

## “What’s So ‘Identity’ About That Word?”

### *Pasifika Men’s Experience of Being ‘Afakasi*

Philip Culbertson and Margaret Agee

#### **Abstract**

The self-perceptions and experiences of men who are ‘*afakasi*, or half-caste, were explored as part of a qualitative project undertaken by a pālagi/Pasifika research team. For most of the eight men who took part, the focus group discussions for this project provided their first opportunity to talk with others about their experiences of being ‘*afakasi*. Themes that emerged included the influence of formative experiences within their families, including an early awareness of difference; the significance of language and languaging; the quantification of blood in discourses regarding ethnic identity; connectedness and belonging; the influence of multiple contexts; identity confusion; and creating metaphors to stabilise identity as ‘*afakasi* men move between worlds.

Until recently, little research has been published on Pasifika ‘*afakasi* (half-caste) identity. At the inception of this project, we were aware only of the essays on Māori half-caste identity by Bell (2004), Carter (1998) and Kukutai (2005), and on Pasifika half-caste identity by Keddell (2006) and Salesa (1997). All of these authors linked their own work to the 50-year-long tradition of research in mixed-race identity, dual-heritage identity, race politics, complex identity, and “third culture” kids, and the expansion of that research fuelled by the academic fascination with Homi Bhabha’s (1994, 1996) writings on postcolonialism, “hybridity”, “third space”, and culture (see, for example, Ifekwunigwe, 2004). Given the explosion of overseas research, we were surprised how little work had been done in this area of political and cultural identity in Aotearoa New Zealand with those born into ethnically mixed families.

Continuing our search, we stumbled across the prominence of ‘*afakasi* identity in the fiction and poetry of Pasifika writers. Because this literature so poignantly embodies the struggle of Pacific peoples who live out multiple racial identities, we have opted for a creative approach to the traditional literature review, highlighting the emotional struggle of ‘*afakasi* Pacific peoples as expressed through novels and poetry.

Mixed-race fiction has itself a long history in this country. Somerville (2002) observes that while “many of the earliest published Māori writers were of dual descent”

(p. 200), it is also the case that “there has never been a defined ‘mixed race’ community in Aotearoa/New Zealand” (p. 202). Nationwide “race politics”, which existed in this country long before the academic term was coined, have created a dominant discourse here which tempts all of us, including many mental health professionals, to conceive of identity only in terms of Pākehā, Māori, Polynesian or Asian. Yet residents of this country have long intermarried. Over 40 years ago, “[a] 1966 study noted that more than 50 percent of Maori marriage partners choose a Pakeha partner” (Brennan, 2002, p. 13). The dominant New Zealand discourses almost automatically alienate people who carry more than one identity in their bodies and psyches. Perhaps this is why so much of the exploration of *afakasi* identity is carried on in the “safer” literary margins of society, away from the view of organised politics and dominant discourses. There, through the voices of *afakasi* writers, some of the contradictions are laid out.

Samoan writer Albert Wendt (1999) observes how attractive the Samoan tatau can be on pālāgi skin: “Fair skin has always been considered ideal for tatau because of the black on white contrast” (p. 401). Yet the same contrast haunts Samoan poet Selina Tusitala Marsh (2006), in her short story “Afakasi pours herself afa cuppa coffee”:

*Afa’s thoughts cowered under the shadow of her pen about to trek the unexplored terrain of her paper. Its whiteness mocked her. But hasn’t that always been the case? The brown edges of her newly inked words mocked her. Hasn’t that always been the case? (p. 29)*

Tongan poet Karlo Mila (2005, p. 118) writes similarly: “I feel like a potato/ brown on the outside/ white on the inside.” Indeed, the issue of whether skin colour accurately signals identity proved to be a significant theme in the stories of our *afakasi* research participants.

Skin colour connects also with the theme of “visibility” in the work of Pasifika writers. Leilani Burgoyne (2006, pp. 171–172) describes her “Wretched soul/ Fighting, to justify./ Struggling, to be./ Brown soul trapped/ Inside”. In an alphabetical poem, Tusiata Avia (2004, p. 9) writes: “A is for afakasi child/ Left at the crossroads/ Who will save her from the snakes?!/ Who will save her from the darkness?” The struggle to comfortably position two (or more) identities in one body can produce confusion; Albert Wendt (2003, p. 263) describes *afakasis* as “lost between two cultures.” The struggle can also produce a kind of situational dissociation. Talosaga Tolovae (1995, p. 289) describes the fear he feels from others when they meet “a pale Polynesian.” Karlo Mila (2005, p. 23) articulates the hurt she felt as a young woman in the company of her peers: “when those Tongan girls/ I see them stare/ see my skin half palangi fair/ I watch your nostrils flare/ I see you *sio lalo* [look down on me].” Selina Marsh (2006,

p. 30) emphasises the connection between narrating an identity and performing it, when she describes her anxiety over “not knowing how one does brown publicly.”

