

Return, Remix, Repair: Moana Epistemologies as Relational Art and Research
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~ To Open ~

Wayfinder, welcome to this research.
I am your guide and friend on the journey.
Before we embark, take a deep breath in ~
to expand your heart,
and a deep breath out ~
to steady your mind.
Remember, you are nourished by the elements,
and held by your ancestors.
Remember, you are never alone.
May you walk gently through these pages,
and find what your spirit seeks.

~ Chapter 1. Return ~

When I was staying on the floating island of Venice for the Art Biennale last year, my apartment at a corner of Castello was close to Chiesa di San Lorenzo that hosts what is known as Ocean Space. Ocean Space is a center for exhibitions and cultural activities established by TBA21-Academy, and I visited the exhibition on display titled *Re-Stor(y)ing Oceania*. I encountered the commissioned works of two Moana~Pacific¹ artists Latai Taumoepeau and Elisapeta Hinemoa Heta, curated by the Moana artist Taloi Havini. Latai is Tongan Australian born in Gadigal Ngurra Sydney; Elisapeta is Aotearoa New Zealand Māori affiliated to the Ngāti Wai and Waikato Tainui iwi~tribe, with Samoan and Tokelauan heritage; and Taloi is from the Nakas Tribe of the Hakö peoples in Arawa, Bougainville, currently based in Brisbane, Australia.

As the exhibition title plays with the phonetic semblance between “restoring” and “restorying”, the exhibition engages with traditions, knowledge, and stories of Moana peoples to rehabilitate Oceania in a time of environmental crisis. Besides the enduring impact of historical colonialism on the life and belief of the Moana peoples, Moana has been burdened with political militarism and extractivist capitalism from superpower countries that covet the resources of Moana. This exhibition is an attempt to subvert these accounts that take Moana as means to economic gains and geopolitical power, and to revive traditional narratives that respect the agency of the Moana and rehabilitate the interconnection and interrelation between people and their environment in the region.

Walking past the gigantic title board, two sets of portable spectator stands are revealed to enclose an area of black mirrored surface over the marble ground of the church. On top of the arena stands sixteen standing paddle machines which are sound installations connected to one speaker each, activated only by the paddle movements. What is played through the speakers are the recordings of a choral singing, which, as the cultural mediator explained to me, is the Nukunuku Youth Choir of Wesleyan Church in Tonga singing a Togan traditional ceremonial song. This is Latai’s work “Deep Communion sung in minor (ArchipelaGO, THIS IS NOT A DRILL)”.

¹ “Moana” means ocean across many Polynesian languages and “Pacific” is termed by the Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan in 1521. While “Pacific” is still in use by many Oceanic scholars, I use “Moana” for its indigenous root.



Figure 1. Latai Taumoepeau, “Deep Communion sung in minor (ArchipelaGO, THIS IS NOT A DRILL)”, 2024. Exhibition view of *Re-Stor(y)ing Oceania*, Ocean Space, Venice. Photo by Giacomo Cosua.

I stepped onto the machine, as the cultural mediator invited, and started paddling, or trying to, since the paddle is heavier than I thought. The recording sounded for a second, responding to my first attempt, and stopped as I stopped. I adjusted my body and prepared my strength for another try, and the recording started to play continuously. Within a few paddlings I could already feel my body temperature going up. Suddenly, I could hear the sound of the recording amplified behind me, and I turned around to find that the cultural mediator had gotten up to another machine to paddle with me. Catching a glimpse of that choral singing played in communion, I decided to stop before I started sweating, also out of feeling ill at ease for the cultural mediator who is accompanying me for the full paddling experience. During the opening months, Latai invited local sports teams to perform this work in its largest capacity as part of the public programs of the exhibition. I have seen videos of those online, which are very impressive indeed. After having paddled there myself, I was also impressed by the strength and stamina expended to make the performance possible. The work also takes on a different note with the aspects of entertainment and spectacle, as it is the case of sports in popular culture and mainstream media.

