

# FAREWELL TO THE VIOLET ONE

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Nin was born Violet Cecilia but has always been known as Nin in reference to her love of a whānau swimming hole known as “te puna o nini.” She was of the Rapihana whānau of Te Uri o Hina, a hapū of Te Rarawa, with other links to Lake Ohia and also our shared whakapapa through the Leef/Moetara line of Ngati Korokoro in South Hokianga.

Nin was sent to convent school in Auckland, then attended Queen Vic. She came to university as a young mother to Inia, and quickly shone as a student in Māori Studies, where she tutored. Nin went on to study law, where she excelled in contract, and became a protégé (and later close friend) to Professor Brian Coote. Nin was recruited by the Faculty immediately upon her graduation in 1992 becoming only the second Māori member of staff following the brief but influential stay of Ani Mikaere. I was then 20 and entering into the second year of my law studies.

Where to start on the complex and unique character that was Nin Tomas? She was a big part of my life. Over 22 years Nin was my teacher, my mentor, my friend, my whānaunga and on many occasions a pain in my butt. I always loved her but often did not like her very much. Nin was uncompromising, charismatic and sometimes plain scary. You always knew what she thought - she was uncompromising and fearless - living up to the reputation of Te Rarawa as people without extreme. At times students would refer to her as the “Tarara Taniwha”, which I think she secretly liked.

Nin taught me Māori Land Law in my final year of law school and her teaching style was unlike anything I’d ever encountered. It ranged from brilliant to bizarre, from esoteric to scatological in its earthiness. Nin’s teaching was often unorthodox and sometimes controversial. Often hilarious, with a cutting wit, her teaching was charismatic, unpredictable and inspiring. As teachers we often joke about not being prepared for classes but Nin often meant it. I’ve never seen another colleague give a two hour class from notes scribbled on the back of a serviette. She was able to do this because she thought deeply about the material and the issues affecting the law and her students’ lives. The law, and the Law School itself, was a huge part of Nin’s life. She loved to debate the law and the impact it has had on Māori.

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Nin had great ideas for class participation and was particularly fond of role plays and dressing up. One memorable Māori Land Law class was constructed around a roleplay of the resource consent process for the Ngawha prison – complete with gaudy crowns for the Northland councilors and walking sticks and fake teeth for the kaumatua.

Nin and I co-taught several times in Māori Land Law and the comparative Indigenous rights course, which was a cutting edge Masters course taught by live-video link to students in Queensland, Oklahoma, Ottawa, and Saskatchewan. Some days we were like a Laurel and Hardy double act. One day it was our turn to present for three hours on a basic introduction to Māori culture, tikanga and its place in our legal system. Nin decided to liven things up so the two of us dressed in ridiculous outfits – we drew moko on our faces with eyeliner, draped tino rangatiratanga flags around ourselves, wore huge plastic tikis, wrapped piupiu over our pukus, and put feathers in our hair. She looked like a demented Māori Pocahontas activist and I looked like a white kid playing dress-ups. We presented our seminar completely straight faced. One of the Canadian teachers mentioned to us that he had an important visitor sitting in, but out of the view of our screen, who might want to make comment at the end of our class. We thought no more about it and carried on our merry way. At the end of the class, this distinctive voice boomed over the international airwaves “kia ora korua – thanks for that presentation, those are very interesting outfits you have on there.” It was Rongo Wetere, then tumuaki/CEO of Te Wānanga o Aotearoa – probably the most important man in Māori tertiary education at the time. We did the Law School proud that day and it was one of the very few times I ever saw Nin Tomas speechless.

Nin’s vision for the law school was to provide a safe space for Māori legal thinking, teaching and research. She also brought Māori people to the law - as students and manuhiri and as members of the community to be consulted in times of review or for new proposals. She had close links to the profession and to the judiciary and she worked hard to incorporate these views into her teaching and research.

She made significant progress towards her goals over her two decades on Faculty. Many of the things now institutionally ingrained and taken for granted by students and academics alike at the Auckland faculty are the product of Nin’s determination and years of hard work.