But at the same time that ‘*afakasis* suffer both intrapsychic confusion and social humiliation, they often wish to defend their “two-bloodedness” (*totolua*) (Pacific Daughters, n.d., p. 5). As Cherie Barford (2003) observes, “My father was a German soldier/ as if it really mattered/ and I discovered much later/ that details really do” (p. 19). To ignore the details of heritage and identity, even in their messiness, is to seriously threaten the mental health of those with mixed-race identity. Jacq Carter (2003) defiantly claims her connection with her grandmother, “who had blood enough for me”: “I am/ because you were/ and because I am/ you are” (p. 44).

Finding some sort of stable identity is a lifelong search for many Pasifika writers. Determined to reject the colonial heritage (see Wendt, 1999, p. 411), they also resist being overwhelmed by their indigeneity. As half-caste Māori writer Keri Hulme (1981) commented, “A dual heritage is both a pain and an advantage” (p. 294). Some resolve this tension easily, and others do not. Reporting an interview with Selina Marsh, journalist Monique Esplin (2006, n.p.) wrote:

*Marsh says her mixed Samoan and Pakeha roots have put her in a privileged position of having a foot in both worlds.... But the flipside of that is that she feels like she is never fully part of either culture. Typically optimistic she says, “I take in the best of both worlds.”*

## Method

### Evolution of the project

The aim of this project was to investigate the sense of identity, self-perceptions, and life experiences of adults who are Pasifika people with complex or “hyphenated” cultural heritages and identities (*‘afakasi*). The project’s impetus arose out of the preparation of an essay for *Penina Uliuli: Contemporary Challenges in Mental Health for Pacific Peoples*, a book co-edited with a colleague, Cabrini Makasiale (Culbertson, Agee, & Makasiale, 2007). The team of Pasifika authors who contributed to the book identified the experience of being *‘afakasi* as a “taboo” topic that needed acknowledgement. To break this silence, four Samoan *‘afakasi* women from the group decided to come together to share what being *‘afakasi* meant for them, with Margaret as facilitator.

Convinced that this needed to be taken further, the writing team evolved into a team of Pasifika and pālagi co-researchers, with the inclusion of two Samoan *‘afakasi* male colleagues, Philip, and a further cultural consultant acting as independent data analyst.

All decision-making was collaborative, including negotiation of the research agenda, questions, method and process, in keeping with Gibbs’ (2001) principle that “[c]ross-cultural collaborative research should be at least partially ‘participant driven’” (p. 679). Permission to undertake the project was obtained from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, and a grant was obtained from the University’s Staff Research Fund.

### Procedure

Focus groups were chosen as the most suitable method for this qualitative study. As a collective process of data gathering, focus groups provide participants with an audience for the telling of their stories, through which shared meanings are created. The initial discussion, retrospectively, had served as a pilot, since it had reflected the characteristics of a focus group (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Separate men’s and women’s groups were facilitated by pālagi/Pasifika pairs of same-gender researchers, and each group met for 2–3 hours.

Pasifika members of the research team, who were themselves *‘afakasi*, acted as recruiters, distributing information about the project through personal contacts and snowballing. They invited all prospective participants to a *fono* (meeting) to explain the project further, meet the others involved, divide into focus groups according to geographical convenience, and collectively decide when and where the groups would meet. By using this method we, as pālagi, attempted to minimise the potential for cross-cultural research to become “re-colonising” (Quanchi, 2004, p. 4).

Each group discussion was audiotaped, then the tapes were transcribed, checked, and verified for accuracy by each group member. Transcripts were then analysed using grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Opportunities were given to participants to review and comment on the summary of themes, according to the principle of host verification (Miles & Huberman, 1984), and analysis was also checked by the independent analyst on the research team.

This report is based on data from the two adult men’s focus groups, each comprising three participants, a Pasifika co-facilitator and a pālagi co-facilitator. It must be noted that in the men’s groups, the male co-facilitators had not participated in such a group on this topic before, so they became co-facilitators/participants. (On reflection, we do not believe that this has compromised the research’s professionalism. In Pasifika communities it is not uncommon for people to hold multiple roles within a group, extended family or village.) Care was taken during data analysis to ensure that the stories of the co-facilitators were not accorded greater significance than the stories of the rest of the participants. This research should therefore be understood as exploring

the identity journeys of eight Pasifika adult males, in their 30s and 40s, identified by pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

## **Results and discussion**

Although these men's groups were small, the discussions elicited rich data. Seven of the major themes that emerged are discussed here, including developing identities within the family and community; the significance of language; the quantification of blood; identity as connectedness; the influence of multiple contexts; confusion; and creating metaphors of identity in moving between worlds.

### **Family and community: The cradle of identities**

The stories of our participants' identity journeys revealed the ways in which their experiences within families and communities shaped their awareness from an early age. In part, this involved a process over some years of "finding out" about their family histories; this was even more complex for the two who were adopted. For several, early experiences involved trips between New Zealand and the Islands, spending time with Samoan grandparents, and living for a period in the Islands. This influenced the ways in which they identified with their heritages, acquired Samoan, Tongan or other languages, and connected with places and groups of family members. Other group members had little or no experience with Island life.

Encounters in which they experienced themselves under the "gaze" of others evoked a consciousness of being different. Pkal: "I went to Tonga when I was younger; they treated me as a pālāgi. All my cousins would go running off to the shop to get Coca Cola or Fanta, because they thought that we wouldn't drink coconut juice."

