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| **Speak Up - Kōrerotia****Anti-racism interventions****16 March 2022** |
| Male | This programme was first broadcast on Canterbury’s access media radio station Plains FM 96.9 and was made with the assistance of New Zealand on Air. |
| Female | Coming up next conversations on human rights with “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”, here on Plains FM. |
| Sally | E ngā mana, E ngā reo, E ngā hau e whāTēnā koutou katoaNau mai ki tēnei hōtaka: “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”. Tune in as our guests “Speak Up”, sharing their unique and powerful experiences and opinions and may you also be inspired to “Speak Up” when the moment is right.Mōrena, this is Sally Carlton with “Speak Up” – “Kōrerotia”, today we’re talking about anti-racism and I’m very much looking forward to this kōrero, I think it’s something that is super important anyway but I feel like the world at the moment really needs some important and powerful and probably quite confronting conversations about these sorts of things. We’ve got a couple of guests with us right at the moment, we’re hoping a third one will join us later on but perhaps if Heather Came and Mahdis Azarmandi, you could tell us a wee bit about yourselves and why it is that you’re taking part in today’s conversation. Perhaps Heather, we might start with you. |
| Heather | Kia ora. Ko Heather Came tōku ingoa. I’m a seventh generation Pākehā New Zealander, I’m part of STIR - Stop Institutional Racism - and Tamaki Treaty Workers and also I’m an associate professor at Auckland University of Technology in the public health campus. I’m probably here because I’m passionate about human rights and anti-racism and upholding Te Tiriti o Waitangi. |
| Sally | I think that Te Tiriti is going to be a fundamental part of this kōrero, I imagine, as we move forward. We can’t talk about anti-racism in Aotearoa New Zealand without talking about the Treaty as well. OK, and Mahdis?  |
| Mahdis | Kia ora, I’m Mahdis Azarmandi, I’m a senior lecturer at the University of Canterbury. I guess I am here because my research focuses on anti-racism, possibly also the work I’ve done outside the university on issues of racism as well. I came to Aotearoa as a PhD student, I’m originally from Germany, my parents are from Iran so working on racism is something I’ve been doing now for over 20 years. And yeah, I think it’s nice to have this conversation with Heather who is one of the people I interviewed for my PhD which looked at Pākehā Treaty work as anti-racism work.  |
| Sally | Very cool, that’s a nice circle there. Just to kick us off then, I think if we’re going to be talking about anti-racism today, let’s start with the basics. What is racism? How do you both define it as you go about your work?  |
| Heather | It depends who you are talking to and what shade of racism people are asking about. There’s the personal mediated racism, which is the routine ordinary everyday stuff between people; there’s the cultural racism which is fuelled by the education sector and the media; there’s the institutional racism which is rampant within social institutions - and there’s 100 shades in between but those are the three main ones that I kind of think about. So it’s about a system of power that disadvantages one group, advantages another. It can manifest as action or inaction in the face of need, it’s just not very nice, it’s violence, it’s violence.  |
| Mahdis | I agree with Heather that racisms manifests slightly differently across these different levels. I really like the definition used by Ruth Wilson Gilmore which I know sounds very maybe theoretical for some people but she describes racism as “the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” - which really kind of situates racism as a system of violence that can be direct and also indirect so it can be you know, the violence that literally kills you and the violence that takes away life opportunities and life chances; so, who has access to resources that make life more liveable. So I think that’s one of them and I’m very adamant to acknowledge the colonial roots of racism as it manifests today and that we need to talk about white supremacy as a system - not just white supremacy as a phenomenon of the KKK or some far right fringe - but that white supremacy refers to a system of power that privileges life chances for some people but also certain types of knowledge, certain types of practices and so forth. So I would add that to my definition of how I understand racism.  |
| Sally | And then if we’re thinking about racism across these different levels using these different definitions depending on who you’re talking with, depending what kind of context you’re in, how do we then think about anti-racism? I always think about anti-racism as something that’s active; it’s not just not-racism, it’s something that’s got some active component, to me anyway. |