In a seminar² of OCEAN / UNI - a pedagogic project initiated by TBA-21 Academy

² The seminar is the first session of the Spring 2024 semester titled “Pacific Resistance”. “O/U

dedicated to art, activism, and science around the Ocean - Latai talked about the inspirations and processes of her work, which honors the Tongan traditional practice of me'etu'upaki, with me'e meaning dance, tu'u standing, and paki meaning with paddles. Me'etu'upaki is an ancient ritual group dance that functions as a call to prayer before Tongans voyaged into the Moana and, as Latai talked about how the recording was made, it turned out that the ceremonial song is so ancient that not even Tongan people today recognize its full meaning anymore, nor other islands adjacent that shared such similar tradition. The installation in Ocean Space then, is an iteration of me'etu'upaki that uses the bodies of the visitors as conduits to revive ancestral memories and cosmogonies in the present.

With modern technology and contemporary art space, Latai successfully involved visitors - the majority of them in Venice being white European middle-class cultural tourists - to labor and contribute to the revitalization of a ceremonial ritual from an island country in the Moana, which they likely have very little knowledge or impression of. Latai also uses this ritual to raise awareness of deep-sea mining around the Moana islands where resources are extracted from the seabed to generate capitals that benefit, most of the time, countries in the Global North. Although the curatorial text describes the participatory element of Latai's work as inviting visitors' "teamwork contributing to the resistance to deep-sea mining,"³ I sensed more symbolism behind the demand of physical labor, which, produced in an island that epitomizes the wealth of Europe, became metaphoric compensation to the Moana islands. It could thus be understood as a project of ceremonial repatriation and, as the exhibition title suggests, of cultural restoration.

In the seminar, Latai framed her Venice intervention as both a transference and a reclamation, "bringing something from the Global South to the Global North"⁴ while recentering Moana epistemologies within the Euro-Christian space of Chiesa di San Lorenzo. In bringing her work and the Moana to Venice, Latai also

SPRING 2024 - Session 1: Prologue: Pacific Cosmogonies ~ Pacific Resistance," online seminar, produced by TBA21-Academy, recorded January 31, 2024, posted February 5, 2024, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cxa_6JrOMSQ.

³ Ocean Space. *Re-Stor(y)ing Oceania*, exhibition brochure (2024), accessed May 26, 2025, <https://www.ocean-space.org/exhibitions/latai-taumoepeau-elisapeta-hinemoa-heta-re-storying-oceania>.

⁴ "O/U SPRING 2024 - Session 1."

creates an occasion for reciprocal energy to be brought back into the Moana. “Deep Communion” materializes the physical effort from the more privileged participants to, literally, make the voices of the Moana peoples heard. Yet crucially, Latai’s work refuses the flattering narrative of victimhood for the Moana peoples. While Latai engages socio-political questions to interrogate, for example, power dynamics in South-North relations, she also creates a space that transcends binary oppositions of right and wrong, condemnation and valorization. Holding these tensions, Latai’s work generates occasions to invite new potentiality and relationality beyond mere critique.



Figure 2. Latai Taumoepeau, “Repatriate,” 2022. Performed for exhibition *Declaration: A Pacific Feminist Agenda* at the Auckland Art Gallery. Photo by Ana Maykot.

Latai describes her practice as “a way of holding a worldview”⁵ and what is always at the center of her practice manifesting that worldview is the body. Besides activating the bodies of the visitors, Latai has often laboriously exerted her own body. In 2015, Latai worked with me’etu’upaki in another work titled “Repatriate”, where the only body at work is hers, dancing within rising waters in a transparent water tank. She wears a bright yellow life jacket and floaties, and performs choreography of me’etupaki and other traditional dances from various Moana islands. The performance was shown as a five-channel video, and has also taken place live at art festivals and galleries. In 2022, Latai performed on the street of the Auckland Art Gallery, bringing the immediacy and urgency of the

⁵ “O/U SPRING 2024 - Session 1.”

work to passerbys beyond the walls of an art space, and in the 90min that the waters fill the tank, her performance reiterated that the critical question of survival for Indigenous Moana cultures among the rising sea levels is no longer a drill, as the name of “Deep Communion” also suggests. Yet Latai’s work is far from a lament of climate change or a denunciation of systemic inequalities that climate change manifests; it is an insistence on coming to terms with the present where climate change is already a reality of here and now, not something elsewhere that takes place another time. In condensing the literal rising of sea levels within a 90min performance, Latai collapses both time and space of climate change to the scale of an individual body, making this crisis viscerally immediate to her audiences.

