

Dash:

Hello, I'm Dashiell Moore and I'm the chief investigator of an ARC-funded project [that is] investigating connections between the Islands of Australia and Pacific Literature. This conversation takes place on Zoom, unfortunately, as I was just saying. But I'm speaking from the University of Sydney at Gadigal Country, and today I'm delighted to be in conversation with Pacifica writer, editor, and Sweatshop director Winnie Dunn. Winnie, would you be able to introduce yourself in your own words, if that's okay?

Winnie:

Yeah. Mālō e lelei

My name is Winnie Dunn. I'm a Tongan Australian. I'm a Tongan Australian author and editor from Mount Druitt in Western Sydney. I'm also the general manager of Sweatshop Literacy Movement, which is an organization [that is] dedicated to empowering First Nations writers and writers of color through reading, writing, and critical thinking.

Dash:

Fantastic, thank you. Yeah, I think, I can't remember the first point at which I immediately crossed over with you or started to kind of read of you Winnie, but I think it was Sweatshop, and then there was a Western Sydney Literary event that I kind of attended or at least heard of through you. But since then, I just want to say a huge congratulations to the reception of *Dirt Poor Islanders*, your first novel, which is such a fantastic book. And I'll just say kind of for the record, Winnie, and we kind of touched base briefly teaching, I was in contact with Winnie in the teaching at the University of Sydney here, but we are talking as it was recently shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Prize.

Congratulations. How's that experience [been] on your end?

Winnie:

It was definitely more than I expected of my little dirt speck of a debut, so that's been really wonderful. And it's always quite surreal to be like *Dirt Poor Islanders* is the first published novel written by a Tongan-born Australian. And then so any kind of accolades that come out of that is also the first, which is quite strange. So, also being the first Tongan Australian to be longlisted and then shortlisted for the Miles Franklin is pretty wild. And also to win the Kathleen Mitchell Award for a debut manuscript under 30, which my mentor and kind of who I looked up to when I was younger, the Palestinian Australian author, Dr. Randa Abdul-Fattah won many years ago for *Does My Head Look Big In This*, which I read when I was in Year Six. So it's kind of surreal to know her now and be following in her footsteps.

And then the Sydney Morning Herald Prize as well for young writers. I think it's under 35. And that was really special as well because Dr. Michael Mohammad Ahmed, who's the founding director of Sweatshop, he won that for his first debut exactly 10 years ago. So it's been really, really rewarding. And I think it's also really helped me kind of set myself up more as a leader editorial and publishing wise within my community, because I'm doing the Fresh Off the Books Initiative with New South Books, which will culminate in Australia's first print anthology of Pacific Australian writers. So there's about 24 [writers] that I'm working with at the moment. So I think it gave those writers some more confidence in me, which is always nice.

Dash:

No, that's great. And, like, I'm just kind of piecing together the different parts of your response there. On the one hand, you are the first, but then you are also following, and now you're setting up a path for others to follow. So in a way, [it's] like, even if [being] that.. the first has been kind of repeated in almost every kind of interview or any kind of pop-up engagement, which is so kind of mind boggling and astounding

Winnie:

It also gets annoying to say [that], [and] I don't take joy in saying it.

Dash:

Yeah, yeah. I can imagine there would be a weight that comes with that. But you're also creating this - I don't know - a literary trajectory that extends before and beyond you into that space, which is really important. Yeah

Winnie:

Yeah. Thank You. Thank You.

Dash:

I guess kind of the subject of this interview, although we can digress, as we have already, is to think about West[ern] Sydney Pacifica identities in literature, in history, [and] in culture, and their connection to kind of wider Pacific Australia narratives. So maybe just to kind of focus in a little bit - and that's a big question in mind - but do you mind if I ask you a question about your family Winnie and about how that connects with these bigger threads that we could take up from this corner of the Pacific? What was essentially the kind of story of your family? And [how] that kind of [story] was formed some of the backdrop for, I guess, the inspiration that would then become *Dirt Poor Islanders*, which is [...] not being exactly representative of the novel, but there's this kind of interesting relationship between [them], yeah.

Winnie:

Yeah so then there's me, the writer, Winnie Dunn, and then there's the narrator Meadow Reed, in *Dirt Poor Islanders*, who's inspired by my own lived experience but [is] different from me. And so I'll point out the two differences. So for me, as the person, Winnie Dunn, I'm the oldest of eight siblings, [and I] live in a blended family. My dad was born here, [and] my birth mom who passed away when I was quite young, she was also born here as well. So they were kind of one of the first second-generation children of Pacifica Families in Australia. And they were also one of the first kind of mixed-race children as well, which is very odd [to think] that they existed, that they found each other but then of course they did because they're so similar.

So my connections to Tonga is through my paternal and maternal grandmothers. So my birth mom's mother was born in Tonga in a village called Kolomotu'a which is kind of a noble village. And then my dad's mom and her family were born in the village of Malapo, which is kind of a peasant village. And so when my parents got together it was quite scandalous [...] past life [...]

And the reason why my paternal grandmother came here is because she, [and] her Mehikitanga, which is like the leader of the family, told her to move out of Tonga and go live in New Zealand. And then in New Zealand, she met this British-Irish guy named Brian who kind of very quickly proposed to her. And initially she wanted to reject him. She wasn't interested, but her Mehikitanga, who's the leader of the family, was like, no, you have to do it because there's no other way to get us into Australia. And so my grandmother, because she's the oldest of her siblings, she took on that responsibility, and she had three kids with him. And then by the time all of her family had kind of migrated into Australia and had visas or permanent residences, or even citizenships - you know, just for the sake of being born here - then she divorced him.

And then he left her without any money or kind of sustainable income and didn't contact his children again. And so she lived in a housing commission [home] in Liverpool for most of her life. And then when she turned about mid-forties, maybe early fifties, all of her children who are now adults, bought her a house. They put all their money together, they bought her a house in Mount Druitt, which was the first house she ever owned. And yeah, that's the story of my paternal grandmother.

And then my maternal grandmother, I don't know much about, because she also died when my birth mother was quite young. So I never really met her or knew her. All I know was that she was a nurse, and I think she came over here to work as a nurse and she met someone, had my mom, and then passed away shortly after.

