

Exegesis:

Fuluhi ki tua ke kitia mitaki a mua:
Turn backwards so that you may see forward well

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An exegesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Creative Writing (MCW)

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Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Candidate's signature

NAME: Rob Luisi

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Oue tulu tulou.

Intellectual Property rights

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Ethics Approval

This research project did not involve human participants or any other potentially contentious elements, and as such did not require approval from the AUT Ethics Committee (AUTEK).

Abstract

Unwanted is a novel (Creative element) accompanied by a critical work (exegesis),
Fuluhi ki tua ke kitia mitaki a mua: Turn backwards so that you may see forward well.
It follows the coming of age story of a young pre-teen Niuean boy, being raised by
extended family after his single mother passes his care to her older sister.

The thesis asks the question, of whether a bildungsroman novel (coming of age)
can be written which, while set in Aotearoa New Zealand (namely Tāmaki Makaurau
– Auckland) can embrace and evoke whakapapa and cosmological connections to the
Pacific, namely Niue while capturing the complex cultural and social experiences of
Auckland in the 1970s (particularly the fraught events of The Dawn Raids).

The critical work (Exegesis) supports the novel (Creative element) by exploring
the dilemma of cultural and generational space in those world views framed within the
context of diaspora, themes of identity and belonging, and how the migrant experience
influences the development of the central character.

Exegesis

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Face backwards so that you may see forward well

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Fuluhi ki tua, ke kitia mitaki a mua

Talahauaga a Niue

The talahauaga above translates to, ‘Turn backwards so that you may see forward well.’¹ This proverb and its meaning cross many Moana Pasifika cultures and languages as artist and author Kolokesa Mahina- Tuai surmises:

“There is a Moana belief that we walk forward into the past and backwards into the future, both of which are constantly mediated in the changing present, where the past is put in front as a guiding principle and the future, situated behind, is brought to bear on past experiences.”²

The talahauaga in this case is an affirmation to embrace the fullness of who we are as Niuean, by understanding how we got to be at this place and time. For whom we are is tied to our tupuna, our ancestors who have come before us. It is with their aspirations, their achievements, their challenges, and their legacies that we discover our futures.

Scholar Epeli Hauofa, speaks to this paradigm poetically in *Pasts to remember*, and talks to the importance of Oceanic communities holding on to our knowledges and sense of belonging, as foundations with which to navigate far into the past ahead.³

In his memoir, *Out of the Vaiepe, the Deadwater: A writers early life*, Maualaivao Albert Wendt posits, “We are what we remember, or want to remember”.⁴ His reflections on his experiences as a person and as a writer are a reminder that the histories and stories we keep and share are deliberate and shape and inform our identity as much as the stories we omit or conveniently forget.

For Niuean diaspora, the question of identity has become increasingly poignant as the impacts of mass emigration to Aotearoa between the 1950s and 70s⁵ resulted in an accelerated dissipation of language and culture within the space of one generation. The first Niuean children born in New Zealand were among the first to no longer communicate in their mother tongue. Loss of language led to further cultural markers

eroding over time from assimilation, intermarriage and cross cultural relationships.⁶ In that vein, I indulge a little personal insight to experiences that have brought me to this point in time, as a person and as I embark on this quest to pen a creative manuscript of Niuean experiences in Aotearoa.

Growing up in 1980's Auckland, as a first generation Aotearoa born, it was a rare occurrence to see the Niuean existence reflected in mainstream culture. To clarify mainstream, I mean the dominant discourse within Aotearoa being European or Palagi. This provided little motivation to embrace the culture I did not know, the culture of my parents which was often ridiculed by my Maori and Palagi friends as being fresh and fob.

Most of my West Auckland classmates had never heard of Niue (even those descended from the Moana region) let alone find it on a map. Either Niue was literally not on the map⁷, or could only be seen as Savage Island, thanks to Captain James Cook's brief but colourful interaction with the locals in 1774.⁸ Others keen to find it may have been confused about the spelling, looking for something that matched palagi teacher's pronunciation of "New-way," in comparison to the phonetically correct "Knee-ew-eh." Not recognising Polynesian vowels, I too, like many other children born and schooled in New Zealand, repeated the former pronunciation even though I knew it was wrong. I may not have been able to speak the language, but I could recognise it by ear.

