



## Names and Narratives: Māori Identity and Cultural Survival in Select Poems of Aziembry Aolani

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### Abstract

This paper investigates subtle racial discrimination in contemporary New Zealand through the poetry of Māori/Polynesian writer Aziembry Aolani. Focusing on “Give me my name back” and “Parking Warden,” it examines how Aolani navigates both historical erasure and everyday prejudice. In “Give me my name back,” the reclamation of names operates as a political and cultural act, restoring whakapapa and asserting Māori identity against colonial legacies. “Parking Warden” dramatizes microaggressions in urban workplaces, revealing how casual stereotyping perpetuates racial hierarchies. Drawing on perspectives from Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Derald Wing Sue, and Albert Wendt, the study situates Aolani’s poetry within Māori and Pasifika literary traditions, highlighting themes of identity, language, resilience, and decolonization. Aolani’s work transforms lived experience into poetic testimony, bridging the personal, political, and historical, and demonstrates literature’s power to affirm Indigenous voice while confronting subtle and structural racism.

**Keywords:** Māori literature, Polynesian poetry, racial microaggressions, naming, identity, cultural resilience, decolonization, Aotearoa

Racial discrimination in New Zealand (Aotearoa) has deep historical roots in colonization and continues today in subtle, everyday forms. Māori and Polynesian communities face prejudice not only through systemic inequities but also via stereotypes, microaggressions, and casual erasure of cultural identity. Literature provides a vital space to articulate and resist these injustices. Aziembry Aolani, an emerging Māori/Polynesian poet

publishing in platforms such as *Turbine Kapohau*, explores these realities in his poems “Give me my name back” and “Parking Warden.” His work blends humour and grief, foregrounding identity, ancestry, and resilience, while examining urban spaces – workplaces, streets, and family memory – where subtle racism persists. Like earlier Māori writers such as Hone Tuwhare and Witi Ihimaera, Aolani situates personal and communal experiences of

discrimination within the broader legacy of colonization. Together, his poems reveal how racism in Aotearoa operates both as a historical erasure and a contemporary, lived experience.

Māori have experienced systemic racism since colonization, including land alienation, suppression of te reo Māori, and exclusion from political power. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in *Decolonizing Methodologies*, highlights how colonial systems imposed “research, language, and knowledge frameworks” that marginalized Indigenous voices (Smith 1-5). Today, racial inequality continues through:

1. **Stereotyping:** assumptions that Māori are naturally athletic, aggressive, or uneducated.
2. **Education and health gaps:** Māori are underrepresented in higher education and suffer poorer health outcomes compared to Pākehā (European New Zealanders).
3. **Justice system bias:** Māori remain disproportionately policed and incarcerated.
4. **Microaggressions in daily life:** subtle comments and attitudes that devalue Māori identity, echoing Ngahuia Te Awekotuku’s observation that Māori are constantly subjected to “the politics of being looked at” (Te Awekotuku 72).

Aolani’s poetry reflects these layers of discrimination – both historical erasure (“*Give me my name back*”) and contemporary prejudice (“*Parking Warden*”). Aziembry Aolani’s poetry transforms lived Māori and Polynesian experiences into powerful artistic testimony. His poems articulate how discrimination – both historical and contemporary – infiltrates language, identity, and daily life, while also offering resistance through humour, resilience, and cultural memory. Two representative poems, “*Give me my name back*” and “*Parking Warden*,” showcase how Aolani bridges the intimate with the political, dramatizing both the

colonial erasure of the past and the subtle microaggressions of the present.

In “*Give me my name back*,” the refrain functions as both a personal plea and a collective protest against colonial violence (Aolani, “*Give me my name back*”). Within a Māori worldview, names carry *whakapapa* (genealogy) and *mana* (spiritual authority); to strip a person of their name is to sever ancestral continuity. Through imagery of rust, ash, and decapitation, Aolani depicts naming as a site of trauma and resistance. The loss of names mirrors what Patricia Grace calls the theft of “repositories of identity” (Grace 84). By demanding the restoration of names, Aolani joins a larger Māori literary tradition that insists on the cultural and political significance of language. Linda Tuhiwai Smith similarly argues that renaming is a key colonial tool, and its reversal becomes an act of decolonization (Smith 89). Thus, the poem is not only a record of personal dislocation but a manifesto for cultural survival.

If “*Give me my name back*” situates identity within the colonial past, “*Parking Warden*” reveals how racism persists in ordinary contemporary settings. The poem dramatizes workplace interactions in which a Polynesian person is stereotyped, dismissed, or reduced to his physicality (Aolani, “*Parking Warden*”). Casual remarks about skin colour and rugby may appear humorous, yet they exemplify what Derald Wing Sue identifies as racial microaggressions – “everyday verbal or behavioral indignities” that communicate derogatory assumptions, often unconsciously (Sue et al. 271). Such comments may be framed as jokes or banter, but they reinforce racial hierarchies by reducing Māori identity to stereotypes.

Here, humour operates on two levels: while the colleague uses it to belittle, the speaker reclaims it as resistance. His ironic retort – “And I have a walkie-talkie!” – mirrors Albert Wendt’s idea of Pacific literature as a “counter-discourse” that undermines colonial authority

by refusing silence (Wendt 17). Aolani thus demonstrates that the most harmful forms of prejudice are not overt acts of violence but the normalized microaggressions that accumulate in daily life. By exposing these moments, the poem challenges New Zealand society to confront the persistence of racism in its everyday interactions.