So that's my connection to Tonga, which is always a bit sad to think about, because traditionally, in a Tongan sense, your Tongan lineage is supposed to come from the father's side. So it's always quite interesting.

And then that - so - I've [never] met my paternal grandmother, I mean my maternal grandmother, and therefore I never met my maternal grandfather either, who was also, I think, a white Australian guy. I've never met him, and I never met my paternal grandfather, Brian, who was that English guy. And he passed away a couple of years ago. So that's kind of, even though I'm mixed race and my parents are mixed race, I grew up in a house that was completely, like, Tongan in the sense that everybody who raised me had a connection to Tonga, had a biological connection to Tonga in one way or another.

And then the difference with that in *Dirt Poor Islanders* is, I pretty much - there's a chapter, I think it starts on page 13 - where I kind of outlined the paternal grandmother's migration from Tonga to New Zealand to Australia, which is very much reminiscent of the trajectory that my paternal grandmother took. The only difference is that she - her auntie was this kind of studied, learned figure. I think she was doing a teaching degree in New Zealand, which I researched at the time, was a kind of a popular course for Islander women to take when it was available in the 1950s and 1960s.

So I just made up this Mehikitanga character for the grandmother to have who kind of incentivizes the grandmother Rose to think more outside of her small village and more outside of a Tongan, "Tonga staying in Tonga" mindset. That turns out to be a bit detrimental for the grandmother in the end anyway. But it does get all the family over. Yeah, the only difference

between my family history and Meadow's family history in that regard is that the grandmother character had a kind of educated figure that was motivating her to make these certain choices. Whereas, in my paternal grandmother in real life, it was just like her working class auntie and uncle who happened to live in New Zealand.

Dash: But still this kind of like an act of - in a way - kind of like the phrase I'm thinking of, is still an act of daring in a way. It's kind of like a reckoning with total ambiguity, but you've [also] got taken on this responsibility to be the first again to kind of...

Winnie:

Oh yeah. She was the first - one of the first - Tongan women to marry a young white guy. So there were some instances of Tongan women marrying very[much] older white men as, [like] a marriage of opportunity. But my grandmother was one of the first to marry kind of a guy that was her age. And so that was kind of really exciting. And our whole village had a parade for them.

Dash: Wow. Oh my goodness.

Winne:

[They] got married and [then] I came over to visit. So everybody was very excited. And so I always say that I come from a line of firsts in my family. And ,[also], two men who are kind of the firsts in their own right as well.

Dash:

Definitely. And reckoning with what that means, as it's kind of and the repeated firsts over time. So glad you've said that, it's really kind of crystallized a few things in my head ,for me about the novel and then the stories that it stems from. Thank you so much for taking me through that. I know it's a bit funny to just say, "Hey tell me about your family," especially over Zoom, so.

Winnie:

I know, I'm like do you have 1200 hours?" But yes.

Dash:

Yeah, I know I know. Maybe picking up one of the strands - I was going to come to this later - but I thought it might be a nice opportune moment to ask, but did you or any of your family kind of talk to a descendant of Brian? Has that relationship ever reappeared in that strange kind of way, how family can reappear?

Winnie:

It appeared to me once on Facebook when I was in high school - like, Year Nine - and all he did was tell me about very old British history, [like] British and Irish history,

Dash: Oh God.

Winnie:

... that was connected to our last name Dunn. And then he sent me a bunch of weird CDs in the mail that I never listened to, and then

[...CUT...]

Winnie:

Yeah that was the extent of [it for] us. But also, one point of differentiation between myself, the person, and Meadow Reed, the narrator in *Dirt Poor Islanders*, is that when I was born in 1995, my paternal grandmother - my grandfather, Brian did come and visit. So he was estranged for many many years and then I think he found out his son, my dad, was having a child. And so [he] tried to use that as a way to kind of maybe see if he could kind of come back into their lives. But it had already been such a long time and the relationship had been so non-existent and estranged that - and, you know, my dad was very young when he had me - he was about 20, turning 21. And to have your first kid at that age and then to also be meeting your dad for the first time at that age, and then to be with this woman who is like, because she's a noble, you're not really meant to be marrying her, I think just all that stress was, like, I don't have room in my head for the guy.

And so he came and visited and he saw me, [and] my grandfather when I was born, and then I think he realized [that] a relationship just wasn't going to happen. And so he went back to England again. And so my dad did meet him and have conversations with him but I just think the relationship was so non-existent that it was just, it wasn't going to happen, which, fair enough. But in my book, in *Dirt Poor Islanders*, I omitted that. So I think just for the ease, cause as a writer...

Dash:

There's enough [there]

Winnie:

Yeah, like, the most information you're putting [in], it gets very stressful and the more you have to carry, and it's like, it wasn't that important. So there's a little line in that section on the grandmother's migration history where it's like, the Brian - Liam - in the book becomes dead to the family because he doesn't come and visit his first grandchild, which is Meadow. But in the [real] life he came and he saw me. And then yep.

Dash:

It reminds me of the *God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy. There's this kind of arranged remeeting of a family very much in a colonial context. But yeah, maybe it's kind of an offshoot for a next book.

Winnie:

I know, I haven't read [it]. It's one of those books that's been on my reading list for ages.

Dash:

Oh yeah, no, that's - I don't know. I 've always kind of been about... dreaming about this book.

Winnie:

I think I've tried to read it once, and I was like, this is too dense. I dunno what I'm going to do..

Dash:

I know, once you get through the first 30 pages of this, the vivid descriptions of the jungle and the river, it really kind of takes off. But the way - I guess just to kind of explain that otherwise this

will sound strange - but the father is meeting with his child of his children who live in England, but they're separated for the first time - bringing them across to India to meet kind of the wider community - but tragedy ensues. So it's about this severed link that I think is both analogous and not analogous, for these wider - you know - the weight of history, I guess.

So I guess moving onto, I guess, the next question. So this kind of project is thinking about how particular spaces.... islands, are used symbolically and also physically to confine particular groups across Australian and Pacific history. So I was going to ask you - I mean - whether you could help me think through some of these dynamics in maybe a more flexible way, to think through whether there's a particular kind of space or site - plantation, suburb - I'm thinking [of] the spectral idea, for instance, that we have of Mount Druitt, from... and ones [from] the rest of Sydney, then it's kind of disassociate...disavowed from a wider Sydney Australian Identity. Or, in the example of Tonga, whether, how representations of particular spaces as kind of enclosed or kind of unto themselves can influence how they're seen by others. So that's kind of a very open ended question, but I wanted to, first, have you thought about these kinds of dynamics, and then where does it lead you, I suppose?

Winnie:

Yeah, so what comes to mind for me is protest masculinity. So, it's the one in my TEDx talk where I talk about how the rap group OneFour take on this very kind of menacing identity that's been imposed on them through classism, racism, and the police force, and [are] reclaiming that narrative to empower themselves in a way. And Western Sydney is kind of like, people who live in it - we call it the area. So it's like this designated spot where you are from, and you kind of don't go outside of that, and you kind of don't let people into the "area", which can be kind of empowering because you kind of feel like [you're] in charge of this space, even though it's imaginary... how Ghassan Hage talks about this white nation fantasy, that, like, Australia can control who comes in and who comes out, and they're always in the center of that...but, in reality, it's like you are not in control of that at all. It just..everybody's here.

So similarly with the area, you can kind of feel [that] you're part of something special, part of something really exciting, because you who have been demonized because you come from a low socioeconomic area, can start to exclude the people who are demonizing you from the area that you're from, and kind of making it a safe space between yourself and the people around you who live there. So for me, I think that's what Western Sydney is. It's like a very big kind of protest performance from kind of the marginalized people who live here. Cause I find, like, even, like, the white people who live in Western Sydney have a very strong connection to the place and tend to kind of play into that inclusion exclusion of the area between themselves, and even other white people that they might culturally have more in common with than [people] living [their] lives right next to them.

So that's for me with Western City and the suburbs. I think it's just one very big performance. And even though I am very critical of *Struggle Street*, and obviously it needs to be criticized, when it came out, I remember, all of - everybody in Mount Druitt just laughing and being like, yes, we are from *Struggle Street*. And just kind of picking up that term and running with it. Because, like, if you can't laugh at it, you'll cry. Do you know what I mean?

Dash:

Yeah, no, I know exactly. I know exactly. I mean...I know exactly. But that's such a wonderful

way of thinking about it. And just by way of analogy, I kind of grew up on the South Coast, not quite, like, remote, but, like, in a regional town called Kangaroo Valley. And when we grew up, it was like people with six fingers basically lived there.

But you play into that narrative, then it becomes a badge of pride and you can easily dismiss it. But it's like, otherwise, you can kind of miss some of the us-against-the-world dynamics and go on... where you're once very legible to each other, and you might have more in common with someone who lives a kilometer away than [with someone] on the other side of Kangaroo Valley, or the area. But that's the discursive, basically, kind of the imaginative framework you're kind of working in. And yeah, no, that makes so much sense. And that's a really helpful, I think, way of thinking about how, I guess, kind of pre-established borderlines have been kind of created within this white Australia that you've been describing.

Winnie:

And then within Western Sydney, there's borderlines within themselves, so there's something called postcode wars that OneFour are very much a part of and they play into, where Mount Druitt and Rooty Hill, which is kind of more central Western Sydney, is very much in opposition to Southwest Sydney, which is like Greenfield and Bankstown. And so you can kind of have these postcode wars even within this larger area called Western Sydney. And there's a lot of pride in certain areas.

And I will say, having moved from Central Western Sydney, Mount Druitt, to Southwest Sydney, in Fairfield, there is a difference. In Southwest Sydney, I think it's more First Nations, not First Nations, it's more first migrants who've just come and asylum seekers. And it's much more, there's a lot more of a Middle Eastern presence here as well. And so it is very community-strong.

Dash:

Did you mean, in Fairfield? Did you say?

Winnie:

Yeah, in Fairfield, there's way more small businesses. There's way more refugee and migrant resources and centers. I find even, their arts - the arts scene - in Southwest Sydney is much more dedicated to [...] Whereas in Blacktown, it's like second and third generation migrants mostly, and there's not many small businesses, and a lot of it is just major shopping complexes. And then that's kind of it.

Whereas in Fairfield, there's a lot more units and apartments, and everybody's living on top of each other, and so you kind of have to know your neighbor.

Dash:

Yeah

Winnie:

Yeah. My family always teased me. They're like, you're a traitor, you went to the Southwest. And I'm like, oh, we lived in a housing commission in Liverpool, I just gave it up.

Dash:

That's right. These things always cycle around. I remember I went, "I'd never leave the inner West," but yeah. But it's funny, in terms of Southwest Sydney, like I live in Bexley, which is like, I count that as Southwest Sydney. Maybe it's stretching the boundaries of what - the directions in Sydney don't make any sense - but it's precisely framed by that question that you - those dynamics that you're talking about - how to fit geography into this template of ethnic or cultural difference that is superimposed onto it, which is just...

Winnie:

Yeah, and all these things are imagined boundaries and things.

Dash:

Yeah, totally.

Winnie:

Imagined sources of identity.

Dash:

Yeah, I might kind of switch back to talk about research. So this might seem as an odd question, I suppose, but you've talked already about how Meadow emerges kind of from this composite of experiences that your family's had, but they're quite distinct....there are a number of distinctions there. I wanted to know how you went about the process of researching the novel. Obviously, there's this immediate family history that you know as another skin. [...] what was the process of researching the history around this book, and in your future writing too? What's your approach?

Winnie:

Well, I trust to describe it, like, [that] I use myself as a primary source. And I feel like that is very, I'm not quite sure, but I always get the impression that's a bit undervalued in academic spaces. But I feel like using myself as a source is quite valuable and unique, and does create an original contribution to knowledge, which is what I think the aim of literature should be. And I always go back to the fact that Chris Lilley, he has gone on the record to say [that] he did a lot of research into Tongan culture when he was doing *Summer Heights High* and *Jonah from Tonga*. And he was just like, "I was just reflecting what I saw in my research." And so there can be that kind of negative, kind of malevolent side of research, kind of used as, like, when kind of outsiders are looking in.

And so for me, it was so important to use myself as the main source and the primary resource, because there was just no way I was going to get something wrong if I was just talking about using my own experiences to craft the narrative in *Dirt Poor Islanders*. Because even if Meadows' ideas or thoughts or questions are a bit skewed, or they're not totally reflective of actual Tonga or actual Tongan Australia, for instance, it's still very much a reflection of a mixed race Tongan Australian experience in the world. So I take great pride in the fact that I was able to use myself as a primary source.

And then, in terms of research, it was more about researching the craft, really. So learning about dead metaphors, extended metaphors, alliteration, learning about Talanoa practices through the research of Dr. Konai Helu Thaman, who's a very renowned Tongan Australian, not Tongan

Australian, Tongan educator. So her work on Talanoa as a framework for teaching and storytelling really helped me to kind of think of ways to craft my cultural way of storytelling into this more kind of Western, white framework of a written novel.

And then, in terms of, again, the stories that kind of Meadow outlines about her family is really just stories I heard growing up. And then if I felt like it was a little bit too close, I would try and find ways or reasons to differentiate the story. So the thing with the paternal grandmother's auntie in New Zealand, the reason why I wanted to make her educated in *Dirt Poor Islanders*, is to show that even though this family is quite welfare, and working-class, there are pockets of people in this family tree who are studied and who do value education. And it kind of, Meadow is an extension of those kind of small pockets.

And when I was thinking, as I was writing it, when a Pacific Islander person picks this up and they read that line, they might be like, oh, I feel really inspired that this character from the sixties went to a college and studied to be a teacher in New Zealand. That's really interesting. And it might activate something for them, because they're able to see different pathways that aren't necessarily just the marriage of opportunity, into welfare class, into factory work, or into farm work, which is what most of us go through.

So just having those little pockets of representation, in the form of education I think, was so important because when I read Professor Jioji Ravulo's study on Pacific communities in Australia, he found that less than 1% of Pacifica Australians attend university, and then from the ones that do, more than half dropout. So it's very dire statistics. So I was really keen on having an educated figure, an early educated figure, in *Dirt Poor Islanders*, which has informed a lot of my second book, which I haven't started writing yet, but I've had the idea for it ever since.

It's [to] explore Meadows, and my experience as a first person in my family to go to university, [and how that] will inspire Meadow Reed's experiences in tertiary education as well. And again, just kind of addressing those dire statistics through creative writing, I think will be really important as an accessibility point.

Dash:

That's so interesting. Thank you so much for taking the time to go through all that. So much better than a standard response on research. This is brilliant.

Winnie:

Ah, for Tonga, it's just because I went there and I just had that.

Dash:

Yeah, yeah. What I - what it kind of reminds me of - so particularly what you were saying about research, and it's like assuming this kind of bird's-eye view of all knowledge, that things can be known, or that the kind of positionality, or as opposed to kind of like any kind of collaborative or shared exercise in thinking through something, which is what I broadly kind of think is a more productive way of going about it. But what you...

Winnie:

Sorry, just..

Dash:
No, please.

Winnie:

That's why editors are really important, because when I...I remember working with one editor in my publishing house, Hachette, and she pointed out that I got one of the main road directions wrong. So I got the main road right, but the way it was flowing, she's like, oh, these two villages that you're talking about, you have to actually go the other way. And so, like, that's why editors are also really really important, because they can also find the mistakes that you kind of naturally make as an emerging writer and researcher, which was really wonderful.

And then, because I don't speak Tongan, I got a Tongan..fluent Tongan speaker - who's also a writer - to do the editing for me, the language editing for me, and also read over a lot of those mythology stories as well just to make sure that they were correct. And so another part of my research was kind of outsourcing things that I didn't know.

Dash:

Yeah, it's relational work. Yeah, editors - I mean - there's different hats that you have to put on at different times. And I think knowing, like, I'm thinking back to your statement, myself, as a... thinking of yourself as a primary source, it's like you almost kind of think outside of your own perspective sometimes. You can read through something a thousand times, but that one slip will always go through.

But I was going to kind of...you use the word "typical," or maybe you didn't, it just reminded me of that. But I think you were talking about it in the context of the exemplary cases, where these pockets of education, these paths through education, paths from immigration into education, as coming up against this kind of more well-trodden path. And there's so many great examples, but it reminds me of a comment - this is me linking up, this is a note to myself - basically Faith Bandler, the well-known South Sea Islander activist, writer, you know extraordinaire, when she first came to publish her first novel *Wacvie*, which is kind of the story of her father, [Wacvie] Peter Mussing, who was blackbirded from Ambrym from Vanuatu when he was 13 years old, into Mackay.

When it was published, it was reviewed by two main kind of scholars. The first said that it was the most simple and reserved of the black Australian novel. So it's reading through the prism of race, it's also kind of missing large points of the novel. And the other says, from a historian perspective, it wasn't typical, but it's like what do you expect a novel to do? But it was coming out of a context where life writing, Pacific Life writing, Pacific oral histories, were used as a complement to truth. So, that they have this kind of - they had to perform this faithful account, or kind of a testimony. And if they kind of jar with that, then it's, you know, that's where...

Winnie:

I just find this idea of real research being somebody else looking into something else that's not necessarily connected to them, weird. Because in Tongan culture, we're, like oral historians and storytellers, and we just passed on knowledge literally just by talking to each other, and just passing it on through stories, and through the act of making *ngatu* and research was embedded naturally into that practice. And Witi Ihimaera, what I really love about him, obviously *The Whale*

Rider was really fundamental in my work, but I did an interview with him at Brisbane Writers Festival a couple of years ago. It published on.. it's published in Griffith Review [...] but he talks about, because what he does - which I find really interesting and really weird, and I still don't know how I feel about it - is [that] every time he has a new edition of one of his old books, he goes through the manuscript and he updates it, and he tries to reflect the politics of the time.

Dash:

Oh, wow.