I remember seeing a New Zealand film in 1988 called *Queen City Rocker*⁹ with some of my friends and cousins. It was cool that we could recognize places in the film like K (Karangahape) Road and Queen Street. We were all Niuean, crowded around a TV at a church youth live in watching it on VHS and our ears pricked up during a scene because one of the central characters and his Grandmother spoke in vagahau.

“Fakaaue lahi,”¹⁰ Mark Pilisi’s character said thanking his grandmother who was giving him a cup of tea, before she continued to encourage him in vagahau to use his good and gentle nature as opposed to his bad. The sense of pride I felt to hear the language of my culture and heritage come through the TV was one of affirmation. It was like Mark Pilisi’s character Andrew, was representing all of us in the room. The emotions going through me were reflected by everyone else as we voiced our joy at seeing one of our own. To Pilisi’s credit, and without bias (I’m sure) he probably gave the best acting performance in the film too so that helped with our sense of joy.

What was interesting at the time, was up until that point of the film we all thought Mark Pilisi and his character was Maori or Samoan. They were the only brown or Polynesian people that usually made it on TV as far as we could tell so we were hardwired I guess to not even expect that one of us could make it to the big screen.

What we didn’t know, and what I only discovered later watching it again with my mum and dad, was that the film also featured another Niuean Tony Nogotautama better known as musician ‘Tony T’,¹¹ who during a scene plays in the band he was part of at the time. One of New Zealand’s up and coming bands back then Ardjjjah.¹²

These experiences illustrate a lived example of what Wendt reflects on as an ever present search for meaning which in essence is about survival. Survival of our person and our experiences and histories. For as Wendt contemplates, “...we are all shit scared of having no meaning or worth.”¹³

In the absence of acceptance we swivel our social compass towards meaning and reinvent ourselves without ever changing ourselves. For I couldn’t see that Niueanness was all around me as a kid, not even when it stared me back in the mirror as I did not value it until it was validated through mainstream culture.

Niuean writer and playwright Maree Webster displays an insight to this inner turmoil in her 2006 short film *Like milk*,¹⁴ where her main character bathes in milk desperate to lighten her skin and be like her Palagi school mates, as peer ridicule took a toll on her wellbeing.

Playwright Vela Manusaute's 2014 stage play *My name is Pilitome*¹⁵ was his first Niuean work and told a story of a young Niuean boy from Mangere visiting Niue for the first time, unable to see any worth in the island by the measures that he had become accustomed to being raised in Aotearoa.

Thus cultural denial is now part of my history as much as it has become Niuean history and will remain for generations to come, weaved into the fabric of Niuean identity, and is an important theme posited in my thesis in a reflective manner as opposed to a defeatist lament, as this is not to be viewed as a negative point of our history but rather a reminder and confirmation of our intrinsic self-worth.

The thesis *Unwanted* attempts, in the first instance, to tell a Niuean story. A story that gives insight to Niuean diasporic experiences in Aotearoa through the point of view of a 12 year old boy who is placed in the care of his Aunt and Uncle. It is an opportunity to explore the question of 'How we got here?' Not in the literal sense of course, but understanding the influences that shape our sense of self, and our attitudes toward identity.

It is also an opportunity to contribute to the works by Niuean story tellers that offer insight and depth to the Niuean narrative. As one of the smaller Moana nations that make up the Pacific diaspora community in Aotearoa, the Niuean experience can be and has been, to some extent, dwarfed or lumped in with the larger nations of the Moana.

Being set in the mid 1970s *Unwanted*, allows the reader a look into a pivotal time frame in the development of the Niuean identity. Niuean's had been seeking employment opportunities abroad in other parts of the Pacific taking up work in places like Fiji, Samoa and Pago Pago,^{16 -19} prior to joining the wave of Pacific migration responding to overtures from New Zealand to remedy the labour shortages of the post-World War 2 economic boom.²⁰ Niuean's viewed this as an opportunity to escape the often-difficult subsistence life experienced on the island.

Creative works by Niuean contributors John Pule and Pauly Fuemana also capture the motivation of this mass movement to New Zealand in their works.

Fuemana, born in Aotearoa in 1969 achieved worldwide fame for his Number one hit song 'How bizarre',²¹ before immortalising the aspiration of early Niuean migrants to New Zealand in an ode to his father, 'Land of plenty',²² making reference to the hope, and good times he and his kinfolk left the homeland for during this period of migratory shift.

Acclaimed artist, poet and writer Pule's first novel (the first written by a Niuean author) 'The shark that ate the sun: Ko e māgo ne kai e lā',²³ would also capture the desire for an easier life in this correspondence between brother and sister characters from the book. Here, Mocca living in New Zealand writes to her brother Puhia in Niue. The year is 1950.

“Now after eight years here [sic] we are comfortable. Life is easy, not like life in Niue, having to look for food in the forest and climbing over rocks by the coast.”²⁴

This excerpt speaks a simplistic motive highlighting the harsh terrain on Niue with its rough coral base and shallow soil making it difficult to grow food and the steep cliffs that boarder the island plunge straight into the deep ocean making fishing while possible difficult to access particularly in rough sea.^{25, 26}

In addition to this motivation to seek new lives in New Zealand, Rosa Kalauni one of the first Niuean language teachers of a Niuean bilingual class in Aotearoa in 1988, offers insight in her 2019 auto-ethnography that this enthusiasm for the new world would be a major factor in the diminishing of language and culture as assimilation into the palagi way was seen as necessary to succeed.²⁷ Writer and art critic Lana Lopesi, also alludes to the invisible influence of neo-liberalism and globalisation predicated by colonisation in her text *False divides*, exposing socio economic inequities that existed in the Pacific region. This made way for the mass migratory movements to New Zealand and the prevailing self-deprecating views that developed.²⁸

Journalist Nevak Rogers (Ilolahia) also speaks to this theme from her Tongan experience as a presenter in the 2010 Documentary *Polynesian Panthers*, “Dad grew up believing that to get ahead he had to leave his Tongan heritage behind.” She recalls his response to her wanting to learn more about Tongan culture, “...you need to just, you know do what you’re doing, head down ... you know bum up just work hard and you just you just fit in.”²⁹

These changing values to identity meant that teaching and use of vagahau (Niue language) to children would be deferred, as the adopted English language and ideas of New Zealand would become the inspired way.

Other factors contributing to the further decline of Niuean language and culture; Statistics New Zealand in 2014 shows how much cross cultural marriage or relationships emerged as an unforeseen consequence of migration. Of the 26,000 Niuean’s who reside in New Zealand 79% are born in Aotearoa, and 75% of the Aotearoa born identify as mixed race.³⁰

Moreover, the attitudes of the Niuean community cannot be hung entirely on the ideas of progress and romantic affiliation. Niuean's already had a sense of self-consciousness prior to the 1970s due to the hangover of two historical events in particular.

Captain James Cook's aforementioned brief interaction with Niue in 1774 resulted in his labelling Niue, *Savage Island* due to his frustration at the stoic resistance of the Islanders denying his crew access inland. Unbeknownst to Cook, the island had a policy of self-imposed quarantine due to previous disease epidemics sparked by visitors or people returning to the Island from excursions abroad. Nevertheless, annoyed by the inhospitable reception he encountered and frustrated with some of his crew, Cook retreated in a foul mood blighting Niue's future reputation with the mere flick of his quill.³¹ The enduring legacy of this action meant that by the 1970's the name Savage Island and all the imagery and connotations that name suggests continued to be associated with Niue's narrative, and could still be found on maps in the 20th century.³²

The murder of New Zealand's Resident Commissioner to Niue Hector Larsen in 1953 by three young Niuean's only enhanced the idea of a savage island and for Niuean's added to an already compromised self-image. Historian and writer Dick Scott highlighted some of this sentiment in his 1993 book titled *Would a good man die?*³³ when interviewing a former Senior official of Niue who advised him that Niuean's were still self-effacing on the topic, "They'll be upset if you say much about it... they won't like it."³⁴

Author Margret Pointer also references this sense of shame still felt by the Niuean's in her 2015 Niuean history publication *Niue 1774-1974: 200 years of contact and change*. "The wider [sic] community also felt great shame and apprehension as

they wanted to see how New Zealand would treat them in the aftermath of the murder.”³⁵

Pule also alludes to the fall out of the Larsen murder in his aforementioned novel as his character Mocca writes her experience to her brother Puhia back in Niue;