Latai describes her body-centered practice as *faivā*, literally meaning “do-time-in-space” in Tongan and one of the major Tongan art forms. Her work intentionally activates the relational *tā* and *vā* in Tongan cultures, *tā* meaning time and *vā* meaning space across various Moana languages, and studies around which *tā* and *vā* have become one of the most prominent and fundamental aspects in indigenous Moana theory.⁶ The *Tā-Vā* theory of reality theory was developed foremost by the Tongan scholars Hūfanga 'Okusitino Māhina⁷ and Tēvita O. Ka'ili in the early 2000s, and has become the underpinning structure for Tongan and Moana philosophy. The *Tā-Vā* theory concerns not only ontology - the nature of reality - but also involves epistemology - how we learn from reality - and further implies ethics - how we engage with that reality. Hūfanga, in one of his early works on the *Tā-Vā* theory, establishes it as an axis of Moana cultures. He listed some of the general tenets for the theory as:

- that ontologically *tā* and *vā* are the common medium in which all things are, in a single level of reality;
- that epistemologically *tā* and *vā* are socially arranged in different ways across cultures;
- that all things, in nature, mind, and society, stand in eternal relations of exchange, giving rise to conflict or order;
- that conflict and order are of the same logical status in that order is in itself an expression of conflict;
- that *tā* and *vā* are the abstract dimensions of *fuo* (form) and *uho*

⁶ A variation of *tā* and *vā* is *kā* and *wā*, for example in Hawaiian languages.

⁷ Hūfanga is a Tongan title of respect, and I am using it according to how Hūfanga 'Okusitino Māhina is referred to in his *talanoa* on *Va Moana*. See <https://www.vamoana.org/news/talanoa-hufanga-he-ako-moe-lotu-dr-okusitino-mahina>.

- (content), which are, in turn, the concrete dimensions of tā and vā; and that tā and vā, like fuo and uho, are indivisible in both mind as in reality.⁸

Seeing tā and vā as inherently connected and inseparable, present in all things of nature, mind, and society, informs how time and space is organized, studied and materialized. In Moana cultures, guided by this ontology of tā and vā, time and space is organized in “plural, cultural, collectivistic, holistic, and circular” modes, in contrast to that of Western cultures which are often “singular, technoteleological, individualistic, atomistic, and linear”.⁹ The difference in the organization of time-space then becomes the origin of other differences between Moana and Western cultures. One example of such differences is the construction of past, present, and future. While in the West time is most often linearly arranged as in how the past is placed behind people at the present who are facing the future in front of them, in Moana cultures, people are facing the past with their back to the future, and the present is the interface between walking forwards - into the past - and backwards - into the future.¹⁰ The thinking behind how past, present, and future is arranged is that the past as something known and tested could serve as guidance for people going into what has yet to happen in the future. The evidence of how this line of Moana reasoning makes sense with its clarity and coherence exposes the paradox in the opposite organisation of past, present, and future, naturalized for the majority of the world.¹¹

Latai has said: “The more ancient I am, the more contemporary my work is. I am not doing anything new.”¹² There has been a lot of discussion around what contemporary art is and what the term delineates in Western art history,¹³ along with its chronological precedence of modern art in the Western society where a

⁸ Hūfanga ‘Ōkusitino Māhina, “TĀ, VĀ, and Moana: Temporality, Spatiality, and Indigeneity,” *Pacific Studies* 33 (December 1, 2010), 169.

⁹ Māhina, “TĀ, VