

By Road: Reflections on Niue's coral highway, August 2015

GREGORY O'BRIEN & ROBIN KEARNS

A letter to Robin Kearns - Gregory O'Brien

Listening to the Samoan-born writer Albert Wendt at a recent literary festival in Wanaka, my thoughts drifted northwards in the direction of the Pacific. When asked—in keeping with Maori protocol—to name his ancestral mountain, Albert insisted on citing three: a hill behind Apia, then a sacred burial mound on the Samoan coast, and finally Mt Taranaki, beneath which he had spent some formative years at New Plymouth Boys' High. This set me thinking about our visit, last year, to the Niuean village of Liku. Our painter-friend John Pule had recently built a house there, leaving Auckland to settle on the plot of family land where he had been born in 1962.

At the end of John's driveway, a large mound of coral sand intended for roading had been neatly deposited, a short distance from where his grandfather was buried in a grave marked only by a tangle of vegetation. As we boiled up shellfish on the adjacent verandah, I found myself contemplating John's nearby ancestor and this perfectly triangular, sunlight-saturated, temporary mound which could rightly be declared John Pule's ancestral mountain.

Bearing in mind Albert Wendt's headcount of (at least) three ancestral mountains, it has become apparent to those of us who live in Oceania that the fixed, singular X on a map—the archetypal Point of Origin—is becoming increasingly less viable. The notion of identity, so often anchored to a specific point or place, could be more usefully assigned to a state of movement or flux, a field of activity, a multiplicity of points on a chart. As if to underline the point, later in the Wanaka festival event, Albert Wendt answered an inquiry as to which place he considered to be home with “Samoa Aotearoa”—the names of two countries, unpunctuated, alongside one another. “Both places, and the space between them.”

Some months after our return from Niue, I encountered an almost identical notion of movable/multiple origins in Rangīhira Pānoho's *Māori Art*.¹ Thinking beyond the oft-told myths of anthropomorphised god-mountains walking across the Central North Island, Pānoho devotes an entire chapter to “Aku Maunga Haere” (“my travelling mountains”). He cites artist John Ford's assertion that ancestral mountains do in fact have, within Māori tradition, “pre-material form,” and it is “their existence in Hawaiki and in cosmological thought which allows [them] to move where people travel.”² To further underline the travelling capabilities of ancestral maunga, he discusses a photograph by Natalie Robertson, *Maunga, Tai Rawhiti*, which features a roadside pile of gravel, recast as an ancestral mountain in a manner that anticipates Pule's radiant mound on the Liku roadside. Like the pile of transient asphalt in Robertson's photograph, John's ancestral mountain is also destined for another life. In his case, it will be re-rendered as a stretch of the coral highway that links the villages of Niue.

Upon arrival at Niue International Airport in August last year, Robin, we were struck at once by the white coral runway, across which we walked to reach the terminal. The extent to which the airport is “international” is a moot point. The only regular traffic is a weekly (twice weekly during winter) flight from Auckland, the city in which some 95 per cent of the world's Niuean population lives. Only 1200 Niueans remain permanently on Niue—which renders the island-state, demographically, but a satellite of the New Zealand/Niuean population centre. Niue was, in fact, an integrated part of New Zealand until 1974 when, after years of pressure from the

United Nations, it was declared independent. Niue now remains, along with the Tokelaus, the Cook Islands and the Ross Dependency, a part of the “Realm of New Zealand.” The national currency is the New Zealand dollar, and Niueans travel the world on New Zealand passports. The future of the two nations is inextricably and, for the most part, positively entwined. The relationship with Aotearoa/New Zealand is, at heart, one in which they are very much a part of “us” and we are a part of “them.”