Winnie:

And I was like, what? That's so weird. Why would you do that? And then he was like, oh, because the novel - the way that First Nations people and particularly Pacific Islanders treat stories - is as a living, breathing document. We don't write anything down. We literally live it and speak it. And every time a new orator comes into that, their breath changes the story, like, they'll pause at a certain word that the previous storyteller didn't, or they'll say a different sentence that the previous storyteller didn't. And it naturally gets updated over time. And so he tries to treat the novel as a living, breathing document that can be updated and can have mistakes, which, when he put it like that, I was like, that's really amazing. I still don't know how I feel about it, but I was very much inspired.

Dash:

No, I love that. Yeah. The storyteller is the story, or something, right? Yeah. No, that's wonderful, thank you. So maybe picking up the Ihimaera connection. What was the first kind of - we talked about [...]. we talked about Struggle Street, we talked about Chris Lilley, maybe this is a good time to talk about Epeli Hau'ofa, Ihimaera. What was kind of the...there was a network of Pacific literature, or Australian literature, or Australian books, that you kind of engaged with, or that you returned to? I know *The Whale Rider* is obviously the big one, but maybe could you speak to the significance of that?

Winnie:

Yeah, yeah. It was the first positive representation of Pacific and indigenous people that I saw on screen, and it was really moving and really powerful when I watched the movie as a child. And I didn't read the book until I was much older, but just having that representation there was always really inspiring, and something that kind of my family just kind of watched every couple [of] years and still do to this day. I think it's such a seminal text for Pacifica people around the world.

But when I read *The Whale Rider* in Dunedin, actually, when I went there I was very much inspired by the fact that he opens up with a myth story. And that's how *The Whale Rider* really inspired me to put down Tongan myth stories, because I started to think like, oh, I'm a Tongan reading this Māori book and I'm learning about the Māori culture. Like, this isn't just written for the white gaze. It's written for people who are Māori and who aren't Māori.

So I was like, wouldn't it be great if I'm not only teaching Tongan Australians about Tonga - and by Australia, I don't just mean white Australians, I mean everybody in Australia - but also just teaching Tongans about Tonga, really, which is weird as the kind of third-gen mixed -race Tongan. But because my auntie was very much interested in mythology stories, she would just kind of retell them to me, and I just kind of kept them in the back of my head. And when I read

The Whale Rider, it kind of really unlocked something for me.

And my Tongan editor, when she read it, she was like, you know, there's some people in Tonga who don't even know this, Winnie, how do you know this stuff? And she was really impressed, and she was like, it's so good that it's on the record, because then when Tongans think about pre-colonial Christianity, and what our stories and what our history was like before then, they can use your book. They can read through [it] as a kind of representation of that history that we've been made to feel ashamed of. And so having *The Whale Rider* was really special and important for me in that regards.

Dash:

Yeah, that's lovely. And to the Ihimaera point, before as well, I mean, the retelling of that story, it adds a new inflection within today - I mean, within the novel - so it's this kind of, it's change, with your own signature. You couldn't engage this without having [to] tell this specific narrative, this specific perspective - the perspective that is yours - but [also] in continuity with the [...] story [that] has been passed down.

Winnie:

Yeah, so definitely, the way I've told the story in the book is not word for word how a Tongan reteller, even 50 years ago, would have told it. In fact, I'm sure if that person read it, they'd be like, what have you done? But again, I think this idea of our stories being a living, breathing document is something I've really taken up to the challenge of, not in the sense that if *Dirt Poor Islander* gets republished, I'll change something. But I think it gave me the confidence to be able to be like, oh, I can tell cultural stories in my own way, and this is just one form of cultural story and how I've told it, but another Tongan will tell it way different, and that's really cool.

Dash:

That's great. I might kind of pivot, in here, into the untold stories of Australia's connection to the Pacific, here. And really, this project, among other things, looks at the literary representation of Blackbirding over time. Maybe, as a kind of way into that, I wanted to ask you whether you like how...whether you notice that there [are] any particular patterns of how labor migration is kind of represented, and if there's been any kind of consistent tropes or narratives that you've seen re-emerge. I mean, there's obviously like PALMs in the current iteration of this. Do you see, kind of, a language or media reportage around that, that [either] has harkens back to or brings us back to the importance of truth-telling, and what the context of Blackbirding and the historical erasure that comes from that [is]? Sorry, [that's] a big question.

Winnie:

No! And I might not be able to answer it fully, but I think, with the PALM Workers Scheme, there's been people who've died because of the poor working and living conditions, and that's not mainstream news. No one really knows about that. And, you know, I also found out recently that those Fijian PALM workers that helped during the floods - whilst they were celebrated for taking unpaid leave to help out SES and kind of transfer people out of their flooded homes - when all was said and done, and they had a celebration at the Sydney Opera House, they got fired from their jobs.

Dash:

I didn't know.

Winnie:

Because they took too much time off - literally helping the community - and then they got shafted. Most of them got shafted into Adelaide, where they're getting paid significantly less wage than what they were getting paid back in - was it - Lismore? Something like that.

Dash

Yeah, yeah, that'd be right. Northern New South Wales.

Winnie:

And so I only found that out recently, and I was so shocked, and I was so devastated. I was like, what do you mean? They're like national heroes, you're telling me. Yeah. So I think this idea of Pacifica people as something that Australia can expend, that we're just all body and no mind, as bell hooks says, is that's the narrative that's being played out again and again with this kind of PALM Scheme and the labor migration.

Because if you're not a farm worker, you're a factory worker. If you're not a factory worker, you're a security guard. And if you're not a security guard, for some reason, you're on the football field, and you're supposed to be really grateful and feel really lucky to be there. But again, these are very body-orientated jobs, and we're not valued for our intellect. And I feel like that's just the narrative that gets played out for the pacific islanders in Australia.

Dash:

Yeah, that's right. I mean, it's such an unfortunate, shocking trend, really. There's also the contract conditions as well that I was thinking [about] because in the backdrop of the conversation around Blackbirding, there's debates on definition playing out from historians and the South Sea Islander community generally - cultural kidnapping as opposed to slavery. But then these evolving conversations around modern slavery, I mean, it's kind of like, in the spirit of the term, but these are people who, they don't have a control over the contract, right, and, to that exact example, you can be basically dropped and moved across the state at a drop of the hat. Yeah. So expendable, in that really awful kind of...