Sui recalled being sent to a shop at age 5 or 6, where the Indian shopkeeper and a Fijian man looked at him, asking where he was from and whether he was Fijian or Indian. "And I said, 'No, I'm not Fijian, I'm not Indian, I'm brown European.' I think this story is indicative of how early in life I was already sorting out a sense of identity as a person of mixed/blended origins."

As early as kindergarten or playschool, another participant, Fritz, recalled being aware that he didn't quite fit anywhere: "I just felt it. I wondered why certain people behaved certain ways and parents interacted with them in different ways and they communicated differently."

Several participants who grew up experiencing parental cross-cultural conflict or were particularly conscious of ways in which their mixed heritages complicated their lives, recalled wishing that their parents had made other choices when they married, and that their lives were simpler. While Pkal, at about 10 years old, had wished they

were pālagi or that his mother had married a Tongan, Fritz wished his had married a Samoan. Sui’s “inner thoughts” were:

*Why did you have to marry this bastard, who was made up of a whole lot of different peoples? Why couldn’t you marry a pure Fijian so that I wouldn’t be in this position and you give yourself all this grief?*

Eddie voiced the painful internalisation of such parental conflict when he recalled being “torn between my English father and my Samoan mother.” Pkal bluntly described growing up with “an awful lot of shit flying at you. Shit also shapes your identity unless you’re able to fend it off.”

In spite of their stories of early consciousness and conflict, most participants acknowledged that their mixed heritage was not something that was generally spoken of, even with their own siblings. Not until he was at university did one participant find “someone to talk to about the issues and problems I had come across as a young Tongan.” One participant had undertaken extensive research into his *gafa* (genealogy) which he could trace back six generations, including both European and Samoan ancestry. Another described having become more intrigued about his identity as he had grown older:

*For myself at times I have thought about identity and it’s interesting to think what sort of things formulate you or help construct your personality and your world view, that sort of thing. Now that I’m over 40, I’m thinking about things and reflecting. (Eddie)*

The conversations for this research provided an opportunity to speak with others about their experiences as ‘*afakasi*, some for the first time.

### **What language do ‘afakasis speak?**

Both groups of male participants became absorbed with questions of language and languaging. Given the research topic, it is not surprising that the men were curious to understand the meaning of the term ‘*afakasi*. In each group, a member fluent in Samoan explained it as a loanword, or “borrowing”, derived from the English “half-caste”. As one explained:

*‘Afakasi is a translation of the word half-caste. What is so “identity” about that word?... It is just a translation of somebody else’s language. But having said that, I haven’t really thought of an alternative term, other than “coconut”! (Pkal)*

Sui, a *kailoma* (Fijian half-caste) member, added, “In my language, it means ‘the peo-

ple between’.” Laughing, a Tongan member, Pkal, remarked, “In my language, *hafekasi* means ‘to eat with the white people!’” Among other members, there was less clarity about the term’s meaning. Xanana observed that he had always thought of ‘*afakasi* as referring to “someone [of mixed blood] from Samoa who can speak Samoan.” Because he could not himself speak Samoan, he identified himself not as ‘*afakasi*, but as “Kiwi with Samoan blood.”

At least two of the group participants did not understand the term at all. As children, they had heard ‘*afakasi* used—one while his friends at school were talking about him, and one while his aunties were discussing him at a party—but while neither understood what was being said, both sensed a negative connotation to the word. That same negativity was articulated by another participant, Bob: “For most people, the term ‘*afakasi* is very offensive because it says ‘*afakasis* are intruders and ‘*afakasis*’ blood is not 100% pure.”

### A bunga or a monkey? Language as a pejorative

Many participants had been derogated as ‘*afakasi* by other indigenous people, both playmates and relatives. This conversation prompted a discussion of additional pejoratives they had been called: filthy coconut, black fly, monkey, bunga, f.o.b. (fresh off the boat), banana, honky, *pālagi loi* (fake white person), *pālagi pepelo* (white imposter) and *pālagi toy* (“I was a toy made by white people”). Many of these generated laughter, and in fact participants occasionally described themselves as coconuts, but behind the laughter lay a pool of deep childhood pain. Bob opened up that pain: “This name calling made Samoans laugh at me but it was not funny to me because it was confusing and hurtful when I was growing up.” Fritz commented: “Growing up, I was very confused with all my *pālagi* friends. They called me a filthy coconut, my Samoan friends called me a honky, and I didn’t know where I fitted in, and it really really rubbed off on me.”

But ‘*afakasi* could also be used to express admiration or envy. This contrariness of usage showed up in the earlier discussion that was the pilot for this study (Berking et al., 2007). David, a Samoan-born participant in one of the men’s groups, described his own experience:

*The ‘afakasis in Samoa are well off, or better off, in Samoa than the full Samoans. Because I grew up in a family where we were relatively poor, I was not referred to as ‘afakasi. But the interesting thing though, when I go into the villages, because I am a little bit fairer than most of the full-blooded Samoan, they call you a pālagi or an ‘afakasi, yet amongst the ‘afakasi in the schools that I went to, because of the*

*socio-economic situation of my family, we were not referred to as ‘afakasi. We didn’t meet the criteria from that perspective.*

### “A little bit on the outer”: The criteria of inclusion and exclusion

The words “privilege” and “criteria” reveal another aspect of the way identity language is used in relation to mixed-race Pasifikans. The term ‘*afakasi*’ can be used either to include or to exclude, or stated otherwise, to hold someone at arm’s length.