Viewed during a descent through scattered cloud, the runway is the straightest line on an island governed by the curve and the arabesque. A three kilometre extension of the island’s roading system, the tarmac is similarly made of coral, extracted from the reef which encircles the craggy coastline. Setting forth toward Alofi in our silver rental car (no one ever offered a satisfactory explanation why the vast majority of cars on the island are silver), we found ourselves dazzled by, and soon discussing, the roadway beneath us. Whereas in past centuries, communities would have tended to move in straight lines across the island or along stretches of coast, the encircling road heralded a new order—an opening out of the villages, one to another, to visitors and to the government.

But, rather than its history or present utility, it was the unexpected beauty of the highway, as it unfurled before us, which first struck us—a light-infused mat, as heavenly a road as the earth has ever had laid upon it.



Fig. 1 Ambrosius Holbein, *Utopiae insulae tabula*, 1518, engraving 179x119mm.

Fig. 2 Map of Niue, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carte_topographique_de_Niue.svg. Accessed 29 November 2016.

The cover of the Oxford edition of Thomas More's *Utopia*—which I carried onto the island in my airline-bag—features an engraved rendition, by Ambrosius Holbein, of More's idealised island-state. My reason for taking the book on this particular outing was because of the close resemblance between More's island and "The Rock of the Pacific" upon which we now stood. The surging waterway in the sixteenth-century engraving mirrors the encircling road you can trace on any map of Niue. The well-governed, scrupulously planned European hamlets, with notable church towers, echo the Niuean villages, with their similarly placed churches. Like a well-functioning machine or clock in the careful calibration of its parts, More's utopian island also bears, in Holbein's rendering, an uncanny resemblance to a human brain or head. So, too, Niue.

Over the ensuing week, much of our experience of Niue was regulated and shaped by the roadway. The speed limit (40kmh in most places) ensures that visitors and locals get a good, unhurried look at their surroundings. Speeding didn't seem to be a problem on the island—although some vehicles were travelling so slowly it was difficult to tell whether they were, indeed, moving at all.

We admired the way the road-builders of a century back appeared to have diverted the highway around many well-established trees. While, in some places, the road had been blasted through coral, the overriding impression was of a peaceable accommodation between highway and land. Most of the time, the road went gently upon its way. With people walking purposefully or loitering alongside, and the verges immaculately mowed, the highway had something of the manicured town square about it. So the road wasn't just a flattened and extended ancestral mountain, it could also be thought of as a stretched-out village square—a chalky layering of social as well as mineral materials.

Devoid of the multinational advertising which has become ubiquitous around the globe, the signage encountered alongside the Niuean highway added instead a homely layer—and all of it easily readable at 40kmph: "Washaway Café," "Pinky Alofi," "Fish For Sale; Flying Fish \$25 a Bag," "IF SHOP UNATTENDED PLEASE COME TO THE BIG HOUSE," "Welcome to Tuapa Smokefree Village," "Persistent Organic Pollutants—POPs—On The Rock," "Toi Village Hall; Hair Cuttings, Womens Weaving, Womens Gossip, Aerobic, Concerts, Cinema, 21st Parties etc...."

While the whiteness of the road hardly varies, the time of day is constantly working at the immediate surroundings. Things come and go. Shadows are forever packing and unpacking themselves. In my notebook, as we followed the road (and the road followed us), I listed the various things that characterised the island as a whole. These I labelled "The Constants":

waves, roadside graves, palms, dogs, coconut crabs (uga), roosters and hens, signs to discourage smoking, tsunami alarms on poles (to the amusement of the local population, these devices, installed by the European Union, are of no practical use; being a steep raised atoll, Niue is impervious to tsunamis—the upwelling waters simply roll past), shipping containers (used variously as cool stores, spare bedrooms, coffee-outlets, landfill ...), hurricane houses, out-rigger canoes/vaka (usually at rest under coconut palm fronds), the island's electricity supply (buried)...

As well as all these recurring motifs, there were singular items along the way: a yellow dress on a line, a Niuean flag, a chair marooned atop a tin roof, a small village of "climate refugees" from Kiribati, a quarantine station, an enclave of super-hero guardians towering over an

Avatele homestead, and the hospital at the end of its service-road like a kite on a long, taut string.

