, so this little quote was a godsend to me. Not only was it a counter-argument to the dominant individualism of neo-liberalism (or even classical liberalism), but it reinforced, for me the insight of my twelve-year old self: people think differently.⁶

Around the same time or somewhat earlier I read Michael King's edited book (King 1975) of the wisdom of many Māori elders, which I would recommend to anyone seeking to understand the Māori context, including the land grabs which so impoverished the people.⁷

As part of my doctoral studies I read Foucault with the late Professor James Marshall. Jim Marshall's contribution to education in Aotearoa New Zealand lies in both his deep knowledge of philosophy and introduction of Foucault to our academic world, and his support of Māori students who have gone on to become the backbone of Māori academia in Aotearoa New Zealand. My greatest gift from Foucault is his inversion of von Clausewitz' maxim in *Power/Knowledge*: Knowledge is not an absolute form of truth, but the understandings of a successful invading power.⁸ As in Aotearoa New Zealand the knowledges concerning law, education, justice, even agriculture have all been replaced by the concepts and assumptions of the governing power. And the 'knowledge' of the people who have been invaded or overcome becomes a form of 'suppressed knowledge.' The implication of this for me, is both that suppressed knowledges are legitimate forms of knowledge, and that they provide a necessary correction or critique to prevailing forms of knowledge. This again is a profoundly political interpretation of the matter—knowledge—which forms the backbone of the educational enterprise. Foucault's thesis about knowledge in the social sphere, that it is historically contingent, forms a release valve from the common assumptions concerning the superiority of European knowledge—'powerful knowledge.' Powerful it may be, —and that is always a temporal claim—but it has no greater claim to truth *ipso facto* than any other form of human understanding.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith's profoundly important book, *Decolonising Methodologies* (Smith 1999), an essential text for students or academics working in the fields of indigenous knowledge, builds, I think on a very similar understanding of Foucault.⁹ (Smith's supervisor was also Jim Marshall). This book is not about providing a formula for indigenous research methodologies, but is rather concerned with the ethics of indigenous research. Pakeha are not excluded, in Smith's account, but the purpose must always be the benefit of the people who are being researched. Not the researcher, not the research supervisor, but the people themselves. It is a very wholesome corrective to the 'Mead' problem, wherein indigenous people, particularly Māori, have been 'researched' to create academic careers, or to solve pakeha problems.

Among the teaching colleagues from whom I learnt in the 1990s, was an older Māori woman, Awa Hudson. To watch Awa in operation at a tangi or other gathering was to see '*va'a*' in action: she was relentless in working out the relationships which form the glue of a collective people, and to Awa the *va'a* went far beyond simple family relationships, but included neighbours, friends, friends of friends,

anyone with whom a connection could be established. At the time I didn't have a word for this: I learnt the word from my Tongan students years later.

I have, of necessity, left out a number of formative experiences and amazing people who helped me to learn. When I went to the University of Waikato to work with student teachers, I had the privilege of working with colleagues who valued Māori and Pacific ways of thought: Timote Vaoleti, Timoti Harris and Jane Strachan. Timote Vaoleti was my introduction to Tongan philosophy (see particularly his very important work on *'talanoa'* (Vaoleti 2006), and Timoti Harris taught Māori philosophy through *whakatauki* (proverbs and sayings handed down from elders).¹⁰ In Aotearoa New Zealand Māori and Pacific children continue to be underserved by the education system, so this was my focus as a teacher educator—to the extent that one of my students laid an official complaint against me for being biased against Europeans—an interesting consequence to an effort to try to level up the attention paid to minority students.

I worked with teacher education at the University of Waikato for nearly 10 years, and then went to Auckland University of Technology as a specialist in post-graduate education. Here I have had the enormous good fortune to work with doctoral and master's students who are writing the books I could not find in the 1970s. Again, I want to emphasize that I do not have the cultural or philosophic background to teach/tell them anything. But what I can do is to emphasize that their knowledge, and that of their people is valuable in its own right. Although they look at European knowledge to set a context and perhaps to learn an appropriate vocabulary, we always prioritize the indigenous ideas. In every chapter, the indigenous ideas, Māori and /or Pacific, come first.