| Mahdis | Definitely, I think it needs to be an action-oriented stance. So it is not just the absence of racism, it’s the active opposition to structures that enable racism. But it goes beyond that too. I think sometimes when we think of the word ‘anti’, we think it is just a response, it’s the opposite, it’s the inverse of something and I think anti-racism is actually so much more, it’s also about envisioning a system in which racism is no longer present. Right, so it also entails that for me. Sometimes we mistake the presence of visible forms - and I say ‘visible’ because we often measure racism by things that are really tangible to the eye - as being anti-racist and I think there’s a flaw. I also think that racism, because it entails violence is always attached to risk. It poses risk for the people it targets so therefore anti-racism has to be accompanied by taking a risk. If the work that we do that is supposedly anti-racist doesn’t take a risk at all, I always say I’m not quite sure it’s doing what we are saying it does. So it means if it doesn’t rock the boat, if it doesn’t make people uncomfortable, if it doesn’t redistribute certain forms of resources, it might not be delivering on what it is promising.  |
| Heather | Kia ora, I love how everyone has a different answer to these questions. As a public health person, I think about anti-racism as an art and a science just like public health. We came up with this definition that we were using for our briefing paper we wrote in the hope to influence the National Action Plan on Racism and our definition is; “It is the art and science of naming, reducing, disrupting, preventing, dismantling and eliminating racism. It takes a multiplicity of forms that centre around solidarity with those targeted by racism, analysis of power and a commitment to reflective, transformative practice. In the context of Aotearoa, it involves engagement with Te Tiriti o Waitangi”. But obviously there’s a number of groups in the New Zealand context that experience racism but yeah, I specialise in racism targeting Māori.  |
| Sally | Given you’ve mentioned those different groups there, we’re talking about different kinds of definitions or different labels or types of racism almost. Do you notice or distinguish between racism of different kinds depending on different groups being targeted?  |
| Mahdis | I personally don’t, I don’t think there are distinct forms of racism, I think they manifest slightly differently. So I think it’s important to kind of keep in mind that there’s an overarching structural logic here in which racism operates because I don’t think that racism is arbitrary, right? Like, it’s not something that always has existed and therefore somehow has to always has to continue to exist. But I do think that depending on communities that we look at, we need to look for different forms of how these discourses appear. So for example the way media representation depicts Māori is very different from how it might depict Muslim populations or Asian populations so it does show up slightly differently but it doesn’t mean that they are distinct unique forms of racism. I think some of them have their specificity and whakapapa, so they have their own genealogies that are worthwhile acknowledging and I’m thinking here of anti-Semitism that has such a long history and such a, in some ways unique history as well, so I don’t want to gloss over the specificities. But I think when we think of solidarity, which is in Heather’s definition which is so important, is that we need to understand that somehow we need to see these things as interconnected and that’s how we can bring them together. And in a settler colonial context, it’s even more important not to reduce indigenous people as one amongst lots of groups who experience racism, like in a multi-cultural context where all these minorities are kind of the same. But to acknowledge that indigenous people and indigenous sovereignty has a completely different place so which is why it is important to put Te Tiriti at the centre of conversation on racism because of the context we are in, right, so for me it is also thinking about racism in translation and thinking anti-racism in translation. So what might have been an anti-racist approach let’s say in Germany, might be useful and might have some insights for here but it cannot replace thinking from here and thinking from the local history of here and keeping in mind that, you know, this is a settler colony where conversation is ongoing.  |
| Heather | Yes and I think about Kevin Dunn’s work and how… and it’s self-evident when you think about it, that racism is different in different places. How they do it in the south of the United States is different than how they do it in Australia and different than how they do it in South Africa. So there’s something that’s the same because it’s a system of power and it’s violence but yeah, there’s unique bits to it but it’s much more interesting working out how to disrupt it rather than describing the problem because we’ve been describing the problem for a long time and it’s much more fun to disrupt.  |
| Sally | On that note we might move quickly into the talk on disruption. However, just quickly as we do, do we have a sense of how pervasive it is and if so, do we have any form of measuring or gauging? I guess as complaints through to the Human Rights Commission for example and obviously there are large-scale events like we’ve seen here in Christchurch a couple of years ago, we’re actually almost at the second year anniversary of the 15th March mosque attacks - but other than that, do we have a sense of how pervasive it may be? |