Amidst a seemingly random array of shipping containers beside the Liku Rd, a fish merchant called Graeme sells me a bag of ten flying fish (*hahave*, in Niuean) after explaining, not entirely convincingly, the traditional use of the fish: Niueans tend to eat them in the late morning, he stipulates, when they are suffering from massive hangovers. Fresh from the freezer, the flying fish are carried down to the sea. The afflicted person holds the fish in the tropical water and, as it defrosts, the skin is peeled back. And the fish is eaten raw. And, this way, even the roughest of hangovers is swiftly cured.



Fig. 3 John Pule and Gregory O'Brien, *Maleva*, 2015, intaglio etching, c.260x220mm, courtesy of the artists.

Fig. 4 John Pule Gregory O'Brien, *The Nightfishing, Avatele*, 2015, relief etching, c.260x220mm, courtesy of the artists.

Instead of eating the *hahave*, however, I use them as the basis for a series of etchings which John Pule and I work on together. The seven remaining specimens in our motel room freezer on the morning of our departure, I hand over to the gardener. Back in his birthplace, Kiribati, he tells me, the villagers are particularly adept at turning these most streamlined of fish into an ample and sumptuous feast. Niueans do not fully appreciate these beauties, he says. And off he goes with the bag of them, down the blinding white road.



Fig. 5 Robin Kearns, *Roadside Statue of St Joseph, Makefu, Niue*, 2015.

Retaining the trippy brightness of its undersea origins, the highway continues on its way, snaking past the comparable whiteness of the statue of St Joseph outside the Catholic church at Makefu. Another singular moment. The road recognises the translucent surface of the saint in its own pallor and a kind of intimacy is struck up.

There are some places you can't leave behind. The circular road is a useful emblem of that: Where you have just been will always be, invariably, where you are heading. Maybe that is one tenet of island life which the highway appears custom-designed to assert. There's no getting away from it.

But it isn't just a question of what the road does, it is also a question of what it means. In the case of Niue, the road has a humility about it. A passivity even. It is the exact opposite of the brutalist roading system of a city like Auckland. It suggests the possibility that a road can effect some kind of holistic embrace upon its locale, that a highway can—in a non-utilitarian manner—*contribute*. My thoughts drift in the direction of other harmonious roadways: the many tree-lined lanes in Southern France, the streets of numerous cities which have been handed back to pedestrians or cyclists; the road through the old town of Oamaru.... Artist Bill Culbert once told me of his first arrival on the island of Corsica. When he asked a local which side of the road to drive on, the reply came, in all seriousness, “on the shady side.” On Niue too, the accustomed rules no longer apply. Intentionally or not, the whole concept of the road has been given a rethink. Shrugging off associations with speed, progress, congestion, expansion and “modern life,” the ring-road takes us back to the Zen-like highways of Rita Angus's late Hawkes Bay paintings, or to the abstract, circular motifs in Ralph Hotere's great black paintings—works in which a simple circle becomes simultaneously a sun/moon, an

infinity symbol and a cell containing all life, the Eucharist of Catholic tradition or the motif at the centre of Zen Buddhism, as outlined by the monk Shoichi:

The all-meaning circle;
No in, no out;
No light, no shade.
Here all saints are born.

What goes around comes around. The Niuean highway is a thread or seam running through all human and non-human facets of the island, stitching them together. It is neither border nor boundary; it defines both centre and periphery, soul and surface. The road is enabling and encompassing; it behaves as a road, in an ideal world, should. And it is many things. Minor thoroughfare. Promenade. Shop window. Ancestral mountain. Village square. It returns you to who you are, as well as where you are from. And it takes you back.