The major part of our conversation around the topic of language had to do with language fluency—who could speak their indigenous language, and who could not. Of the eight participants, four had a command of their Pasifika language, and four did not. The four who did had spent part of their childhood in the Islands. Of the four who did not, two had attempted to learn the language, so far unsuccessfully, and two had not tried.

One of the participants who was fluent in Samoan, and sent his children to an *a’oga fa’a Samoa* (Samoan language nest) in Auckland, cited the words of a prominent Samoan academic: “Without the language, the nation would be cast into darkness.” The participants who could not speak their indigenous language struggled with how disadvantaged, excluded and sometimes shamed they felt by their inability.

*At a lot of the family meetings, the gatherings, it was all in Samoan and you felt left out. You know a few words, and all that, but you can’t understand it properly, well, I couldn’t, be part of that discussion. I think I might have viewed it differently if I could speak the language, like, be more inclusive, but you are a little bit on the outer if you can’t speak the language. I don’t know if they look down on you but, it was definitely, you weren’t quite there, or quite included to the same extent, if you couldn’t converse with them in Samoan. (Luke)*

These feelings were commonly expressed by the non-fluent. Those fluent in their native language spoke of the relational, and occasionally professional, advantages, and the role of fluency in their identity. Most, though not all, of those fluent in an indigenous language, however, recognised that language fluency alone was not enough to guarantee a solid ethnic identity. One participant explained at length:

*Language is important because it is one of the tools that are part of one’s identity. Also, people who own the language, for example, Samoans, will respect anyone who can dialogue in their mother tongue. As a Samoan, knowing how to speak Samoan connects me with my people. Yet, some may argue that language does not make a person Samoan because anyone could learn a language and speak it and write*

*more perfectly than most full Samoans but it does not make them Samoan. I agree with that argument because some Samoans who have spoken to me in Samoan in the past said I was not Samoan because I was white and I was not born in Samoa but I was born in New Zealand and I was adopted, and all these factors weakened my claim to be a full Samoan or a Samoan. So, one could speak, read and write perfectly a language but it does not guarantee that person to be identified as a native of that language. Therefore, language is not a 100% indispensable part of identity for me. (Bob)*

Little comment was offered about the professional advantages of being a native English speaker. Comments about fluency seemed much more concerned over the quality of relationships that were gained or missed, depending on one's language abilities. Overall, those who could not speak a Pasifika language envied those who could. Those who could not speak the language felt they had missed out on certain advantages in life, including jobs and a sense of connectedness. They were not always quick to identify any advantage of being 'afakasi. This attitude persisted, even when the fluent argued that speaking a Pasifika language could not be counted as a marker of being "really" indigenous.

### **The quantification of blood: Percentages of complexity**

Conversation in both groups was peppered with subtle but frequent concern over what constitutes a "real" Pasifikan. On the basis that they were not "full" Samoans/Tongans/Fijians, participants questioned how Pasifikan they were. Their concern was often couched in terms of quantification, as the men described their friends as "a fifth Samoan, or half Samoan, or 90% Samoan." Mutual "blood" could help people understand each other, and "European blood" was recognised, ambiguously, as sometimes giving one an advantage, and at other times creating exclusion. In addition, "mixed blood" was used by some of the participants, as well as their surrounding cultural groups, to explain dysfunctional family dynamics:

*I wished that [Mum] had married someone that would have made my life more simple than having to deal with all these "managing" things. I also blamed Dad. At times he would be loving and caring and an awesome dad. But he could have a drink or two and just go mad, sometimes without the drink, and he would be just so wound up. I linked that to his make up because he was made up of so many different bloods, and messages that I would hear from indigenous Fijians would also confirm this for me, such as "these kailoma people, these 'afakasi people, they are too hot-blooded, they are not stable." So violence was interpreted as something*

*that came along with being of mixed origins. I didn’t like that; as a result I thought it would have been simpler if Mum had just married someone that wasn’t so hot-blooded, so “mixed blooded”. (Sui)*

Many of the participants were uncomfortable with the ethnicity categories offered in the 5-yearly New Zealand census. Our participants tended to prefer a census self-definition that included the full range of their family heritage, such as “New Zealand-born half Samoan and half Irish”, or “a New Zealander with some English blood and some Samoan blood”, thereby rejecting the levelling normally produced by the dominant discourse’s preference that people in New Zealand are “Pākehā, Māori, Pacific Islander, or Other.” However, in summary census statistics, people who named a complex identity were ultimately grouped among the 11.1% of New Zealanders classified as “Other” (Johnston, 2007). This results in a government-level “cover-up” of the increasingly rich diversity of identities in this country, a source of frustration for many of our participants. As one expressed it:

*For me in any of those things I tick Chinese, I tick Samoan, and whatever they have for “European”. I tick all three. I know where I used to work, you tick as many as you like—but if you ticked Māori in combination with five different things, then you were Māori on the statistics. If you ticked any one of the other groups, like Samoan then that’s what you were.... You couldn’t be part this, part this and part that. (Luke)*

It would seem that statisticians and mental health practitioners have different agendas, for some of New Zealand’s leading statisticians have opposed the deconstruction of the dominant ethnic/racial discourse in this country. Our participants preferred to keep open as many options as possible, in order to find room to express to the fullest their personal identities.