| Heather | I don’t think the Human Rights Commission data is very complete, I don’t think many people write complaints when they experience racism and send it in to the Human Rights Commission. So I don’t think their data is very complete. I think academics sometimes record, collect stuff but I don’t think there’s any comprehensive data about the extent of the problem. But for me as a health worker, you can see the racism manifest as health inequities and in the tertiary education sector, it manifests as ethnic inequalities and health and education outcomes. So that’s your evidence of racism more than people logging complaints because for a number of people, it’s an everyday occurrence. When it’s a little thing, a microaggression, it’s just incredibly ordinary. It’s what I hear people talk about and that’s shocking, it’s become a normalised part of many people’s days. And one person experiencing racism is one too many. |
| Mahdis | I think when we talk about measurements of racism, we kind of forget what it is that enables the things that happen. So we are kind of focusing on who experiences and when is it manifested and when can we record it which again as I said earlier, it puts a focus on these really extreme cases of direct violence, if somebody is physically harmed or there is a slur word that we can clearly identify as being racially loaded and then that person sitting down and making a submission about it or complaining to the police about it in order for it to be recorded. But it kind of neglects how, in the everyday fabric of our system, they are inequities or that design institutions in the image of certain people and not others and I think sometimes it helps us to look: who does this system work for? And that, of course, is much harder to measure. So you know, like going into the university and seeing who is represented in the university, who is in the top positions in the university, who has really good academic achievement. So some people assume that that is just because of hard work and others understand that there is a system at play that puts obstacles in the way of some people and less obstacles in the way of other people. So I think like racism is not just, like, the incidents that happen that are explicit, it’s also the everyday fabric of society and that is I think really hard to acknowledge because everybody agrees that these overt extreme cases are bad and I would say the vast majority of people actually don’t endorse these really openly racist events but many people accept poor health outcomes, less education access, less access to housing, staggering poverty rates and they don’t think that those outcomes have anything to do with racism.  |
| Sally | I guess as well on that there’s all the intersectionality that comes into play as well. If we’re thinking about things like poverty and intergenerational poverty, that’s race combined with disability combined with gender combined with etc etc etc. OK I would like to have our first song now, we’ve actually had our song chosen by Derek who hasn’t yet joined us but he chose ‘War’ by Bob Marley and the Wailers.  |
|  | **MUSIC BY BOB MARLEY & THE WAILERS – WAR** |
| Sally  | Ko Speak Up Kōrerotia tēnei, we’re talking about anti-racism and interventions for anti-racism. And Heather made the good point before: we talk and we talk and we talk about these sorts of things but what is it we can actually do to try and enact some real change, some actual tangible change that we might see? So over to you both to think about what are actually some of these interventions, things that people are doing to implement anti-racism policies, and practices for that matter. |
| Heather | Well it’s a whole bunch of people working on constitutional transformation so that we have a foundation to our government and our state so that it will uphold Te Tiriti, He Whakaputunga and tikanga and that’s extraordinary, brave and courageous and visionary work that initially was led by Margaret Mutu, Moana Jackson and a whole lot of Māori activists where they went around the country and spoke at over 300 hui, talked about that kaupapa and then managed to distil it and put it into an amazing report where they offered the challenge to non-Māori to respond by 2020 and they wanted it implemented by 2040. So that’s one of the major anti-racist projects of our time, extraordinary piece of work and as of yet, we haven’t had a lot of response from tauiwi in relation to that, there’s been some. So that’s an obvious big one. |
| Mahdis | So I always think about like responding at different layers, I think there’s people doing work at civil society levels. So there’s activists that organise I think like Matike Mai broader level but also at smaller levels. I think the work that activists do educating within communities, I think the work of Asians Supporting Tino Rangatiratanga that run workshops about Te Tiriti specifically for migrant populations of Asian descent, where they take into account the unique experience of Asian migration in Aotearoa which also needs to be acknowledged and shouldn’t be erased. I think about interventions that happen at legal levels. So we know that legally speaking, it is actually not allowed to be overtly racist, right, like we’ve criminalised certain racist behaviours, we’ve removed being able to have openly racist legislation - which doesn’t mean that legislation cannot be interpreted in ways that enables racism, I think that’s really important. We acknowledge the importance of ideas about inclusion and human rights and I wouldn’t necessarily anti-racism but those ideas within our education sector. So I think there’s different layers at which people do that and then there’s the everyday. So I think you know, as a woman