“30 upper Queen Street, 1953

Puhia,

Niuean’s in New Zealand are not very well liked. Some have lost their jobs and there is much hatred of our colour because of the murder of Mr Larsen, with shouts of ‘Savages!’ and ‘Go back Home! on the streets...’³⁶

A split remains to this day regarding Niuean attitudes to Larsen’s murder as can be found in online discussions and threads whenever this topic is brought up, and many Niuean’s discover the story for the first time this way.³⁷

If we are what we remember or choose to remember, then we need to consider how these events in and surrounding Niuean history, shape and influence the Niuean psyche that existed in the 1970’s and how that is reflected in a story from that time period written decades later in 2021. In the case of the attached thesis the importance is to give the audience, particularly the young Niuean reader something that informs them of what it means to be Niuean in the here and now by understanding what it was to be Niuean in the past.

Currently there is a strong desire amongst the people of Niue, especially the young, to reconnect with language and culture that is in accordance with a postmodern Moana movement and beyond that global indigenous reclamation of identity and existence as observed by Theophilus Okere the Nigerian Academic (amongst his many titles), in his foreword to the seminal collection of writing’s on Samoan indigenous knowledge and religion *Whispers in Vanity*:³⁸

“These are voices crying out, not in unison but in symphony... All these various reactions signal the arrival of a moment of awareness and the rising tide of a movement... This is the hour of the deconstruction of hegemonies and it is if,

at long last, the world's moment of freedom has arrived... the freedom of the mind, the freedom of the self, and not the hour of the freedom of the individual but the freedom of the peoples and their cultures.”³⁹

This movement can be seen in the many activities currently in place to allow this reconnection to identity and a remembering of self. Not in the romanticism of returning to a golden period of precolonial contact and influence as Wendt suggests pondering on the future of the Moana in his work *Towards a new Oceania*.⁴⁰

But of the kind that brings increased activity and debate amongst all sectors of the Niuean community as we usher in a period of renaissance for all things Niuean and for meaning, as we continually explore the question.

Who are we? Who am I? Ko hai au?

Activities like *The takalo project*, headed by young Niuean leaders, artists and scholars Asetoa Sam Pilisi, Io Aleke Fa'avae, Leki Jackson-Bourke, Haanz Fa'avae Jackson, Tommy Ikitogia and others is an example of this movement and desire for Aotearoa born Niuean's to connect to their heritage through traditional song, dance and language.⁴¹

Dianna Fuemana whose film contribution as part of the 2019 Moana collaboration *Vai*,⁴² speaks to the importance of the Niuean language and how it serves to maintain links for diaspora to the Island and the people who remain there as a stronghold of Niuean identity. Her piece featured vagahau Niue language only.⁴³

Terina Kaire contributes a personal article in E-Tangata *The struggle to embrace my identity*, espousing cultural denial of her Niuean and Maori roots growing up in Aotearoa due to shame imbued by such means as tv representation of her heritage as negative stereotypes in crime shows like Police Ten 7. However her story would have an upside that echo's this growing fervour for identity reclamation. As she reflects as an adult living abroad in Hawaii,⁴⁴ “It's funny to think that it took moving across the

moana and immersing myself in another Pacific culture to gain an appreciation of my own.”⁴⁵

This development of thinking also pays homage to Hau’ofa’s idea of a connected Oceania where Moana cultures are a collective region with a pre-colonial heritage to the sea, and it is this collective energy of reclamation across the landscape of Aotearoa born Moana people that lends itself to addressing identity. As the story of Kaire shows, the strength of identity of any Moana ethnic group only serves to strengthen others as stated here by Hau’ofa,⁴⁶ “...it is something we all share in common wherever we are in Oceania,... the sea is our pathway to each other and to everyone else...”⁴⁷

I intentionally set *Unwanted* in 1976 to explore with readers the social political climate of the time juxtaposed beside the Niuean experience. The first New Zealand born Niuean children growing up in their adopted spiritual homeland of central Auckland in places like Ponsonby, Grey Lynn, Parnell and Kingsland were socialising with other Moana migrant communities in schools, sports clubs, and the like developing a contemporary brown urban identity in addition to that of their parents.⁴⁸ Although intermarriage and cross-cultural relationships at this time were already existent, tribalism was strong amongst Island born parents and they clung to their sense of nationhood, which Lopesi might suggest was a reinforcing of imagined colonial borders fastened to each Pacific nation’s imperial history.⁴⁹ An example of colonial constructs reinforcing this idea of separatism would be the Niuean, Cook Island and Tokelauan status as automatic citizens given their membership of the New Zealand Realm.⁵⁰

While the days of viewing Polynesians as a monocultural block have passed for the most part and for good reason, the collective urban experience has been intertwined

and served as an unwitting extension of pre-colonial Moana relationships posited by Hau' Ofa. So to speak of one Pacific nations experience speaks to a common conversance that is not ignorant of the existence of nuance.

