

# MOVING FORWARD BUT LOOKING BACK

## Huni Mancini

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On my laptop I possess a copy of a photograph taken of my grandfather and me, as a newborn baby, perched next to one another on 1980's California lawn chairs. He wears a colourful lavalava with hibiscus floral print and a plain white t-shirt. I imagine the photo still holds the spirit of him somehow, even though it's a Jpeg file that I asked mum to scan from the original and email me, because she now lives in Brisbane and I am here in Auckland, New Zealand.

I have no recollection of him because this picture depicts the only time we would meet. Yet, it seems with every moment we have carried each other; it was at this same point in time that he gifted my name. Mum repeatedly tells me how he enjoyed gazing upon the fragrant Huni flower that hung in his garden in Nuku'alofa. I still haven't seen or smelled the flower. The last time I visited Tonga, a tropical cyclone had just passed through and wiped out all the delicate life forms in its wake.

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Documents hold us, and we hold ourselves through them. They are pieces of the immaterial past we're able to touch, carry, and offer the sight of our eyes in reverence. Time escapes us, but through our documents, we might grasp onto it. This is a phantom touch; close, yet still somewhat distant. Intimate, yet impeded by the object's surface.

Our bodies are entangled in what we do and what is done to us. Our selves are not only us as individuals, but also the selves of our nieces and nephews, children, grandchildren. As objects, documents carry the weight of the people they belong to. Some of them belonged to others before me and will belong to others after I am

gone. In their belonging is a freedom — to move, meet and gather. To disassemble and re-organise. In their ongoing life, documents are not isolated events but like nodes conjoined on an unfolding network.

Moana Oceania is a place that both connects and intersects. Hūfanga Dr 'Okusitino Māhina describes the ocean as a place of 'connection, separation and intersection; of life and death, nourishment and malnourishment.' [1] His view is much more complex than the colonial-

European notion of the Pacific as passive or peaceful. Today we often talk of connection, but it's a kind increasingly defined by distance.

The distance I have long felt may not be my own. How can it be, when my home is right here on this whenua where I reside, and in the Country where my parents relocated, and on California soil where I was born, and the collective villages where my ancestors were from, and in this watery place known as Moana that connects each one?

Maybe home is a process of returning to the moments we've preserved in the mind and the salt of muscles.

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Documents are good at showing things. What is included and what is omitted are part of a carefully curated decision. Each word or object framed is a monument. The negative space surrounding them is an invisible structure giving weight to what is seen.

In the West records are treated as evidence. Monarchs and religious leaders were the primary record creators, but philosophers, historians and scholars also created their own documentary outputs. It was not until the 17th and 18th centuries that people outside the halls of power gained greater access to records. [2] Today their

management has become an entire industry. You might even say we have become dependent on them; we are in service of an impulse to record and be recorded.

Andrei Tarkovsky once said, 'In a certain sense the past is far more real, or at any rate more stable, more resilient than the present. The present slips and vanishes like sand between the fingers, acquiring material weight only in its recollection.' [3] But the order of memory is not linear. Memory sews events together, it reshuffles the past and restores life in fragments. By never being complete, our recollections carry a hint of longing. The act of remembering repeats the pain of an old wound as much as it absolves it.

All we've loved in others can live through us, and all they've suffered as well. The biological residue of our ancestors' experiences can be passed down. We are haunted by the things that were left unfinished, questions left unanswered. Like Etel Adnan affirms, 'Everything I do is memory. Even everything I am.' [4]

Perhaps we can measure the space of those initial rifts with our documents. They let us navigate the cycles of our own grief. If the past stays alive through the pain of then in now, our documents might allow us to feel less alone in our experience.

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These images are steeped in belonging — family photographs, found footage, ancient houses surrounded by lush mountainous landscapes. Rich, tuberous foods like taro and green banana. Tivaevae, 'ei and 'ei katu. Signifiers of Moana and specifically Cook Islands identity, but also the products of many hands; the anonymous work of generations.

They also show us the universal: blue tarpaulin, concrete blocks, curtains, picture and window frames, an empty bed. Items that are just as quintessentially Pacific, but nothing like the postcards and tourism ads we're used to seeing. An honest appraisal of the transformations we are always undergoing.

In their framing we might see the present as a conflicted, transitory space that is constantly mediating the past and future. [5] In revealing

our nuances we become what we already are: remarkably ordinary — not an exotic 'other' but part of the fabric of this place.

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Perhaps giving our lives a narrative is an act of care, of adoration. Our lives are not only our own, but also the lives of our aunts and uncles, parents, grandparents.

Gilles Deleuze once wrote, 'To fall in love is to individualise someone by the signs he bears or emits. It is to become sensitive to these signs, to undergo an apprenticeship to them.' [6] Friendship might be nourished on conversation, he says, but love is born from silent interpretation. To love is to silently interpret a plurality of worlds that are enveloped within the beloved.

When you see through my eyes I do not wish to disrupt or interrupt, but simply be seen — perhaps understood. I want you to embrace my visual pleasure. In this pleasure there is also an abandonment, a loss of oneself, a kind of ecstasy found only in the promise of escape.

In the space of such a gaze it might be difficult to know where we are. Shallow spaces oscillate between domestic and outdoor environments. Curtains hang in windows while others draw a veil over studio surfaces. Their drape obscures an ability to engage objectively with what is shown.

The sensuality of the drape offsets the starkness of concrete, the indecent exposure of wall framing, the emptiness of hollow billboard frames. Structures of Western civilisation in the process of un/becoming.

The radiance of our stories has the potential to unravel all we thought was known. What is inside bleeds out through a porous, manifold, shifting border. In this process we might grow closer, like a skin across the wound of our separateness.



## References

[1] [5] O. Māhina (2019). 'Pulotu, Hawaiki and Lapita,' in *Crafting Aotearoa: A cultural history of making in New Zealand and the wider Moana Oceania*. Eds. Karl Chitham; Kolokesa U. Māhina-Tuai; Damian Skinner. Wellington: Te Papa. pp.43; 45

[2] L. Millar (2017). *Archives: Principles and Practice*. London: Facet. pp.37-38

[3] A. Tarkovsky (1987). 'Imprinted Time,' in *Sculpting in Time*. University of Texas.

[4] E. Adnan (2016). *Night*. New York: Nightboat.

[6] G. Deleuze (2000). *Proust and Signs*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota.

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