Although I am conscious that I don't have the deep knowledge of Māori or Pacific philosophy that my students and their indigenous mentors do, my educational process is not that of 'facilitation' (*pace*, Gert Biesta!). Without the knowledge that I have acquired from my friends over the years, I could not support them or 'teach' them in the way that I do. To start with, there is the work of de-programming. Most of them begin with the notion that they have, or are about to develop, a cure for Māori or Pacific educational underachievement, and that the way to do this is somehow to 'fix' Māori or Pacific students. My mantra is, that there is nothing wrong with the young people: it's the context we have to work on. There is a constant pressure on them—from all they have been taught over the years—to assume that what I want, what the examiners will want—are the truisms of education. They have had to learn these things to be as successful as they are, to arrive at a point where they can study for a master's or doctoral degree. The second thing is that, as a result of my Māori and Pacific education, I can understand what they are saying, where their concerns lie, even when they don't have quite the right words for it. I like to say that I know where the bodies are buried... , that in conversation we can play with the student's interests, relate them to the cultural background, and define a space for exploration. The doctorate, fortunately, hinges on the notion of 'contribution to knowledge,' that is, an exploration of an idea that is not currently part of academic discourse. That idea is not arrived at by the magic of 'facilitation.'

I would like to finish by acknowledging my most recent teachers of Māori and Pacific philosophy—my doctoral and master's students. Professor Georgina Stewart has been my friend, student, teacher, and collaborator since about 2000.¹¹ Associate Professor Jacoba Matapo (Matapo 2021),¹² Dr Jeanne Teisina (Teisina 2011, 2021;¹³ Lorraine Pau'uvale (Pau'uvale 2011),¹⁴ Dr Yo Heta-Lensen (Heta-Lensen 2023),¹⁵ Dr Akata Galuvao (Galuvao 2016),¹⁶ Tina Filipino (Filipino 2023)¹⁷ have all contributed

to my understanding of the Māori and Pacific worlds. Georgina (e.g. Stewart 2021) and Yo (Heta-Lensen 2022) have helped me develop a deeper understanding of Māori philosophy, Jacoba (Matapo 2021) and Akata of Samoan thinking; Jeanne and Lorraine of Tongan thinking (Teisina 2011, 2021; Pau’uvale 2011), Tina of Tokelau (Filipo 2022). It is important in the end not to lump them together, as often happens into a box called ‘Māori and Pacific’ or even, as a separate category, Pasifika, although these categories are useful and politically necessary. But that insight, that people think differently, applies within these categories as much as it does to define the difference with Europeans.

I realize this account is somewhat functional, recording only the bare minimum of the experience and engagement: I owe much more to many more people and books. I apologize to all those who have been left out, and point out that many people have taught me what I needed to know at the time I needed. Kia ora tatou, fakafetai.

My learning with Māori and Pacific peoples has, for the most part, been immensely joyous. Occasionally one gets the spillover, of immense frustration with pakeha ignorance and constant discrimination, and my feeling about that, is that you just have to recognize where the anger comes from—and its justifiable grounds—get up, dust yourself off, and plunge back in. Part of my dislike of the whiteness industry as I call it, is its sense of long-suffering, puritanical obligation, of duty, of moral superiority for examining white privilege and forcing themselves to engage with ‘the other.’ Nothing could be further from my experience. My teachers have also been for the most part my friends, and there has been enormous fun and intellectual challenge in the exploration and validation of *difference*.