A letter to Gregory O'Brien - *Robin Kearns*

In the public imagination, the circumference of a typical Pacific Island comprises a white sandy beach lying between a palm-fringed foreshore and an enticing azure-blue lagoon. I was prepared for Niue to have none of that gentleness, with every access-way to the sea being steep, stepped or treacherously sharp. What I hadn't anticipated was how rare views of the ocean would be, and how one circumnavigates the island within a corridor of green, following the white coral road that unfurls ahead.

But let's start before memories. Here are the facts we arrived with (along with a box of provisions, six bottles of well-wrapped wine, assorted jazz music, reading matter, and some old snorkelling equipment): Niue is a somewhat oval island comprised of coral-based limestone. It is roughly 24 by 15 kilometres in area and formed over an ancient submarine volcano. Apart from a few tiny beaches, usually reached by precipitous paths, cliffs of up to 25 metres high encircle the island. Waves generated in the open ocean greet these cliffs with force although, in places, the cliffs are fringed with coral reefs which are exposed at low tide. The limestone history and the continual wear from waves and rain have crafted caves, chasms, and arches.

On the first full day, it struck me: How often we drive—whether on highway or country road—with no thought for the shapers of the surface that facilitates our machine-driven movement. In whatever country, most roads were cut with sweat and manual effort generations prior to our arrival. On Niue, roadbuilding was hot and nasty work: as Margaret Pointer reports in *Niue 1774-1974*.³ It involved clearing the tangled undergrowth, followed by much filling of crevices with coral carried from small beaches below, and then spreading a layer of sand to create a semblance of smoothness.



Fig. 6 Robin Kearns, *The Ring Road, Niue, 64km the Return Trip*, 2015.

In the 1800s, Pointer relates, the punishment for serious law-breaking—crimes such as theft, adultery, and working on the Sabbath—was road building. Working with the harsh fossilised coral *makatea* was considered a lesser punishment than detention in one of the island’s many caves—an exile gravely feared for the evil spirits believed to be dwelling within. The duration spent on road-building was calibrated according to the offense. “It was obviously a punishment that was liberally administered,” writes Pointer, for, by 1859, there was “a road six feet wide right around this island, fringed with coconut trees for shade.”⁴ This, she writes, was pleasing to George Turner, of the London Missionary Society, who wrote, in his memoir *Nineteen Years in Polynesia*, that “a missionary will find this road a great facility for his labours as it will enable him to take a horse all around the island.”⁵ The quest for smooth passage around Niue later led Christopher Maxwell, resident commissioner from 1904, to make road improvements a priority of his tenure, “to render the road around the island smooth and suitable for wheeled vehicles or bicycles.”⁶ Non-convict workers, Pointer notes, were paid in food and tobacco according to length of road worked on.

It wasn’t until 2012, and with funding from New Zealand foreign aid, that a “significant stretch” of the ring road around Niue was sealed for the first time.⁷ According to the then High Commissioner, Mark Blumsky, the Niuean government had been wanting to upgrade it for some years but lacked the resources. He said “the dirt road had become rutted and was difficult to travel on in wet conditions.”⁸ With the Niuean population currently teetering around 1200, the roads aren’t under a lot of stress and reasons to speed up are few and far between. On a 2015 visit, journalist Liz Light reported that “it feels as if we are in a funeral procession but, no, driving here is always slow-lane.”⁹

Having left Auckland a few hours earlier, we shared her sudden shock of arrival, transferring from four-lane highway to big-city airport then to a narrow coral road. Islands are all about down-sizing, down-scaling, winding down and adjusting to different spaces and times. (I was reminded of a billboard back home, not far from the ramp on which one disembarks the Waiheke Island car ferry: “Slow Down, You’re Here.”)

New roads, as Auckland knows, invite traffic, and by 1916, Pointer tells us, the number of horses and bicycles on the encircling road led to the island’s first Traffic Regulation Ordinance.¹⁰ At the time of our visit, nearly a century later, the population of the island had, in

fact, plummeted—but regulation remained. The day after arrival, we found our way to the police station at Alofi to apply for a Niuean driver’s licence. At first, we found no one there, so retired to a shipping container café for a coffee, and then a T-shirt purchase (“Anjalee Loves Niue” says the elephant, a stylised representation of the recently quarantined animal destined for Auckland’s zoo). Returning when the police station had reopened, I discretely photographed the scene and held back from making light of the situation. The colourful license to drive on Niue is valid for a year. It must be time to return.