of colour in the university, just the existence of people who have been signalled for centuries that they shouldn’t be in institution is also an act of resistance, it’s slightly different from pushing for largescale constitutional transformation by 2040. So I do want to acknowledge that some of these things are more in our every day and maybe not as largescale. So I always say I think we intervene at different levels and we need those coordinated efforts at all levels and sometimes it’s easier to push further, make more radical demands when you’re not embedded within state institutions. I find state institutions are hard to navigate, there’s a lot of bureaucracy, there’s only as much as you can push which is why we probably see different stances towards racism across different political parties, you know the stance the National Party might take is slightly different from the one that the Green Party might take. So I think we intervene at these different levels because racism manifests at different levels and luckily in this country I guess, Te Tiriti o Waitangi is actually a document that is available to us as a guiding document. So we in some ways have something that other countries don’t, that’s there that’s available to us that people are making… like, that people are using to think about constitutional transformation. I always wonder what would that look like if we did that across the board. So yeah, I guess my response to that is people do different things at different levels.  |
| Heather | And certainly there’s amazing work that Kupu Taea have done which is an Auckland-based research group that has mapped the negative talk about Māori in the media and then they developed this amazing, really helpful pamphlet about how to disrupt it. There’s amazing work by Tauiwi Tautoko that challenges racism on the internet and they’ve been training up people about how to do that. There’s that long, long history of the work of Pākehā Treaty workers trying to educate people be Te Tiriti colonisation and racism. Every corner where there’s racism, there’s people resisting and usually people take action within their sphere of influence and so that’s why sometimes, you know, sometimes my mahi is at the university, sometimes it’s in the health sector but much more powerful than individual action is that collective action when people pool their spheres of influence and then you can go much further. And that’s part of the magic of what we’re doing with our Te Tiriti-based anti-racism extravaganza that’s coming up next Saturday, is that we’re mobilising people, we’re giving people open access to information and encouraging them to get out there and mix it up and so I’m hoping that we’ll see a flurry of anti-racism activities as a result of that collective input of piecing that programme together for people.  |
| Mahdis | And I think I would add, I always differentiate between… I’m very much like a macro person, I personally really like the analysis of racism, I think it’s really helpful when the better your analysis is, the easier it is to figure out where the problem sits exactly… is to not mistake this individual learning and the individual responses of disruption as a replacement for systemic change and I see that with you know, our responses to climate change are oh you should buy a keep cup and not use the plastic cups. It doesn’t actually touch the problem. If plastic being pumped into our climate is the problem, then me making an individual choice can never be the solution. So if racism is being reproduced at these really largescale institutional levels, then it’s always limited how much we can do by individually raising consciousness. I always remind people, it doesn’t mean that we stop doing that work because that work is really critical to build mass and build up pressure and to bring different stakeholders together so we can organise together, like I think solidarity amongst groups is fundamental in that. But to remember that our anti-racism strategy cannot rest alone on education right, because we’ve been doing that since 1945 when we really started thinking about anti-racism in western countries and that education hasn’t really manifested the anti-racist future everybody imagined.  |
| Heather | And I think there’s real limitations if you put all your eggs in the basket of education and expect that to transform the world. I certainly think the importance of systems change and that you mobilise people and you get change agents and you build a shared understanding and then you do that whole have a go, reflect, have another go and just stick at it and you build more and more people that are committed to the kaupapa and you get a critical mass and then the magic is happening. And certainly it’s exciting within our university at the moment, we’re doing a whole programme of change in our faculty. Me and my friend Judith, two days a month, we’re doing Treaty training for tauiwi and talking about racism and not only are we doing that, is that we’ve built a team site to create a community of learning for our colleagues and we’ve got an alumni network so that we meet once a month and follow up and there’s a roving group of tauiwi folk that you can access to get advice and support about how to deal with some of this stuff.And so we’re building our capacity at a systemic level and then we’ve created this pool of people and we’re kind of nearly getting to the point of critical mass which is very exciting to be able to do in your own workplace. So fingers crossed that that will hold the magic. |