Winnie:

Like, they can be national heroes, but they'll...

Dash:

But also, like, acceptable heroes, but then, now that - you don't want to be in the limelight too long.

Winnie:

Yeah.

Dash:

Yeah, mind-boggling. What was I going to ask? Maybe, kind of what interests me about some of these discussions, around, is that once there's an awareness of, or hyperawareness of Pacifica labor in Australia, through, lets say, through a rugby league, or if people have a general

awareness of, like, the pastoral industries, but there's this complete disavowal of the manner in which people came here, their own experiences and narratives. And in a way, it's coming back to the wonderful bell hooks quote you just gave, the body and no mind. But with that in mind, I think, what do people need to understand about this kind of history? It's like repetitions over time. If you don't mind me throwing another huge question at you.

Winnie:

Yeah, sorry if I'm not the smartest person. But I didn't learn about Blackbirding until I did my own research, and it's something that's not taught in our schools, and in our history, and it should be, because it's so fundamentally part of Australian history that it definitely needs to be taught in schools, and Pacifica people in Australia need to know about our own history, because the more we're kept away from it, the more we can be used for our bodies.

That's how I think of it. And obviously, again, the PALM Scheme is just a repetition of Blackbirding. It is just, in a modern setting, I think. Because also, the thing with the PALM schemes, is that all the young men and women are going over, and so only elderly people are left on the land, and they can't cultivate the land as much as it needs to be. And so Tonga itself is losing income and losing resources, and because Australia has decided to take a majority of their young people into their workforce, for what? Cheaper fruit? So it's also the fact that it's another way that colonial forces are destroying our homelands. There's climate change, but there's also just the fact that if you take away generations of people and remove them from the land, and they're not there to look after, and cultivate it, that land will die as well.

Dash:

Yeah, yeah. No, depopulation is on an entire scale. This is, I mean, literally the same events repeated, in a way. It's kind of the chilling thing to see those kinds of parallels playing out. And then to have a prime minister or a radio presenter suggest there's no slavery in Australia, or that the Pacific is Australia's backyard. I mean, some of these representations are changing, but the progress is so slow, and so one-sided also, in the labor having to retell these histories.

Winnie:

And I think back to - I think it was Scott Morrison and maybe Peter Dutton who whispered to themselves, "let them sink", so they know that it's real.

Dash:

Yeah, you had three Prime Minister or opposition leaders - that was Dutton, Abbott and Morrison.

Winnie:

Yes, and they're not denying climate change. They're not denying, like, the devastation of depopulating a whole nation for your own workforce, but they just don't care. They just don't care.

Which is why, with *Dirt Poor Islanders*, I really wanted to have this - not this, like, cliché return-to-land awakening - I was very conscious of the fact that I wanted Meadow to come back from Tonga and have her coming of age in Mount Druitt, in that kind of birthing scene with the stepmother at the end of the book. So, I wanted her to come back to the place she was born, Mount Druitt, to come of age. But I wanted Tonga to be - her trip to Tonga - to be the catalyst,

that [is] what sparks that change.

Because it's very easy, kind of being second-generation, third-generation, growing up in Australia, you are kind of taught that the Pacific is kind of nothing, and it's not of value. And that was the narrative that I clung onto when I was a teenager. And it wasn't until my second trip - I went when I was 21 with my auntie - where I went to all of the kind of historical and natural landmarks, and kind of learned deeper, into the history of Tonga, that I really started to appreciate it.

And then again, it's something that even Tongans are kind of ashamed to talk about, because there's a kind of pre-Christianity element to knowing those stories. But again, critical thinking, and having the information, is so important if Tongans and Pacific Islanders are going to kind of liberate ourselves from these kind of modern slavery schemes.

Dash:

Yeah, exactly, there's a Ross Gibson, I think, [who] has this book, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badlands*. And he has this kind of strange - I'm not sure what I think about it, to be honest with you - but he has a passage where he is describing a group of Pacifica teenagers who were playing League on [what] would be a field outside his office, or something. And he has this strange kind of projection onto them, where he's describing them as repetitions of this historical process, basically, the repetition of Blackbirding.

But then he brought [it] into - it's almost like this strange distortion that has to happen to kind of fit it into this Australia narrative, an Australian historical narrative, because eventually he aligns that same group of people to the people who came across on the First Fleet. And it's just - I don't know - in a way, it's shaped by these strange kinds of focus points around...I'm just coming back to the point you made about the complete absence of Pacific narratives in Australian high school, apart from maybe World War II, right?

Winnie:

Yes, and also, I've also heard rumors that Captain James Cook had a - I don't know where, from - but had a Pacific islander onboard the *Endeavour* to help with their navigation.

Dash: Tupaia!

Winnie:

Okay, cool. So where does [the] Pacific Islander play into that, and what responsibilities do we have, and what things are we responsible for, that we have to own up to, and stuff like that? So it's so interesting and so complicated, but again, it's like, can we just learn it first before we decide?

Dash:

So true. Yeah. So true, so true. Also, before theory or research is kind of mapped onto it, yeah. I have to say this about the Tupaia story. My favorite part of the story, and you probably know this, or you've heard of it, but the fact that Tupaya has kind of created this amazing map, which is used to navigate through the Pacific, but then when he comes to Aotearoa, he's able to talk in the same language, despite not having been there. So it's like language has preceded him, and he's kind of acting out, like, that.

Winnie:
That's amazing. Yeah.

Dash:
Historical kind of migration, but there's that common root, so they can basically just talk. And he's used as kind of a translator, which is in colonial history, it's always the most fatal position. And he passes away after they get to Australia. Maybe, taking that as kind of an incentive to kind of broaden out then. How does this kind of - I feel like I'm gonna talk myself into knots here - but how can we think about the Pacific and the Pacific history as part of a global...global system? There's obviously the thinking around indentured labor, but basically, how the Pacific has become a place for intertwined stories. I was recently reading Manisha Anjali's recent poetry collection *Naag Mountain*, if you've heard of it.