### **Identity as connectedness**

Since the majority of the men in this study talked of refusing the official categories of the government census, what other options do they prefer in articulating their ‘*afakasi*’ identity? Clearly their identity had not been defined on the basis of language fluency, however much some expressed regret at their inability in this respect. Nor were the majority of them comfortable defining their identity on the basis of the “one drop theory” (normally attributed to Walter Ashby Plecker in 1920s America, in an attempt to keep ethnic groups from mixing, thereby defending the “pure white race”)—that having “one drop of Samoan blood” makes them Samoan. Nor was skin colour an indi-

cator. One participant commented to another, “When I walked in the room, when I saw you, I was going, ‘There’s a white guy in the room!’, but that’s the ignorance we carry with us, cause I myself get that a lot” (Bob to Fritz). All of the participants appeared to define their identity through a spectrum of connectedness/disconnectedness, though they differed among themselves about how much of the connect/disconnect spectrum was self-initiated and how much cued by external factors.

Perhaps their sense of being “a little bit on the outer” or “held on the edge” of different parts of their ethnic identity acutely sensitised them to signals from others about whether they “belonged”. Both groups began with the expected Pasifika protocol, of naming important aspects of their genealogy and their families’ identification with specific villages. In both groups, this normal cultural exercise resulted in some members connecting, via ancestral names, with others in the same group. But also in both groups, participants agreed that while connecting was important, so was identity, and for them, identity seemed to encompass more than connection alone.

Several participants commented on how cultural rituals gave them a sense of belonging—going to family funerals, participating in cultural performance groups, or being “able to perform all of the tasks that full Samoans do.” But other parts of traditional culture seemed to repel some of them, such as the *fa’alavelave* (Samoan: financial obligations connected to family rites of passage), tensions between their parents over cultural issues, or their difficulties with language facility. Some of the participants commented that taking their children “back to the Islands” had given them a renewed sense of connection, though nearly half of the participants had not travelled to the Islands at all. Those who knew their *gafa* (Samoan: genealogies) on both sides seemed more connected than those who did not.

But overall, connection and disconnection in the present seemed more important to our participants than their past heritages. Several participants had felt disconnected in their childhoods due to family circumstances: “I would be embarrassed for them to see that my mum was Samoan;” “We didn’t have the nice things that all my pālāgi friends have;” “I didn’t know my family connection.” As children, some participants were quite sensitive to messages from others about whether they belonged or not.

In general, participants wondered what the criteria were for their inclusion or exclusion. Belonging seemed to need to be “earned”, yet they were not always sure how to do that. There seemed to be “criteria” for belonging, but no one could quite name what those were. One participant, Fritz, articulated the question that he carries into every social situation as an *afakasi*: “Shall we meet, or shall we not meet? Shall we just pass each other?”

## Identity in context

Whether encounters were characterised by meeting or just passing, and the elusive criteria for belonging, seemed largely determined by contextual influences, including the politics of ethnicity, social status, expectations, and meanings derived from visual cues. Having to sit at the back during traditional Fijian ceremonies “reminded” Sui about his *kailoma* “status and social ‘place’ in Fijian society.” Another participant, Xanana, contrasted the experience of feeling like “cool Samoans” who were “not from out in the bush” when he was with other ‘*afakasi* with the derogatory attitude he noticed when he was with a group of full Samoans. Stories of being singled out as ‘*afakasi* or taken for *pālagi* when in the Islands contrasted with comments about not “feeling ‘*afakasi*” in New Zealand (David).

Being ‘*afakasi* in New Zealand was associated with positive and negative connotations for participants. One man, who had spent time living in Europe, compared responses to him that he enjoyed overseas with racist attitudes that offended him in New Zealand:

*When I’m in London they find it fascinating that I am part Samoan, whereas over here I’m a coconut. I love it. So I didn’t want to come back to New Zealand. I feel quite bitter against Kiwis, which is maybe why I don’t identify as Kiwi. To me Kiwis are racist. (Fritz)*

He described feeling “in a bit of limbo in a lot of contexts in New Zealand”, but whether in Samoa or New Zealand, as a child he never felt that he “fitted in” with his cousins “because they were all dark and I was fair.”