It is in this regard that the thesis examines how the global social movements rallying against racism and oppression during this time period affected or activated the Niuean community? Particularly marginalising race based policies against Moana communities.

Unwanted, is not necessarily about any one social movement or happenstance but is a birds eye view to the backdrop and markers of the time period proffering an intimate view into what it was like to be marginalised for being brown at this time and not directly targeted or interested in the apportioning of blame and the actioning of racism by institutions of power.

The Dawn Raids are an example of tension that features along the plot line of *Unwanted* and reflects on Niuean attitudes at the time. Out of curiosity and fascination over the years I've often asked family and friends who grew up during this period to gain some understanding about the Dawn Raids, and their experiences. My sense is that Niue's status as New Zealand citizens allowed for a passive bystander approach to the policies and actions of government and police during this period. Not passive from the point of apathy but out of fear for personal repercussion as Police were aggressive in their targeting of brown people,⁵¹ and there was a reluctance to bring shame upon family, even if they felt strongly that the raids were wrong.

One Niuean however, who was extremely active at this time was Polynesian Panther Tigilau Ness, fearless in his endeavour for social justice, he was at the forefront of efforts to battle racism towards Moana Communities during the Dawn Raid era.⁵¹

He was part of the Militant wing of the Panthers who were not afraid to go to jail if it meant that positive change would be an outcome.

One of the operations he took part in included a raid on a Government Ministers house at 3am in the morning to deliver a piece of street justice in retaliation for the racially and politically motivated raids. Within weeks of this action the raids would be discontinued.⁵²

The Polynesian Panthers were Pan Pacific, mostly New Zealand born and radical, so someone like Tigilau Ness would have been an exception to the general Niuean attitude at the time of trying to lay low and fit in.

However as time has passed he has rightly been acknowledged alongside all the Polynesian Panthers as instrumental not just for action against racism towards Moana communities but other pivotal movements of the time like the Bastion point land occupation⁵³ and anti-apartheid protests.⁵⁴

The feats of Ness and the Polynesian Panthers have been featured in books Polynesian Panther Melanie Anae's 2015 book co-authored with Lautofa Iuli and Leilani Burgoyne, *Polynesian Panthers: Pacific protest and affirmative action in Aotearoa New Zealand 1971-1981*,⁵⁵ Pauline Vaeluaga-Smith's 2018 Fiction novel *Dawn Raid*,⁵⁶ and Damon Fepulea'i's 2005 documentary *Dawn Raids*⁵⁷ as prime examples.

Fifty years on, it's a chance to look back at what was happening within Niuean households, classrooms, neighbourhoods and the global community so that we can understand how we got to be where we are now.

How does writing a story from this period allow for a redress of the Niuean voice? Given that Niue and Moana communities are so connected, can I create a fiction

manuscript that gives justice to the experiences of this history delivered through a Niuean lens?

Themes of family, displacement and belonging will be explored through the practice of Tama hiki or Tama leveki, a customary practice interpreted loosely as informal adoption.⁵⁸

As mentioned earlier the creative work is not simply a story of any particular social movement or action. It is a story of a young Aotearoa-born Niuean boy growing up in 1970s Auckland, raised by extended family, trying to discover who he is while uncovering the world around him.

This exegesis therefore serves as the past I face backwards to as a writer, to help me pen the thesis *Unwanted*. It is my hope that it will stoke our communities' memories, and learnings so that we continue to share and explore new depths to the question of who we are. It is not an attempt to reinvent history or dredge further sensitivities of self- deprecation by bringing up past transgressions in an age where cancel culture exists. But a chance to look back so that we can see our way forward more clearly.

Kuenaia, fakaue lahi.

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