Winnie:
Very, very vaguely. No, I'm thinking of a poetry collection called *Night Swimming*. Oh, I would love your reading list, by the way. I'd love to know these books that you're referencing.

Dash:
Yeah, well, we've got this one next to me. I'm happy to [share it]. It's great. It's set, basically, it's like an Indo-Fijian descendent poet.

[...CUT...]

But it's kind of retelling the story, among other things. It's set in a number of locations, but it's based in Mackay, and she writes at a crossroads where CSR, Colonial Sugar Refinery, they used to own her family, according to the indenture contract. But she links it as part of this kind of global system, to the Blackbirding trade. So this is a long question, but basically, why is it so important? Why is it necessary to connect one experience to others? And how do stories intertwine within Australia? With Australia within the Pacific? How do we balance the needs of telling one story, and thinking about how it connects with others?

Winnie:
First and foremost, I do come to Epeli Hau'ofa's argument that we are one ocean. And so, even though we come from different islands, and [even] including Australia in this kind of Oceania thing, I feel like Australia kind of sees itself as an individual thing. But it's like, no, you are part of the South Pacific ocean too. If we start to think of ourselves as connected through the water, and that we all have a shared destination with it, that is kind of a way where we can link our stories for the better. Because if we're not looking after our shared ocean ways, we'll all drown eventually. So I think of Epeli Hau'ofa in that regard.
I also think about my own methods of storytelling. So, because I teach writing with emerging writers through Sweatshop, a kind of lesson I teach them when they're starting off writing a story and they're trying to pick what perspective they're comfortable talking from, I try to teach them that it's a spectrum.

So on one end of the spectrum, you can talk about anything, anytime, anywhere, anyhow, doesn't matter. And then the opposite end of that spectrum is, I can't even talk about myself,

because that will then to start involve other people, and then I can't talk for them, so therefore, I can't say anything.

And those are two very extreme, opposite ends of the spectrum, where usually, good storytellers, I think, somewhere in the middle. And so they choose what they're comfortable with expressing, and what they're not. They just have to define where they sit on the spectrum.

For me, when I was writing *Dirt Poor Islanders*, I very much was aware that I wanted to make it a mixed-race narrative, that I wanted the narrator to not speak Tongan, because for me, it's not my lived experience. And then, two, it left room for other Tongan Australian writers to fill in those gaps that I'm missing from my book.

So I liked - even though it's the first Tongan Australian novel - hopefully it's not the only one, and other Tongan Australians will kind of fill the gaps that *Dirt Poor Islanders* have. And I think that's the importance of own-voices narratives, is that we give everyone an opportunity to tell their own story, because it's going to be different every time, and there's going to be new information every time. And then, because individuals are telling their own story, you can then start linking it up with other stories, and then it kind of branches out from there. I hope that answered your questions.

Dash:

No, no, that's great. Because you've usefully kind of come back to the fundamentals of storytelling, in a way that's kind of a refreshing approach to grapple with this. I think...

Winnie:

I guess it's because I'm a writer, that's just like...

Dash:

No, no, that's exactly it. I think of writing, there's kind of - there's - hard to sum this up, but basically everything's in kind of a dialogue with yourself, with an imagined reader. And between these two pools, everything kind of takes shape, and it's subject to reaching out, in terms of ethics, to the situated context in which both [of you] work in, but it's between those two. It's in the reaching out from a writer to a reader that something takes shape. And that's why, I think - why I really like that answer, because it's kind of grounding, what is this quite philosophical, or quite impossibly cross-cultural question, to something that's kind of embodied and lived, which is - it speaks exactly to the...

Winnie:

Yeah, and I think it's about connections, not amalgamation. Like, I feel like where [...CUT...] gets it wrong, is that they lump Pacific Islanders with Asia, and it's like, what does that even mean. And also, what is Asia? Are you including Middle Eastern people in that too? That's really broad.

Dash:

Yeah, yeah

Winnie:

And so there's a lot of - I've seen a lot of American discussions with Pacific Islanders about

differentiating between Asian and Pacific islander, especially even, if something as simple, in terms of grants and funding, because both the larger cohort of Asians - whatever that means - and Pacific Islanders can apply for these really niche grants, and usually Pacific Islanders are the ones that miss out. So I think it's about connections, not amalgamation, in that sense.

Dash:

Yet another case where the Pacific is [being] molded into whatever shape or form.

Winnie:

Whatever, I think, is the most convenient, and I think, okay, just because we are tiny, doesn't mean...but yeah.

Dash:

Maybe, taking up the Hau'ofa point here, what does it mean to think about - to think your fiction as part of a wider archipelago, if you like, of stories, taking that kind of incentive up to think about a sea of islands as opposed to islands in a far sea? I mean, how do you interpret that as a writer, as someone working at the craft of writing, and cultivating a network of writers behind you in Sweatshop?

Winnie:

The thing that I think we're starting to move away from in storytelling and publishing, is that if you have one marginalized voice in the mix or published, then that's it - like, you've done your bit, and you can go home. And I think publishers are slowly moving away from that. And there's this real keenness, I think, from publishers to get as much diverse voices and perspectives as possible - on one end, that's really amazing and very important.

Two, on another end, I feel like the publishing industry is in a bit of a rush. I mean, they're businesses, so they have to be.

Dash:

Yeah, yeah, that's right.

Winnie:

But just because somebody is of a diverse background and has a story to tell, doesn't mean they're learned in the craft, I think, enough yet to maybe get a book deal, as maybe as early as they've gotten one, which, who can really say? But for me, I made sure that it took me five years to write *Dirt Poor Islanders*, and I'm always telling the writers that I work with at Sweatshop to not be in a rush, to slow down, and the industry will wait for them. But if you rush the storytelling, and it's not as good as it can be, that kind of gives more - that kind of gives publishers, maybe, a bit, well, you didn't sell as well, so we're just not going to continue, or for...

Dash:

Right.

