The body of Pacific literature

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Abstract: This essay considers my role as a 'Pacific Islander who does literary criticism', as opposed to a 'literary critic who happens to be a Pacific Islander'. It examines the negotiation between Pacific Island research paradigms and aims, and standard practices of literary criticism. The former requires tangible service that enhances both the literal and figurative Pacific 'body'. It considers the relationship between literary criticism and social justice for Pacific peoples and concludes by examining practices that impact the study of Pacific literature and the communities which produce it.

Keywords: diaspora; literary criticism; Pacific literature; Pasifika; social justice

What has the body of a 16-year old hanging from garage rafters in South Auckland have to do with the body of Pacific literature in Aotearoa New Zealand? Like Albert Wendt's often cited essay 'Tatauing the post-colonial body' (Wendt, 1999), which concludes with him watching a young man walking down Queen Street, Auckland, wearing an array of culturally symbolic manifestations and connections, I am talking about a real body. Rather than walking through the streets on a summer's day communicating confidence and strength, this body hung lifeless and silent in a garage behind his family home—he wasn't a metaphor either.

I am neither social worker nor statistician. I specialise in literature. But this question has become one of the driving forces behind my work—both scholarly and creative. You have got to live in some tall ivory towers to not know that Aotearoa New Zealand's youth suicide rates are the second highest in the OECD, or that Māori and Pacific Islanders are disproportionately represented in this group. Or that our fastest growing youth population consists of Pacific Islanders, born and raised here—a phenomenon Melanie Anae controversially calls "the browning of New Zealand" (Anae, 2006, p. 36) and a demographic increasingly known as 'Pasifika' (Marsh, in press; Perrott, 2007). You have also got to live high up in those towers if you are not aware of the link between suicide, self-harm and self-esteem. If, as Wendt has argued since decolonisation began in the Pacific from the 1960s, "self expression is a pre-requisite of self respect" (Wendt, 1976, p. 60), how might the body of Pacific writing in Aotearoa New Zealand influence that other impressionable, vulnerable body of Pacific youth? What role do I, as a university teacher and researcher of that literary body, play in the healing, restoring, renewing, and invigorating of that other body?

While the answers to these questions may seem to be commonsensical; how to get there, from where I stand, is not. This essay fleshes out my philosophical position as a Pacific Island lecturer teaching Pacific literature at University. The phrasing of professional self-identification can be problematic for minorities working in mainstream fields. Anae, one of the first Pacific Islanders to gain an anthropology degree at the University of Auckland, argued in her thesis that she is "a Samoan who does anthropology, rather than an anthropologist who happens to be a Samoan" (1998, p. 24). Which difference makes the difference? In 2005, as the first PhD student of Pacific descent to graduate from the English Department at Auckland University, I joined a small group of Pacific Island academic staff working at this University, and an even smaller group (currently one of two) teaching Pacific literature at tertiary level. I follow after former trail blazers Albert Wendt and Witi Ihimaera. Wendt, long considered the forefather of Pacific Literature, retired in 2008. Ihimaera, the world's only Māori Professor of Literature, is due to retire in 2010. They have played leading roles in establishing the development and study of Pacific literature. But the field itself

remains tenuous and particularly vulnerable to fickle student enrolments, timetabling issues and qualified teaching staff. Consequently, the subject of Pacific literature requires strategic development and needs to be closely guarded on several levels. This was a mandate taken up by the South Pacific Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (www.spaclals.com) in a recent symposium held at the University of Auckland on 'Teaching Pacific Literature', the first of its kind in Aotearoa New Zealand. In the present essay, as a Pacific Islander who does literary criticism, rather than a literary critic who happens to be a Pacific Islander, my work is a continual negotiation between Pacific Island research paradigms and aims and standard practices of literary criticism. The former requires tangible, positive impact on the Pacific 'body', literally and figuratively. It requires working through the relationship between literary criticism and social justice for Pacific people.

Suicide, invisibility and emancipation. These are the descriptors that drive my research and teaching. Literary analysis is driven by the human condition that produces it—not vice versa. While my work aligns itself with tertiary research guidelines like the PBRF (Performance Based Research Fund; a university-wide system for measuring quality and quantity of research with direct correlation to funding access), it has also recently adapted research protocols from the fields of Pacific-focused social sciences, particularly in health, education and anthropology. The crossover of theoretical approaches and critical paradigms in key documents in Pacific-related research allowed a general "Pacific-wide philosophy and ethic" (Huffer & Qalo, 2004, p. 91) to emerge. It was here where I first found theoretical validation for research protocols that implicitly, in certain ways subversively, underpinned my work. My literary training focused on theories of literary development and analysis, usually Western in origin, to be executed with objectivity and analytical distance. While approaches like New Historicism argue for reading texts in historical and cultural context of its production (Abrams, 1999, p. 182), there are few avenues for explicitly impacting the community producing these texts. Traditional Western models of the critic have been increasingly challenged by those working in Pacific literature seeking to implement a more Pacific-centric, less reductive way of reading. A decade ago, the seminal critical text *Inside out: literature, cultural politics, and identity in the new Pacific* (Hereniko & Wilson, 1999) was published. In it, Pacific-based critics and writers responded and presented the kinds of literary criticism that worked in the Pacific. Namely, that which actively worked towards dehegemonisation of formally colonised nations (Gegeo, 2000).