These include the presence of electives such as Māori Land Law, Contemporary Tiriti Issues and Comparative Indigenous Rights, and the automatic inclusion of Māori content in compulsory courses such as Public Law, Land Law and Jurisprudence.

When Nin started, these things were not part of Law School life. Under Nin's leadership, the Māori Academic Programme was founded and developed - a programme based upon fundamental tikanga principles of whānaungatanga, manaakitanga and utu. She placed these principles and Waipapa marae at the centre of our consciousness as Māori law students and her belief in this kaupapa was unwavering. She was a trailblazer although she often employed scorched earth tactics to get where she wanted to go.

If I had to sum Nin Tomas up in a single word, I think I would choose "curious", the etymology of which derives from the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century Old French "curios", meaning "solicitous, anxious, inquisitive; odd or strange". Further back still, the Latin "curiosus" meant to be careful, diligent; inquiring eagerly, meddlesome. Some might say a haututu. Nin was certainly curious in the intellectual sense - always seeking out information, gathering ideas, refining a thesis. She was also curious in the sense of being odd or unusual - she was one of a kind. (Remember the time we laughed ourselves silly for days over your inane joke - how do you frighten a unique animal? You 'neak up on them).

Nin had a constant thirst for knowledge - she wanted to know and be able to explain everything - through any and all possible lenses, including law, science, science fiction and empirical experience. I was thinking of Nin recently when the Stephen Hawking bio-pic "A Theory of Everything" was released. She was fascinated with Hawking's work and spent hours trying to summarise "A Brief History of Time" to me. In many ways Nin's professional life was a quest to discover that Holy Grail - the theory that would succinctly encapsulate the answers to our existence, illustrating what Hawking described as "the ultimate triumph of human reason - for then we should know the mind of God." Of course the element that science fails to explain and account for is the very essence of our humanity - our frequent irrationality, acting against reason, interest and logic, and our faith.

On the science fiction front, one of Nin's great loves was Star Trek, and she would often have a DVD binge over a weekend. I think she fancied herself as a bit of a Captain Kirk, who proclaimed the remit of the Starship Enterprise was to "[e]xplore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilisations, to boldly go where no man has gone before." It didn't really matter if something was new *per se*, just that it was new to *Nin*. I'll never forget the day - sometime around 2007 when Nin "discovered" the internet but not the filter one requires to plow through the screeds of irrelevant and unsupported opinions therein.

Nin's research had both national and international impact. She was the first Māori to earn a PhD in law, and after many years toiling away at it, the long threatening shadow of Rob Joseph looming large over her shoulder in the home straight was the final spur on Nin needed to complete the task in 2007. Many a time she muttered that she would be damned if a man was going to beat her to the honour of being the first – and indeed she did it, by only a matter of months. Her doctoral thesis is an in-depth analysis of those fundamental principles of tikanga as a framework for Māori custom law – and is a masterpiece of drawing together both Māori and non-Māori sources of law. Nin looked magnificent on her doctoral graduation day – timed to coincide with her son Inia's graduation from his medical studies.

Over the years Nin forged many links with Indigenous communities - from Turtle Island (North America), South America, Australia, Rapanui and the Saami peoples - sharing our tikanga and history with them and learning of their own customs and experiences. She would come home with stories of camping on a six dollar pink lilo in minus twenty degrees in Northern Saskatchewan or tramping in the mud with James Anaya and the Mapuche people in Chile. These relationships Nin formed with Indigenous whānaunga around the world were often shared with us as members of Te Tai Haruru so that our whānau of international Indigenous legal scholars was ever-growing. Through Nin, I made the connection with Trish Monture – a pou of Indigenous justice and feminism – and in 2009 my family and I followed the trail to the Canadian prairies taken by Nin to stay with the Monture whānau in Saskatoon. Colleagues in Australia recall Nin causing a group of “frisky” Aboriginal men to quake in their boots when she loudly proclaimed that her people ate their enemies so they had better behave.