Despite speaking Tongan, Pkal experienced within church gatherings “that sense of not being accepted fully in both worlds.” He was criticised by his Tongan family for his choice of sport—a game “Pacific Islanders don’t play”—then was judged as shy when he followed protocol and waited till last at Tongan feasts: “Pkal, how come you’re so shy? You’re supposed to be *pālagi*,” implying that “only Tongans hang back.” In his workplace, dressed in a suit, when he speaks to the cleaners in their own language,

*they look the other way, they don’t want to talk to me. And even when I do address them in Tongan, it takes them a few minutes for them to click that I have actually spoken Tongan and they still don’t think I’m Tongan; they see that English lawyer in a suit. And when ... I’m talking to them in Tongan they speak back to me in English.... It is as if they cannot see the Tongan behind the suit in a city office. I don’t know who taught them how to see their own people, or maybe it’s just me not seeing them.*

The role of visual cues and the multiple lenses through which people interpret the world around them can be seen at work here in determining assumptions and judgments within multiple contexts, resulting in participants being “misread” from several directions. When “reading” the social rules and attitudes in different settings, another participant observed the ways in which these affected his own freedom to engage with others:

*depending on who says it, I find myself either shrinking back or coming forward, even physically, just in the way that I am.... That happens when I'm in different groups. And sometimes I like to just disappear from the group. I find myself just checking out. (Sui)*

In each particular situation, these participants had to cope with the recurring challenge of determining what parts of their identity were to be foregrounded or backgrounded, and whether it might be possible for them to feel a sense of belonging that allowed them to be fully present.

## **Confusion**

Experiences of liminality, conflictedness, and the challenges associated with their processes of identity development evoked powerful emotions for a number of the men in this study. Most commonly, they spoke of their confusion when they were growing up, “with all my pālāgi friends” (Fritz), “because I was white and not brown like my family members” (Bob), wanting to belong yet experiencing others’ ambivalence towards them, and the emotional challenge of exclusion. Sui described “feeling confused at times about my own sense of identity and struggling to feel confident in being of mixed origins.” After experiencing ostracism at school because of his origins, he felt “an overwhelming sense of shame and guilt.”

For several participants, their confusion, anger and frustration found expression through fisticuffs when they were young, particularly when they were teased or bullied. Two spoke of looking for fights, to somehow earn their right to be accepted.

Deeply felt pain seeped through a number of the participants’ stories, despite the matter-of-fact way they were recounted. Questioned about his fair skin by Samoan friends, Eddie’s explanation that his Samoan mother had married an Englishman evoked a response that labelled him as an embodied mistake: “They’d say, ‘Your mum should never have done that, eh.’ The wrong thing, a sort of mistake. Some people are quite subtle; some are more forthright....”

The sheer hurtfulness of this stood in contrast to his grace in attributing their remark to their need to “try to put you in a box” because of their search for their own

identity, “and if you don’t quite fit, people just try and make sense of the world around them, really.”

Underlying less overtly emotionally laden comments was at times an almost wistful sadness among several participants at the loss of what might have been: the lack of opportunity to learn their indigenous language; “the bits that I was missing in those troubled teenage years” and not knowing “what my connections were” (Luke); missing out on growing up in the Islands; and yearning for simplicity and peace instead of the complexity and conflict that characterised family and peer relationships. Nevertheless, a number of the participants had found their own ways of making meaning from their pain-filled experiences, as the fathers in the group perceived their children as having more choices than they had, and their own glass as “half full” rather than half empty.

### **Creating metaphors to stabilise identity: “I can play in both worlds”**

As conversation continued, participants in both groups began to find their sense of connectedness with each other. “Connecting, disconnecting. I don’t know what’s so transforming about that, but maybe this is what people who are ‘in between’ have in common: that place, it’s a distinct place, and I know that place” (Sui). They discovered that their shared experiences of connecting and disconnecting within the group began to create a unique community, giving them a more concrete sense of belonging. In one group, a consensus eventually emerged that the participants could form an identity about belonging “where they were needed.” Pkal added that with this sense of mobility about his identity, “I can play in both worlds.”

What are the advantages of carrying multiple cultural identities in one body? One participant, David, mused:

*There was a book written by Jemaima Tiatia, Caught Between Cultures. It describes the feeling of not just ‘afakasi, but people (especially the young) here in New Zealand, Kiwi or pālagi vs. their Samoan side. They feel they don’t really belong in either camp. But when I read that book, I could see another side to this issue. I feel that being ‘afakasi, you can have the best of both cultures. And for me I feel in that position. I speak Samoan and can move in the Samoan environment, but I’m also quite comfortable being in a New Zealand pālagi culture and environment. I could move and relate to both. So I think there’s another side to that, when you can feel the best of both cultures.*

Two metaphors in particular emerged from the groups, both related to water, that element which binds the Pacific together. The first was the metaphor of a *waka* (canoe).