Aziembry Aolani's poetry is marked by a careful weaving together of cultural memory, political resistance, and everyday lived realities of being Māori in contemporary New Zealand. His poems function both as personal testimony and as collective articulation of Indigenous experience. Across "*Give me my name back*" and "*Parking Warden*," several interrelated themes emerge that illuminate the dual struggle of historical recovery and present-day survival.

For Aolani, naming is not merely a personal marker but a political act. In "*Give me my name back*," the speaker's demand is inseparable from genealogy (*whakapapa*) and cultural continuity. Names hold ancestral memory, geographic identity, and spiritual resonance, and their loss under colonial policies represents an erasure of Indigenous being. By reclaiming the right to one's name, Aolani challenges the assimilationist project that sought to standardize Māori identities into Pākehā categories. Thus, naming becomes an act of decolonization – the restoration of what was suppressed and the assertion of Māori presence in the cultural and linguistic landscape.

Closely tied to naming is the theme of language. Aolani's emphasis on *te reo Māori* reflects the role of poetry as part of a wider revitalization movement. Historically, Māori children were punished for speaking their language in schools, an erasure that produced generational trauma. In Aolani's work, the reclamation of language becomes a counter-colonial act: to speak and write in Māori is to refuse disappearance. Poetry itself, as a literary form, offers a site of resistance where suppressed voices are restored.

Perhaps the most striking theme in "*Parking Warden*" is the normalization of racism through casual stereotyping. The colleague's comment – assuming the speaker's skin colour implies an affinity with rugby – exemplifies what Derald Wing Sue identifies as a *racial microaggression*: subtle, often unintended, forms of prejudice that communicate exclusion or insult (Sue et al. 271–73). These "subtle and stunning" interactions accumulate into what Sue calls a "death by a thousand cuts," eroding psychological well-being while being dismissed as harmless jokes. Aolani's rendering of this exchange underscores how racism in contemporary New Zealand often operates not through overt hostility but through microaggressions embedded in workplace humour, casual conversations, and public assumptions. By highlighting the pain beneath the banter, Aolani gives poetic voice to these everyday indignities.

Another significant theme is the shift of Māori literature into urban settings. Traditionally, Māori poetry and oral traditions are grounded in land (*whenua*) and tribal spaces. Aolani, however, situates his narratives in workplaces, streets, and city environments. In doing so, he reflects the demographic reality that most Māori today live in urban areas, where cultural identity is often negotiated against dominant Pākehā norms. The urban space, then, becomes a contested site where Māori visibility, identity, and belonging are continually challenged.

Aolani employs irony and humour not merely as stylistic devices but as tools of resistance. In "*Parking Warden*," humour works in two directions: it reveals the banality of racist stereotypes while simultaneously undermining their authority. By turning humour into critique, Aolani transforms what is intended as ridicule into a mirror exposing prejudice. This use of humour as cultural weapon reflects broader Indigenous strategies of survival, where laughter becomes a form of resilience.

Despite oppression, Aolani's poems affirm *whakapapa* (genealogy), *whānau* (family), and community as enduring sources of strength. In "*Give me my name back*," the speaker invokes ancestral continuity to counter colonial erasure, while in "*Parking Warden*," the act of voicing discrimination becomes itself a form of resilience. The poems refuse victimhood, instead foregrounding survival and the capacity to reassert Māori identity despite systemic constraints.

Finally, Aolani situates poetry as an explicitly decolonizing practice. As Terry Eagleton notes, literature often unsettles dominant discourses and opens spaces for alternative voices (183). Aolani's work does precisely this: by narrating Māori experience through Indigenous forms of memory, naming, and irony, he reclaims narrative power from colonial structures. His poetry destabilizes the assumed neutrality of mainstream New Zealand discourse, foregrounding instead the racialized experiences often dismissed or silenced.

Taken together, the two poems operate within a dual temporal axis: "*Give me my name back*" addresses the historical violence of cultural erasure and the ongoing struggle to reclaim what colonization stripped away whereas "*Parking Warden*" situates the Māori struggle in the present, exposing how subtle racism and microaggressions continue to shape daily interactions.

This temporal duality illustrates that Māori resistance is not bound to the past but continues in the present. Aolani's poetry becomes both archive and testimony – preserving the memory of dispossession while voicing the persistence of prejudice in modern New Zealand society. This juxtaposition demonstrates the continuity of colonial structures from past to present. As Witi Ihimaera observes, Māori literature often seeks to "reclaim the past in order to move into the future" (Ihimaera xiii). Aolani's work exemplifies this ethos by connecting ancestral

trauma with modern survival strategies. His poetry not only mourns what was lost but also reimagines how Māori voices can thrive in a contemporary, urbanized New Zealand.

Aolani's poetic response to racism lies in his ability to weave together historical memory, cultural reclamation, and everyday resilience. By demanding names back, exposing microaggressions, and reclaiming humour, his poetry enacts a decolonizing project that affirms Māori identity while challenging ongoing prejudice. Through the fusion of the personal and political, the ancestral and the urban, Aolani demonstrates literature's power to serve as testimony, resistance, and a pathway toward cultural survival.

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