| Sally | I’m envisaging as you’re talking, using the analogy of the keep cup, that all of a sudden the equivalent of the banning of the plastic bags takes place in the racism sphere, how cool would that be.  |
| Heather | Well let’s see what the students and the staff say because of the part of that process is we’ve been doing regular mapping of the racism. And I’ll never forget the day where people wrote down where’s the racism and obviously people said the classrooms, the curriculum, the enrolment process, the promotion process but people said “the staffroom” and that made my heart sink. And people said, “in the hallway”. I think it’s up to our students to tell us when we’ve sorted the problem and our colleagues and at the moment I don’t think our students would say we’ve sorted that yet. I’m sure that’s not a unique story to the university that I work for. |
| Mahdis | No I would second that. I think when I - I teach in the School of Education now but my background is in politics, I do often feel like a fish out of water so I don’t often know is this because I’m outside my discipline or this is what education is actually like - is that I meet so many people who are so well intentioned and operate from the assumption that their engagement with the world comes from a place of inclusion and then to point out that somehow things that they say and do actually are the opposite of that. That they’re discriminating and hurtful and gatekeeping is really difficult. So when I talk to my students about racism and they share their experiences with me, it’s really heart-breaking but I also look at my students because they know it’s the same for me, right. Like they know that the experiences they share isn’t just their experience, it’s actually the experience that I have when I go back into a meeting, when I work with colleagues. So I think sometimes in conversations with racism, it’s really easy for us to see the problem elsewhere. So in New Zealand that is “but Australia is so much worse” - so that’s putting it somewhere else. “Oh but Christchurch is so much worse than the rest of the country” - again, it’s putting it somewhere worse. Or “the working class tend to be more ignorant” or “it’s really just the people who have gone down the rabbit hole of conspiracy theory”. And I think it’s so much more difficult for us to sit down and say, “Where am I part of this problem? Where am I doing my bit to uphold it?” which is also really important… I always say racism isn’t about being evil. I understand racism is violence and I don’t want to say that violence is ever benign but for people to hear oh this is racist and for them to hear oh something is rotten inside of me, I must be a horrible person - that needs to change. Because people hear oh I’ve been compared to Hitler, right. I feel sometimes when I talk about racism, that’s what people hear and I always say no, it’s the air you breathe. It’s the air we all breathe so we all do our bit to maintain it or we all do our bit to dismantle it. We don’t do that all the time; like, there are days when I ignore something that is said because I don’t have the energy. It's also learning about where our energy is best focused on, really building networks and alliances and having people fight alongside you. I kind of like this analogy of being in this as people who fight. That’s why solidarity is so important but if I think about it at work, the issue isn’t what parents say or what my students say. The institutional most powerful stuff is what the institution does or where people look the other way. So I think a lot of racism is maintained not because people actively participate but because they willingly stand by.  |
| Heather | I think there’s a lot of people that observe it and do nothing and it’s like that Alice Walker essay about where are the people we’re waiting for and these people are waiting for other folk. And STIR was going to run a t-shirt but we haven’t got organised yet because we’re a tiny community group. But we still want to make the t-shirt ‘anti-racism is a verb’, so it’s about doing something. And I get that it can be uncomfortable and it’s complex for those of us that have got whakapapa that’s been here a long time and we’ve been the beneficiaries of colonisation but we can’t change the past but we can change the future and what happens next. I reckon that we can turn this around, I wouldn’t be doing this work if I didn’t believe that. And I remember I went to visit Derek - who isn’t here yet, he must have got the time zones wrong - I went to do a talk for him at his university in Tennessee, Nashville. He got me to do about anti-racism and I did and then the questions were like nothing I’d had before. It turned out at the after match that the questions came from a place where they were so used to seeing racism everywhere, they just didn’t know what to do with someone turning up who believed that racism could be knocked off, that we could have a world, a day, we could have an hour, we could have a week, we could have a lifetime, without racism. And so I think it’s critical that we try and imagine what it’s like and then work back sometimes. Because if you can’t imagine it, it’s pretty hard to stay motivated. But anyway, different people have different adventures around that but I do remember that being a very interesting insight and I thought wow, I’ve got a completely different experience of this than these people that I’m working with. There’s just always so much more to learn, such complexity but you have a go, you reflect and you have another go. |