The literary-critical research methodologies in which I was trained were not framed by concepts like love, respect, reciprocity, communalism, collective responsibility, gerontocracy, humility, love, service and spirituality (*Pasifika education research guidelines*, p. 14). They did not prioritise "cultural competency" or the fostering and maintenance of relationship, or any of the other nine principles for promoting respectful, mutually enhancing, culturally sensitive relationships between researcher and researched (*Pacific health research guidelines;* Ministry of Health, 2005). They did not challenge me to decolonise my methodology in applying western theories to indigenous texts (Smith, 1998). They did not consider the merit of pre-existing indigenous frameworks for aesthetic assessment of indigenously produced works (Thaman, 1988). They did not require revisionist work on epistemologies that would allow me to question the idea of literary criticism in the first place or how it might be reconfigured to better respond to Pacific creativity (Huffer & Qalo, 2004).

In my journey, these pragmatic charters for Pacific-related research placed relationship as its overarching principle. Wendt was one of the first to apply the notion of 'va', the inter-relational space between people, people and their environment across temporal and spatial boundaries, in an indigenous-centred critical analysis of post-colonial texts (1999). Using the process of tatauing the (postcolonial) body, Wendt aligns the author with the tufuga ta tatau, the practitioner of tatau, casting them as a type of inscriber and go-between negotiator and translator of existing texts, signs and images. This is also applicable to the role of critic. Elsewhere the critic is paralleled with the role of talking chief, one who speaks on behalf of

the sacred high chief (author) in some Polynesian cultures; one who negotiates the space between high chief and commoners (Hereniko & Shwarz, 1999). Regardless of whether one is an author or critic, the constant is the exhortation: "'ia teu le va' – cherish, nurse, care for the va, the relationships" (Wendt, 1999, p. 402). This is done primarily through service to the community.

To return to the question of the relationship between literal and figurative Pacific 'bodies' is to consider the relationship between literary criticism and social activism. Not that the two aren't implicitly connected, but it seems to me that the hanging body of a 16-year old demands theory that works in tandem with active participation, not only in the critiquing of this field, but in its creation and dissemination. For example, the instrumental roles Wendt and Ihimaera have played as editors and anthologists in Pacific literature is unparalleled—roles undertaken as writers *and* literary scholars. In 2006 I edited 'Niu Voices', the first anthology of specifically Pasifika writing published by a mainstream publisher (Huia). It is currently used in some high school and tertiary teaching. Many of its submissions came from a national writing competition held in the previous year. It was co-sponsored by 'Spasifix' (a Māori and Pacific-oriented magazine) and Huia, the Māori specialist publisher. Another anthology is being planned. Throughout the Pacific, literary scholars are also key figures in publishing and editing Pacific writing (Subramani, Mohit Prasad, Robert Nicole, Kareva Mateata-Allain to name a few).

Service also occurs in the classroom. I self-reflexively consider pedagogical principles that inform my classroom practice. For example, the importance of voice, subject-position and self-reflexive critical positions in Pacific literature means that my tutorials are consciously student-driven. Students are actively involved in knowledge production and in questions of epistemology even before a book is opened. We begin by discussing the history and current status of Pacific Studies in broad epistemological terms. What counts as knowledge? As worth knowing? In a literary context: Which books count as worth reading? Worth studying? How might these books tell us about the world, about ourselves, about how they might best be read and taught? Learning environments like the one I try to create replace the kind of 'top down' model of knowledge transference I tended to experience with a more inter-connective horizontal model of knowledge creation and development. Of course, many teachers engage in these kinds of practices with their own agendas in mind. I do so with the conscious choice to nurture the space between ourselves and text, among readers, and between readers and critics and the wider field.

One of the most effective tools to engage students of Pacific literature are 'talanoa' or conversation-oriented sessions with authors (Fonua, 2005). Alongside canonical authors, emerging writers are studied (many from *Niu voices*). Local writers are invited to class to talanoa with the class. Student evaluations indicate that these sessions useful and productive, enriching their own analyses and considerations of their readerly positions vis-à-vis both the author and the characters within the texts. For many, the fact that Māori and Pacific cultural capital was required to contextualise these stories was a revelation in itself. Knowledge that many Pacific students took for granted provided resources that non-Pacific students sought. Both sets of students experienced a re-positioning in class: the former experienced a rare moment of shared cultural capital with the University; the latter became more aware of their subjective reading positions in relation to Pacific literature.