Fig. 7 Robin Kearns, *Gregory O'Brien is Photographed for his Niuean Driver's License at the Alofi Police Station, 2015.*

Off we went, licensed to drive! America is a land of semi-independent “united” states. Europe has the Schengen Agreement allowing easy passage between undefended nations. Niue has 14 villages, which also comprise electoral districts, each with a council which elects its chairman. They are like a shell necklace encircling the head-like island, with each expressing autonomy in subtle ways.

The stretch of road through every village is tended and groomed by its residents. This kaitiakitanga and self-provisioning has a history. Pointer writes of Lapeka undertaking roadmaking at their own expense in 1946 to make new areas accessible for planting.¹¹ This disposition towards self-provisioning of roads remains. The “NIUE VILLAGE COUNCILS ORDINANCE 1967 Section 27 (1) and (2) GENERAL FUNCTIONS OF COUNCILS” lists as priority functions: “The undertaking, provision, construction, maintenance, management, and regulation of (1) Bush roads (excluding public roads); and (2) Road cleaning.”

As self-appointed honorary villagers, we did our bit. There were so few items of litter on the roadside, or anywhere on the island for that matter, that on the one occasion we noticed a discarded plastic bag and Coke can on the verge, we pulled over, then drove back down the road to collect and dispose of the refuse.

I was struck by the gentle quiet which pervaded the landscape. At any time you could stop in the middle of the road and be of no bother to other traffic. A passing vehicle was always a novelty and worthy of a friendly wave (as used to be the protocol back on mainland New Zealand). Abandoned “hurricane houses” built of concrete blocks, long-emptied of life with gaping eye sockets of absent windows, seemed to outnumber lived-in dwellings four to one.

Everything of note seemed on or very near to the ring road: graves, churches, paths to the sea. One of the lasting images was of a dog lying on an elevated grave adjacent to the Catholic Church. There seemed no disrespect. The dog had a knowing smile, in the way some dogs do. It was as if she was keeping a lost master warm. That scene made me think of the 70s band Three Dog Night, named for an aboriginal tradition whereby status was accorded to whomever had the most dogs to keep them warm through the desert night. On this grave, I guessed the silent sleeper would be grateful for a dog by day. Gratitude. Niue seemed an island on which to give thanks for elevation, for height above rising seas, for expectations of eventual returns to emptied houses, of risings from the dead. Or so it seemed each time we saw more roadside graves bearing silent witness to we who passed each day. They also seemed to know that on the seventh day we’d leave.



Fig. 8 Robin Kearns, *Roadside Grave with Attendant, Niue*, 2015.

You mentioned John’s pile of coral sand waiting to be spread on the highway. It set me thinking about the road beneath us and its prehistory in the calciferous housing of countless corals: organisms which have had their day brightening pools and submarine drop-offs, now living on in bony whiteness. On the drive back from Liku to Namakulu, the stark surface of the road was near luminous by moonlight. We watched for uga crossing, but there were no sightings. By dawn, the road belonged to showy roosters strutting across and stopping near the middle. Beyond the brief dawn chorus, it was the quiet that was so striking. Wind in palm fronds. An occasional daytime cock’s cry. Little else. Niue, it appeared, was not trying to be anything but itself.

I am writing to you from the Waiheke ferry where a screen proclaims the island to be “Your slice of Italian wine country.” An unsettling proclamation. Is part of Aotearoa imagined in Tuscan drag? On the Niue road the only inflated imaginaries were the defenders of Avatele, those house-front superheroes splashing colourful optimism onto the roadside.



Fig. 9 Robin Kearns, *Roadside Superheroes*, Niue, 2015.