To be able to name one's ancestral waka is an expected part of the articulation of Māori identity, and Pacific peoples, likewise, are seafaring peoples for whom the waka is standard fare. Pkal introduced the metaphor while describing someone influential whom he had met at university:

*William was saying, "We can be Pacific but we can also be pālagi. We are in both worlds, jumping from waka to waka." That was the first time for me. Up until then, I was too well-behaved. The orders always came from the outside.*

Sui observed that the metaphor of a unique waka for those with 'afakasi identity was gaining an increasing appeal among younger Pasifikans:

*With the younger generation coming through now they are taking back that word 'afakasi and trying to create their own waka. As you just said, Philip, you don't actually belong to any waka. This is about younger people trying to say that 'afakasi is a waka. There is such a waka called.... The ones that didn't quite fit in that one or that one or that one, they get in this one.*

The second metaphor which emerged was that of a bridge. Luke, who described his "census identity" as "Samoan Chinese", explained how the "bridge" metaphor described his growing identity as he matured:

*It became bad when I wanted to join groups like the Samoan group, and then I found out I wasn't really one of them, and I wasn't really part of the Chinese group, and not really part of any other group. But I think for a while now, now I see things as well I can fit with all of these groups, maybe not completely but I can operate in their worlds, good enough to be almost like a bridge to others. It's kind of turned into an advantage.*

A bridge, of course, is a connection across a divide, a structure whose purpose is dependant upon two things being separated by a space or a gap. Even in the midst of their confusion and painful memories, our participants carried two or more ethnic identities willingly. Even their dual identities were illustrated by the tension between these two metaphors: a waka unites individuals together in a safe space, while a bridge spans those who are divided.

### **The rope that binds and strengthens**

In the end, 'afakasi itself became a metaphor, as one participant carefully deconstructed it linguistically:

*For most people, the term ‘afakasi is very offensive because it says that ‘afakasis are intruders and ‘afakasis’ blood is not 100% pure. However, I do not find it offensive that I am part of more than one group. On the other hand, I prefer the term ‘afatasi because Samoans when writing we do not use the letter “k” because it is not originally a part of the Samoan alphabet. ‘Afatasi for me also refers to two words. [The first is] ‘afa, a Samoan product that could be classified as a “rope”. ‘Afa is a product used in the past and still is used today to stabilise a fale or house instead of using nails and it was stronger than nails. It also strengthens and stabilises anything that is unstable; it is like super-glue but the difference is that ‘afa is all natural. Tasi, on the other hand, means “one”. One in Samoan could refer to the number “one” but it could also mean “togetherness” or something strong. However, some may argue the word ‘afatasi still sounds like a group. I agree that ‘afatasi is a group but it is a group I belong to that should be strong, rather than weak, because we are like an ‘afa and we should have a “one” or togetherness attitude, which will give ‘afatasi identity stability. ‘Afatasi are also half of something whole; without us something whole cannot be complete. (Bob)*

## **Conclusion**

We believe the findings of this research open doorways onto new perspectives that widen our understandings of identities and identity development, and present a challenge to the dominant discourse in this country that limits the acknowledgement of complex ethnic and cultural identities. As this is a qualitative study with a limited number of participants who were not randomly selected, the results must be interpreted with due caution and these men’s experiences cannot be claimed as representative of all ‘afakasi men in Aotearoa New Zealand. Nevertheless, their stories present a compelling argument for further research with people of complex ethnic heritages, to develop a more in-depth understanding of the processes through which they are able to achieve a stable and satisfying sense of identity in the context of their communities. The voices of our participants resonate with those of the ‘afakasi poets whose voices were heard earlier. We are all challenged to create spaces of connection and belonging in which ‘afakasi men can give voice to their stories and find acknowledgement in the fullness of their identities.

Alice TePunga Somerville (2002) argues that “identity is an issue that individuals determine for themselves” (p. 208). Selina Marsh emphasises the relationship between identity and context, as did our participants: “We are holistic beings, our identities are fluid. I like to think of my identities as ‘chameleonic’—they change/adapt according

to the context I'm in" (Interview, 2007, p. 2). Identities, then, including ethnic and racial identities, cannot be static, but are always "on their way to somewhere else." 'Afakasi Samoan minister and hip-hop poet Mua Strickson-Pua (2006, p. 49) reclaims both identity and fluidity for himself when he argues that he is not "a real Samoan", but rather, "I am a Samoan becoming real." Our participants' anxieties about "meeting the criteria" of someone else's identity definition underline Somerville's challenge, "If the existence of certain human beings causes problems for certain concepts or systems of categorization, then it is the concepts or systems of categorization and not the human existants [*sic*] which need to be criticized and changed" (p. 200). It is only when we counsellors open up space for our 'afakasi clients to claim the fullness of their complex identities, outside the claustrophobia of the dominant national discourses, that we serve them well.

### Acknowledgement

The authors wish to thank Ms. Nua Silipa for her support and assistance in the production of this manuscript, in her role as overall cultural advisor to this research project.