| Mahdis | It’s ongoing, I don’t think there is a point where we’re like OK this is it, we’re done, you know we can stop doing the work. Because it’s shown us that for the past 500 years it’s managed to survive, it’s manage to adapt itself, exclude new people, included some of the people it used to exclude, and it’s really important that for me in anti-racism, that that understands that what I do here doesn’t neatly translate to another context. That there’s a context outside of this nation. So I think sometimes people talk about oh what do we here and this is what works here and this is how racism identifies people and treats them and these are the stereotypes but it doesn’t necessarily translate. So I think as a transnational person who has moved in and out of so many contexts, I always think about that when people say oh what does it mean to pass. What does it mean to be rationalised and I think about this always in a conversation with a broader global system, right? Like, I think what’s really important for us to keep that global system in mind and to think about an anti-racist stand that reconsiders our relationships to each other but I would also like to add our relationship to land, earth and how that does not… like, that doesn’t end with the borders of a nation. And I think about that also in the light of Covid and its disproportionate impact on populations. I mean, we’ve seen that has been very well documented on its impact on Māori communities, Māori health experts pointed that out from the very get-go and were willingly ignored. But we also see that now that the economic impact of the pandemic is going to be felt in rural communities, in disproportionately marginalised communities much more. We saw that with migrant populations who had zero social network, no access to benefits so they are differences that we need to think about. Like, we can’t say here is a one-size-fits-all, we do this and that’s going to work for everyone else because there are intersections. These things show up slightly differently for populations and I always say if we focus on the ones that are most marginalised, chances are that everyone else is going to do pretty well as well. But we kind of focus on what works for the majority and cross our fingers and hope for the best. |
| Heather | I can imagine the end but I also know it’s an ongoing process. I hold both those things as a bit of a paradox at the same time because it’s about refinement. But it’s interesting how some people just get more sophisticated in their racism after they go to the course; they’ve got different language but it still is dodgy. I think it’s really interesting the possibilities we have about Te Tiriti-based anti-racism and what that offers that’s unique here and I think if we upheld Te Tiriti, I think that would make a world of difference in terms of the institutional racism. But of course we haven’t seen a lot of quality examples of how that’s succeeded. We’ve seen some valiant efforts in the 1980s and 1990s but after the charismatic individuals that led that mahi moved onto different organisations or were pushed out, the work got unravelled behind them. So I think something that’s really important to consider is that sustainability of the work and that’s the bit that we’ve never ever come close to nailing here is about how do you sustain change. Because we’ve had big victories and then slip slide and I’m hoping that with the rise of some seriously unpleasant stuff through Covid, that the tide isn’t turning. |
| Mahdis | Yeah and to connect these systems of oppression again, when I say intersectionality I think of gender, I think of disability but I also think of class. For me there is no racism without racial capitalism and I’m always a little bit reluctant to think oh if just black and brown people and Māori and indigenous people are richer, that somehow racism is going to disappear. There’s the tough conversations for us - and I include myself, they’re tough for everyone, I’m not just addressing white people here. We need to think about how do we build these solidarities, why is it that it serves a system to divide us because it does and we shouldn’t do the work of the system for it by deliberately staying in our silos and maybe thinking about oh if this community has something, it means that I won’t. Like, I think we need to really change our mentality and not operate always from a possibility of scarcity which I think is a very capitalist reflection of how we think about change, that there’s a finite resource and we have to all fight for it. But what if we imagined a world in which we said actually there’s enough to look after everybody and everybody should be looked after and this is the way we come together collectively and if tauiwi fight for equity in the health system for Māori that doesn’t come at a loss for everyone else right, or when we fight for equity to housing or some sort of regulation for this horrific housing market, we’re not talking about some utopian impossibility. Sometimes I feel like my work is really horrible and it’s waking up and smacking my head against the wall every day and it’s really dark and really upsetting. But then I also think I must be such an optimist. Deep down I must be an optimist and wake up and choose to do this work over and over and over again. So I think we underestimate that the people who fight aren’t negative killjoys who want to make everyone’s life uncomfortable by talking about racism at the dinner table. Actually these people operate from a place of really critical hope because we actually believe that it’s possible to live in a world without racism.  |