Driving north of Liku late one afternoon—what day was it? I have no memory; naming days seemed of little consequence—we spoke of childhoods; the way parents once were heroes, looming large and then how, one day, we wake and they are suddenly bathed in new light, foibles exposed to a different gaze. It was the sort of korero that seldom happens in ordinary life; it takes an island, a roadway and maybe its adjacent graves to bring to the surface talk of decline and lives that, like this road, come full circle.

Alofi, Avatele, Liku, Lapeka...; the villages hung like a string of shells around the island's perimeter. The names, it seemed, came more easily than knowing how to live in these fragile hamlets. To the right, driving anti-clockwise, there was the ever-present spectre of an outward edge, the never-far-away jagged teeth of ocean cliffs. A rare splash of graffiti on an abandoned building at Hikutavake begged the question of who we really were: "TOURISTS OR VISITORS?" A question for any passer-by to ponder. Which were we? I opted for visitors, a gentler category, more in keeping with the soft-turning roads we plied, compliantly under 40km/hour. Our moderately scratched and dented rental car, complete with stained seat covers, spoke of an earthy island culture rather than the manicured reality of air-conditioned tour buses and dancing girls. We paused at the gates of Niue's only resort, but spent more time quietly standing, not much further down the highway, before human bones which had been respectfully left uninterrupted in a grotto made of makatea, only a few metres from the road.

I was distracted by many signs indicating tracks to the sea, wondering whether each new one would offer a better view of that other road we were constantly aware of: the super-highway of the ocean. At one memorable café—a shipping container perched on a cliff-top—we sat at a picnic table and gazed in two directions (better four eyes than two to scrutinize an unbroken horizon). We were awaiting some sign of breach, a plume of white—like a feather of peace or a branch of bleached coral raised in fluid gesture—tossed high by a whale on its steady passage north. We were rewarded. Fleeting speech bubbles. Whales were at sea.



Fig. 10 Gregory O'Brien, *Robin Kearns Sights a Whale off Avatele, Niue*, 2015.

The observation of whales requires patience. And islands, in particular, endorse the art of waiting. A sense of expectation is pervasive. At the hospital, the reception area was a village in itself. No doctor to be seen. And at the airport, baggage handlers had a long break between twice weekly flights, disappearing when not on duty perhaps to mend nets or push out a waka at Avatele. We circled the island daily, the only exit from the wide roundabout that is the island's ring-road being the airport runway. On the seventh day, we found ourselves sitting (just as we had on the flight north) next to the Premier of this not-quite-nation, Toke Tolagi. He was pleased we had found the island to our liking. We discussed some further points of detail in Margaret Pointer's book. From the air, the road was a slender gap in the lush green canopy of pandanus and broadleaf, a cream-white line parting the forest and the sole artery of infrastructure encircling this island of no rivers.



Fig. 11 Robin Kearns, *Outrigger Heading Seaward, Avatele, Niue*, 2015.

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¹ Rangīhira Pānoho, *Māori Art: History, Architecture, Landscape and Theory* (Auckland: Bateman 2015).

² Pānoho, 73.

³ Margaret Pointer, *Niue 1774-1974; 200 Years of Contact and Change* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2015), 181..

⁴ Pointer, 70.

⁵ Quoted in Pointer, 70.

⁶ Pointer, 179.

⁷ <http://www.radionz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/208314/niue-ring-road-sealed-at-last>, 6 November 2011, accessed 12 February 2016.

⁸ <http://www.radionz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/208314/niue-ring-road-sealed-at-last>, 6 November 2011, accessed 12 February 2016.

⁹ Liz Light, "Meeting the Locals at Niue's Show Day,"

<http://www.stuff.co.nz/travel/destinations/pacific-islands/71183855/meeting-the-locals-at-niues-show-day>, last updated 18 August 2015, n.p.

¹⁰ Pointer, 188.

¹¹ Pointer, 244.