### References

- Avia, T. (2004). O le pi tautau. In *Wild dogs under my skirt* (p. 9). Wellington: Victoria University Press.
- Barford, C. (2003). Eclipse Friday 23 November 1984. In A. Wendt, R. Whaitiri, & R. Sullivan (Eds.), *Whetu moana: Contemporary Polynesian poems in English* (p. 19). Auckland: Auckland University Press.
- Bell, A. (2004). "Half-castes" and "white natives": The politics of Māori-Pākehā hybrid identities. In C. Bell & S. Matthewman (Eds.), *Cultural studies in Aotearoa New Zealand: Identity, space, and place* (pp. 121–138). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Berking, T., Fatialofa, C. S., Lupe, K., & Skipps-Patterson, S., with Agee, M. (2007). Becoming 'afakasi. In P. Culbertson, M. N. Agee, & C. 'O. Makasiale (Eds.), *Penina uliuli: Contemporary challenges in mental health for South Pacific peoples* (pp. 49–64). Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Bhabha, H. (1994). *The location of culture*. London: Routledge.
- Bhabha, H. (1996). Cultures in between. In S. Hall & P. Du Gay (Eds.), *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. 53–60). London: Sage.
- Brennan, J. (2002). Introduction. In J. Brennan (Ed.), *Mixed race literature* (pp. 1–56). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Burgoyne, L. (2006). Brown soul. In S. T. Marsh (Ed.), *Niu voices: Contemporary Pacific fiction 1* (pp. 171–172). Wellington: Huia Publishers.
- Carter, J. (2003). For a tipuna wahine. In A. Wendt, R. Whaitiri, & R. Sullivan (Eds.), *Whetu moana: Contemporary Polynesian poems in English* (p. 44). Auckland: Auckland University Press.
- Carter, M. (1998). None of us is what our tupuna were: When growing up Maori is growing up Pakeha. In W. Ihimaera (Ed.), *Growing up Maori* (pp. 253–267). Auckland: Tandem Press.
- Culbertson, P., Agee, M. N., & Makasiale, C. ‘O. (Eds.). (2007). *Penina uliuli: Contemporary challenges in mental health for South Pacific peoples*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press.
- Esplin, M. (2006, January 1). An academic trailblazer: Selina Marsh: Auckland University’s first Pacific Island PhD graduate. *Pacific Magazine*. Retrieved April 29, 2007, from <http://www.pacificmagazine.net/issue/2006/01/01/an-academic-trailblazer>
- Gibbs, M. (2001). Toward a strategy for undertaking cross-cultural collaborative research. *Society & Natural Resources*, 14(8), 673–687.
- Hulme, K. (1981). Mauri: An introduction to bicultural poetry in New Zealand. In G. Amirthanayagam and S. C. Harrex (Eds.), *Only connect* (pp. 290–310). Honolulu: Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English.
- Ifekwunigwe, J. O. (Ed.). (2004) *“Mixed race” studies: A reader*. London: Routledge.
- Interview with Dr. Selena [sic] Tusitala Marsh (2007, March). Retrieved April 29, 2007, from <http://www.planet-tonga.com/pacificeye/March2007/interviews/inspiration/marsh.htm>
- Johnston, M. (2007, April 21). Census planners blasted for “distorted” ethnicity statistics. *New Zealand Herald*. Retrieved April 27, 2007, from [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/section/1/story.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=10435396](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/section/1/story.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10435396).
- Keddell, E. (2006). Pavlova and pineapple pie: Selected identity influences on Samoan-Pakeha people in Aotearoa/New Zealand. *K tuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online*, 1, 45–63.
- Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2000). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kukutai, T. (2005). *White mothers, brown children: Understanding the intergenerational transmission of minority ethnic identity*. Paper presented at the Annual American Population Association Meeting, Philadelphia.
- Marsh, S. T. (2006). Afakasi pours herself afa cuppa coffee. In S. T. Marsh (Ed.), *Niu voices: Contemporary Pacific fiction 1* (pp. 29–33). Wellington: Huia Publishers.
- Mila, K. (2005). *Dream fish floating*. Wellington: Huia Publishers.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1984). *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods*. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Pacific Daughters. (n.d.). Lesa’s story. Retrieved April 28, 2007 from <http://www.pacificdaughters.org.nz/lesa.html>

- Quanchi, M. (2004). Indigenous epistemology, wisdom, and tradition: Changing and challenging dominant paradigms in Oceania. In C. Bailey, D. Cabrera, & L. Buys (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Social Change in the 21st Century Conference, Centre for Social Change Research*. Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology. Retrieved August 27, 2006 from <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/archive/00000630/>
- Salesa, D. (1997). *Troublesome halfcastes: Tales of a Samoan borderland*. Unpublished master's thesis, Department of History, The University of Auckland.
- Somerville, A. T. (2002). Waharoa: Māori-Pākehā writing in Aotearoa/New Zealand. In Jonathan Brennan (Ed.), *Mixed race literature* (pp. 200–223). Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Strauss, A. L., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Strickson-Pua, Rev. M., aka REV MC. (2006, June). Pasifika hip hop poetry doing the healing. *Aotearoa Ethnic Network Journal*, 1(1), pp. 46–49.
- Tiatia, J. (1998). *Caught between cultures*. Auckland: Christian Research Association.
- Tolovae, T. (1995). Polynesian old man. In A. Wendt (Ed.), *Nuanua: Pacific writing in English since 1980*. Auckland: Auckland University Press.
- Wendt, A. (1999). Afterword: Tatauing the post-colonial body. In V. Hereniko & R. Wilson (Eds.), *Inside out: Literature, cultural politics, and identity in the new Pacific* (pp. 399–412). Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Wendt, A. (2003). *The mango's kiss*. Auckland: Vintage Books.