| Sally | That seems like a really nice positive note to have our next song on. So we’ll have a waiata.  |
| Heather | It’s like having a Bob Marley tribute hour, we need to play the Redemption Song of course. |
| Sally | Sounds like a great choice to me, here it is: Redemption Song. |
|  | **MUSIC BY BOB MARLEY – REDEMPTION SONG** |
| Sally | You’re listening to Speak Up – Kōrerotia with Heather Came and Mahdis Azarmandi and we’re talking about anti-racism interventions. Heather’s part of an organising committee for the upcoming Te Tiriti-based Futures and Anti-Racism conference - or maybe it’s a speaker series, or maybe it’s an extravaganza as you referred to it before, Heather? - anyway, it’s coming up and there are a whole list of really fantastic-sounding speakers. I’d be keen to hear a wee bit about the conference Heather, but also about some of the behind-the-scenes type working. How do you come up with who is going to speak, have you had any opposition to raising this sort of awareness, these kinds of things, for people who might be looking forward to posting their own anti-racism events in the future? Is it like organising any other kind of event or are there special things that need to be considered? |
| Heather | That’s a lot of questions all wrapped into one question. It’s the second time we’ve run this event and we’re going to keep doing it every other year because we need a rest year of sorts in between. It came from a kōrero by Moana Maniapoto on Twitter where she challenged us to… she challenged tauiwi to organise and do more decolonisation work and she suggested we do it on Waitangi Day and we spoke to our folk and they said too busy and so we thought we’d go with International Race Relations Day. So the programme is crowd sourced from endless conversations with endless people about what would be good. There’s between 50 and 100 volunteers that pull it together, there is no conference organising crew. We get donations from families sometimes and individuals and sometime bigger organisations. It’s a mixed team of Māori, non-Māori, tauiwi of colour on the organising crew. We wrote a paper about what was special about it but it’s still lost in the peer review process, it takes a long time. The magic of it is that it’s about friends and that it’s about open access, that it’s about giving people access to these speakers because people have had to pay hundreds of dollars to hear these people normally and this time you can just… if you’ve got data on your phone or you can get to a place where the internet is, you’re good to go and there’s lots of special bits to it. Because people contribute according to their needs so some people moderate, some people write a cheque. One of my favourites was from Decol 2020 when somebody went around the homeless folk and got them data for their phones so they could listen to Moana Jackson and it was like, how special is that. What’s special about how we organise? It’s quite relational within the group, some of us were friends at the beginning but we’re all friends now and because it’s all being organised virtually, many of us have never met in real life. So we’ve got a relationship but we’ve never been in the room and I so hoped that this year was the year we were going to get to be face-to-face at the marae on day one but two days ago we decided everything is virtual. So there will be no going for a kai after because everyone will be safe in their little houses. I’m sorry I haven’t told you the secrets.  |
| Sally | I didn’t really expect there to be any. Mahdis, you’ve presented at various anti-racism events that I’ve been to down in Ōtautahi and I guess from a point of view of someone who presents or speaks at these sorts of events, what is it that motivates you, I guess, to take part in them? |
| Mahdis | I guess what motivates me is because I quite enjoy talking about my… about the work I do, but also it’s an area that I actually feel really confident in. So I feel like if people want to talk about anti-racism, I am keen to do it. I have become increasingly wary of when I say yes and how I do it because I think how things are organised is fundamental. I learn so much and I have to really give a big shout out to the people who organised a conference with… a decade ago. That was a decolonise the city conference in Berlin that was a conference like I had never seen before, like I’d never experienced before and that connected so many important people with each other and that centred knowledge, not in a really hierarchical way that sometimes the university tends to do and that was everything was intentional. Every conversation that was curated was intentional, every speaker was intentional. We had politics of the mic so it was not a single all-male panel, it was not a single all-white panel. In fact, we were centring voices of scholars and activists and always putting them in conversations in which they could complement but also challenge maybe some of their viewpoints. We had a sliding scale of what you had to pay so I always look