Winnie:

Other writers, like you. But for me, I was just like, ah, if you just spent another year or another two years on this manuscript, it would've been really phenomenal, and they wouldn't say that to you. So I see myself...I see *Dirt Poor Islanders* as this kind of one-drop-in-the-ocean type thing,

in the sense that I never set out for *Dirt Point Islanders* to talk about the whole Tongan Australian experience. I mean, you can't do that. And no novel is ever going to talk about the whole human experience. That's why we have so many.

And so, for me, that's why I'm always about mentoring the next generation of writers, because they'll continue the conversation, and they'll move it in new directions that I wouldn't be able to think of simply because of my age or whatever .

So I think that's also really important. And for me, there's this Tongan concept that I learned about recently. There's this Tongan Middle Eastern artist who does work at Powerhouse Youth Theatre in Fairfield, and there's this Tongan concept of walking backwards into the future. So, looking at the past and constantly looking at the past, while you're moving forward into the future. So my work might always be stuck on Chris Lilley because that's in my past, and that's what kind of shaped me. But eventually, somebody will be looking at *Dirt Poor Islanders* as a past representation, and the pitfalls and the strengths of that. And so that's always really exciting. And so, I try to do my bit in the past, so that when the future writers come around, it's easier for them, I think.

Dash:

That's just wonderful. I'm going to think that, pretty close to a eureka moment, I think, for me. The idea of walking backwards into the future is lovely. Is this an artist?

Winnie:

Yeah, it's an artist. I forgot her name.

Dash:

I'd love to...

Winnie:

If I remember it, I'll let you know. She's like a...

Dash:

Yeah, please, I'd love that.

Winnie:

She's like a playwright, director, at Powerhouse Youth Theatre in Fairfield

Dash:

Yeah, okay. So why I guess it's ringing bells, is that, for one, it corrects this kind of pretty well-trodden concept in academia, [which] is the idea of the Angel of History - that is, this big, mega concept put out by Walter Benjamin - that this angel is just watching the wreckage of history accumulate and repeat, but can't do anything to stop it. But it's just left in the position of witness, but they're facing backwards. They can't look to the future.

But it's like what you're describing is the reverse of that, in terms of agency, and more, it's like a generative shift. [Just] one more kind of brief story, because right now, I think I've almost run out of questions. I've got maybe one more to ask, but I was recently talking to a South Sea Islander descendant in Mackay who told me the story of his Granny Bu, who, basically, [is] the origin

story for how they came to Australia. And this is the height of the Blackbirding trade, but after regulation.

So there's slight protections around the contact, but it's still a practice of deception through and through. She was basically promised in marriage, effectively, to an older man in the village, and she, at the time, had feelings for a young man who had just come back from Queensland, in the Blackbirding trade. He said he's going to go back, and the Blackbirding ship comes into the harbor. He says, this is a chance for us to go, basically. So they orchestrate this escape, or this kind of - going into Blackbirding - cruelty as well but also a seizing of a life together.

And how they manage it is - this is where, this is why it's coming to mind - is that Granny Bu walks backwards from the village to the Blackbirding ship to give the impression that she's vanished at the water. But it's a bit like walking backwards in the sand, into this new life in Australia. Yeah, I immediately thought of it as you were talking. Yeah, it's a really great image, thank you, yeah.

Winnie:

No, thank you. I also think of the story of Lot and his wife.

Dash:

Oh, cool.

Winnie:

In a Christian context, looking back, being [seen] as a demonic thing to do, but..

Dash:

Yeah, totally, and then, who is the Greek figure? Oh, God, I should know this. But you don't look back, because then you've got, a damn...

Winnie:

Oh Orpheus and Eurydice...

Dash:

Yeah, thank you. Again, I should know this, but yeah, totally. Looking back is the synonymous betrayal.

Winnie:

In the Western context, [it] is seen as quite demonizing, but in a Pacific context, [it] is seen as how you operate, really.

Dash:

Yeah, thank you so much. As I said, this is almost the formal end. I guess, Is there anything that, on your end, that you would like to be asked, or that I can maybe spruik, if you like or if there's anything that...questions you have not been asked before, or there's anything that you'd like to...

Winnie:

No, I mean, all the questions you asked me, no one's ever asked [me] before, so...

Dash:

Oh, great!

Winnie:

It's been really great, and yeah, I think, on the note of the Tongan concept of walking backwards into the future, I think that's what *Dirt Poor Islanders* is. I think that's why I chose it to be a coming-of-age novel, [by] going [back and] exploring childhood, because I think there's no - there was no world set up in Australian literature for the Tongan Australian experience, and [I] kind of had to start it from the ground up, which is why I spent a lot of time at the beginning of the novel mapping out the houses, and mapping out the living spaces, because I needed to.

Dash:

You're making this thing from [the] foundations

Winnie:

A lot of world-building because there was nothing there. And, so, yeah, some readers tell me "the first half's really boring" but I'm like well...

Dash:

You're writing the first...

Winnie:

How can I explain this whole family to you unless I build their entire world up from the ground up? I think *Dirt Poor Islanders* is just another example of that Tongan concept of walking backwards into...

Dash:

Yeah, I love that. In a way it's like the case where you can creatively play with the first being the first, but then also kind of disavow it. I think what your novel really does well, is [that] it plays with this kind of - I guess - a politics of representation, but also challenges [the expectations] that perhaps comes along with it.

Winnie:

People think, first Tongan Australian - [they think] we're going to learn all the really nice stuff about Tonga, it's gonna be really great, and then people read it, and they're like, this is gross.

Dash:

Yeah, this is like a regular person - I came for [world] building from my fantasy.

Winnie:

Thank you for noticing, I appreciate it.

Dash:

No, no, because, anyways, I see a lot of parallels with Faith Bandler's fiction too, it's also playing around with this idea of writing, this composite of experiences together, for a public audience, and then, the entirety - that whole element of the novel - is just lost in the criticism of the time. But anyway, hopefully that will not be true of your writing, and the book to follow.

Winnie:

Oh, we'll see, we'll see. But I feel like being shortlisted for the Miles Franklin is a good indication that it was worth it.

Dash:

True, true!

Winnie:

Thank you so much!