International visitors to the law school always want the Māori experience - and Nin loved to meet and host them. We had a regular tour - take them up the maunga of central Tamaki, to Orakei for a korero about Takaparawha and the occupation, out to Piha (stopping for fish and chips for lunch at the RSA) then for dinner on the waterfront. Blown away by her manaaki, many of these visitors extended invitations for reciprocal visits, which Nin often accepted. Only Nin could get internationally renowned scholars to roll up their trousers and follow her skipping into the waves – and I saw it many times.

We would speak at conferences and sing terribly afterward (although lots of people loved it). She loved meeting new people and experiencing new things - we went to an Elvis tribute show in Honolulu, a fa'afine show in Apia (we got up on stage at both shows), and many concerts, plays and kapa haka festivals over the years. One time

we hosted a quiz night for the students during an exam wananga at Waipapa and she insisted we dress up as the world's fattest Playboy bunnies. Thank god most of these things happened before the advent of social media and selfie-sticks.

Nin loved a good project - she learned to paint, to mosaic, to do DIY on her whare in Titirangi and her bach in Ahipara, to learn new languages (Croatian, Spanish, French). Nin always had to be doing something new - and she put her heart and soul into whatever her latest obsession was - saving Queen Vic school from closure, revamping tutorials or working on a piece of research. I called this her Pet Project Syndrome. She would demand that you kōrero with her about her latest idea, whether you wanted to or not - which meant that we would sometimes sneak around the building to avoid being caught in a three hour conversation/debate about Hobbes' Leviathan or how tapu worked as a conceptual regulator of behaviour. She was brilliant. Like another Violet of the north (the magnificent late kuia Waerete Norman), Nin could cut you dead with a single look over those over-sized glasses.

Over her years at the Law School Nin formed many friendships including, Brian Coote, Mike Taggart, Jock Brookfield, Jim Evans, Tim McBride, Paul Rishworth and her cousin Bruce Harris.

Many times I appreciated Nin's candour. Following my elder daughter's birth I was suffering from a significant episode of post-natal depression and my colleagues rallied around to help. Treasa Dunworth, a colleague at the Law School, took me to the doctor, and Scott Optican sorted out my work issues. Nin showed up on my doorstep, sat on my couch and told me to "get your shit together because we need you."

It is hard work being Māori. It is also hard work being an academic. Being a Māori academic in a Pākehā institution, particularly a law school, is next-level schizophrenia. Many people talk about the challenge of "walking in two worlds" or the difficulties of being forced into a particular paradigm or world view and this is the reality for all of us who do what we do. Nin had her own way of coping with this challenge both in her life and in her career.

Being Māori in a modern Aotearoa was a regular topic of conversation and debate between Nin and I - what this meant in terms of obligations, rights, tikanga, kawa. Although Nin advocated for and wrote about collective rights, she was one of the most individualistic and private people I have ever known - Māori or otherwise. I often wondered if this was a result of her being the pōtiki of such a large whānau - where

alone-time must have been precious and rare.

When Nin came to write a tribute in this journal to her friend and colleague Mike Taggart on his passing, she observed that “the measure of a man rests not on how long he lived, or even what he achieved, which may be greater or lesser, but on how well those who knew him tell his story.” Nin was certainly the taniwha with a longstanding reputation. But she was also big-hearted, passionate and constant in her drive and determination to provide a korowai of protection over us as Māori in the Law School. Nin’s professional legacy includes the many people, including prominent lawyers and judges, who have been influenced and inspired by her.

I hope that we have told our versions of your story to your liking e hoa. I love you. I miss you. I miss us together and all the silly things we would do in between profound circular conversations about law and the universe. I hear the echoes of your voice in the hallways of building 803. I pass your office expecting to see your fingers flying over the keyboard to give life to your latest great idea. I see the scrapes of paint on the pillars in the carpark underneath the building as reminders of your terrible parking. Rest easy whānaunga.