Given that writing provides an important vehicle for self-expression, because of a lack of resources on Pacific fiction and a lack of access to existing resources, many students have not been exposed to the expression of Pacific selves in literature. Many have yet to see themselves reflected in this nation's literary mirror. Many have yet to explore the spiritual, emotional and mental terrain currently being traversed by this second generation of Pacific descended writers. What different kinds of 'selves' are being negotiated by this demographically significant yet under-examined group called 'Pasifika'? The influence of this

writing and its reshaping of national imaginaries have yet to be explored. But like a self-fulfilling prophecy, the limited profile of Pacific literature contributes to its ongoing comparative invisibility: many Pacific books have yet to find publishers who believe there is a market for them; many pieces of Pacific fiction fall beyond the parameters of mainstream aesthetics and struggle to find avenues for publication. As I write this essay, members of the South Auckland Poets Collective are seeking funds for the final stage of their project: a first book and CD of collected spoken word performance. It was formed in November 2007 by four leaders in Youthline (a national counselling service) who discovered the value in youth expressing themselves through poetry. The collective has performed throughout Auckland and become a recognisable creative vehicle for Māori and Pacific young people. Specialising in spoken word poetry, its members are young, talented and determined to change the negative statistics and representations that surround them. Their website notes: "Armed with their voices and note books they cast down the negative stereotypes of youth in Manukau portrayed by the media with a new and positive story" (http://newvoices.homestead.com/index1.html).

The South Auckland Poets Collective is one organisation that demonstrates access to Pacific literature can influence the body of Pacific youth positively. The response of the students who take my Pacific literature courses (particularly those of Pacific descent) provides further anecdotal proof. That many were not able to see read stories they could culturally identify with until they entered university continues to astound—despite this having also been my own experience in the 1990s. Students express epiphanies in the classroom based on their connection and identification with characters, stories and situations that centre their realities. To be able to witness the emancipation of under-represented selves is a privilege. To read, analyse, and work within that urban Pasifika movement in declarative poetry, the backbone of identity politics for disenfranchised groups, is an empowering act.

To return to Pasifika, is to return to its literary counterpart and consider how its creation, study and dissemination impact the many bodies in the Pacific diaspora. Some, like national award-winning poet Karlo Mila, tell their stories and move successfully through New Zealand society. They publish books, are regularly invited to read and become recognised personalities on the mainstream literary stage. They even, like Mila in 2007, have poems set in national school exams. The pitfall is that they are vulnerable to being tokenized and viewed as 'The' Tongan voice, 'The' Pacific voice. Consequently, Mila often begins her readings by countering such imposed positions and expectations, claiming the singular over the plural: "I am 'a' Tongan/Palagi voice" (Marsh, 2005).

At the other extreme hangs the body in the garage, stifled by an inability to tell their story, they remain unheard and unread. I first learned of this young man a day after he committed suicide. He lived on the same street as my extended family in South Auckland. He purportedly failed his school exams and did not want to face his family. He had isolated himself to the point where he obviously felt everyone would be better off without him. He was meant to be the fulfilment of their migrant dreams in this land of 'milk and honey'. I took the liberty of imagining all the 'what ifs' on his behalf: What if he'd read his story somewhere? What if feelings of identification and recognition made him feel a little less isolated, a little more understood? What if he'd written down his story and spoke out his disillusionment, anger, guilt and fear in the middle of a supportive environment, like the one offered by South Auckland Poets Collective? What if?

Pacific literary criticism aims to bring these voices to scholarly and public attention in order to raise awareness, appreciation and support – not just ephemeral theoretical support, but tangible support, like raising funds to help collectives like the South Auckland Poets see their projects to completion; establishing writing competitions aimed at exposing this nation's literary diversity; and editing and publishing manuscripts to enable more mainstream reading of Pacific voices. In Issue 26 of blackmail press, a global electronic poetry magazine edited by Samoan/Palagi poet Doug Poole and currently in its eighth year, the Pacific-specific issue

was lauded as "A wonderful blemish on the literary landscape of New Zealand!" (Bilborough, n.d.). It is my intent that Pacific literature should be read, not just as a subversive (albeit celebrated) "blemish", but as a strong and vibrant part of the literary body of Aotearoa New Zealand, a resolve with direct bearing on the bodies inhabiting the largest Polynesian nation in the world.

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Author Notes

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