for that: am I an afterthought in somebody’s planning? Has everything been planned and I am the last person to be invited? That’s a really red flag. It shows where people’s priorities are.Do people have an involvement with mana whenua when they do things here in person? I think that’s another one that I always look for. And, is the involvement tokenistic in order to open and have a closing karakia or is it because you think there’s something that they can contribute? So I look for that. I also look, particularly when it comes to conversations on anti-racism, whose voice is at the centre? Whose voices are amplifying? What messages are we amplifying? Are we bringing people up? There’s an immense amount of gatekeeping, not just in anti-racism organising, in any form of organising, in any form of academic work, probably pretty much also in corporations but that’s not my area of work so I don’t know.I also see it as a red flag when people think there can only be one person who does that. You know, like, we already have one main speaker who talks for the Muslim community. When I see the same person, even if that’s an amazing person on a panel, I also ask myself did you not look hard enough or is this person not extending invitations to other people? Again I don’t think I lose when somebody else talks about racism but I do sometimes wonder how people choose who they give a platform to because the platform is also a form of power. So are we centring somebody who says oh a little bit of sprinkle of anti-racism and we’re all kumbaya, hug the tree, or are we actually putting somebody who makes people feel really uncomfortable and who might have demands that are beyond just having a brown face at the table. I think those are some things that I look for when people invite me. I’m also wary when people invite speakers to talk when the institution is funding but doesn’t want to compensate the speaker. I think that’s very different when community groups ask you to do something. I make decisions based on that but the main one probably is who is centred and am I an afterthought, you know, am I just the spice that’s added to something because otherwise it would have been very white. |
| Heather | Certainly with our one, every speaker and every chair was curated and matched and thought about and there was discussions about them. So it took nine months, it was nine months working on the programme for Decol 2022 which was a long time. I just have to chip in this story about the time I was invited to speak at a health inequalities conference and I was on Twitter and hadn’t looked and hadn’t done my due diligence. They were charging people $1500 a day to go to this conference on inequalities and I just though OMG. So I contacted the organisers and said what the hell and they said oh don’t worry, you don’t have to pay to go and we can give you a free spot and it’s like I pulled out then and there as you would expect because it’s like really? You’ve set up this thing to focus on inequalities and you’re charging people exorbitant amounts, it was a business venture, it wasn’t about the kaupapa. |
| Mahdis | Because companies organise conferences. I think it’s an interesting example, because I went to that conference with… AVC Māori invited me to tag along, like you kind of do that work, you should be involved in these things and we, all of us were like, “Who organises a conference for $1500?” and it’s expected that practitioners come and their institution pays for it. So it’s like OK if you work in a hospital and the hospital is going to pay for your registration fee then you go but it’s not about the kaupapa, it’s about a company making money putting on a conference which is very different, right? I think it’s important to expose those things and it was the first thing that was said at the conference actually, was the opening statement was by the person who chaired the entire conference was what are we talking about equity when you’re asking people to pay $1500 to come and talk about inequality and I think yeah, we see a lot of that and we’re going to see a lot more of it because now it’s becoming a buzzword, it’s become… there’s going to be this window where it’s going to be popular to talk about anti-racism before that window closes and so many people are going to jump on the bandwagon and use it to make money or make a name for themselves. I think the danger of corruption exists within every struggle, I don’t think it’s unique to racism but I think it’s something to be mindful of.  |
| Heather | It was an interesting conference to not attend. |
| Sally | Just as we finish up. Any final words you would like to pass on?  |
| Heather | Have a go, reflect and have another go, and think about registering for Te Tiriti-based Futures Anti-Racism 2022. It’s free, it’s ten days of fabulousness starting next Saturday going through to the following week, it’s something for everyone. Have a listen, get involved, have a chip in. |
| Mahdis | I don’t really have anything specific, I feel like I should have had something more catchy to say but yeah, it’s ungrateful work but you lose some friends, you make some new ones so I think that’s kind of my message.  |
| Sally | Tēnā kōrua, thank you so much both of you, you’re both highly expert in this area and it’s been really fantastic hearing your wisdom and your insight so thank you very, very much.  |
| Both | Thank you |
|  | **MUSIC BY BOB MARLEY – GET UP STAND UP** |