Although **Nesta Devine** was born in England, she has lived in Aotearoa New Zealand almost all her life, and most of that in the northern half of the North Island. She was educated, like most New Zealanders, in public schools, and attended university at the University of Auckland. She married young, had four children, and now has 7 grandchildren. After teaching History and English in high schools for 25 years, Nesta embarked, or re-embarked on higher education, gaining her Phd in 2001. Since then she has been involved in teacher education, and graduate education, at Waikato University and latterly at the Auckland University of Technology, as Professor of Philosophy of Education. Nesta retired at the beginning of 2023 and is now Professor Emeritus of Auckland University of Technology.

Nesta has published a number of papers in philosophy and politics of education, and in pedagogy. Her speciality is in supervising and supporting doctoral candidates and ‘emerging’ academics, especially in Māori and Pasifika education.

¹ Allison Jones, *This Pakeha Life: An Unsettled Memoir* (Wellington, NZ: Bridget Williams Books, 2020).

² B. Seuili, “*Mea Alofa: A Gift Handed Over: Reflections on Research Methodologies from a Samoan and Counselling Perspective*,” in *Pacific Research in Education Interest Group, Pasifika Symposium 2003: Collection of Papers* (Hamilton: Wilf Malcolm Institute for Educational Research, University of Waikato, 2004), 28-35.

³ Maharaia Winiata, *The Changing Face of Maori Leadership* (Wellington, NZ, Victoria University College, 1960); Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation* (New York. William Morrow and Company, 1928).

⁴ Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (USA. Penguin Modern Classics, 1968).

-
- 5 Kiwi Tamasese, Carmel Peteru, Charles Waldegrave *O le Taaao afua; The New Morning: A Qualitative Investigation into Samoan Perspectives on Mental Health and Culturally Appropriate Services* (Wellington: Family Centre, 1997).
- 6 Nesta Devine, *Education and Public Choice: A Critical Account of the Invisible Hand in Education* (Connecticut, Greenwood, 2004).
- 7 Michael King, *Te Ao Huriburi = the World Moves on : Aspects of Māoritanga* (Auckland N.Z: Longman Paul, 1975).
- 8 Michel Foucault, “Two Lectures,” in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge : Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York, Pantheon Books, 1980), 78-108.
- 9 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999).
- 10 Timote M. Vaioleti, “Talanoa Research Methodology: A Developing Position on Pacific Research,” *Waikato Journal of Education* 12 (2006): 21-34.
- 11 Georgina T. Stewart, *Māori Philosophy: Indigenous Thinking from Aotearoa* (London: Bloomsbury Books, 2020).
- 12 Jacoba Matapo, *Tagata o le Moana—the People of Moana: Traversing Pacific Indigenous Philosophy in Pasifika Education Research* (Auckland University of Technology, 2021), unpublished EdD thesis.
- 13 J.B.W.P. Teisina, *Langa ngaue ‘a e kau faiaiko Akoteu Tonga nofo ‘I Aotearoa, Tongan Early Childhood Education: Building Success from the Teachers’ Perspectives* (Auckland University of Technology, 2011, unpublished Masters thesis), *Fatu Lalanga ‘iFalehanga: Subjectivity in Tongan Thinking, and in New Zealand ECE Policy* (Auckland University of Technology, 2021, unpublished EdD thesis).
- 14 D. L. Pau’uvale, *Laulotaba; Tongan Perspectives of ‘Quality’ in Early Childhood Education* (Auckland: Auckland University of Technology, 2011, Masters thesis).
- 15 Y. Heta-Lensen, *Aka Kaupapa: The Trajectories of Kaupapa Māori as Lived Experience* (Auckland University of Technology, 2022, unpublished Ed D thesis).
- 16 A.Galuvao, *Filimanaia: A Samoan Critique of Standardised Reading Assessment in New Zealand Primary Schools* (Auckland University of Technology, 2016, unpublished PhD thesis).
- 17 K. Filipino, *Navigating for Pasifika in Education—Conversations with Mentors* (Auckland University of Technology, 2022, unpublished Masters thesis).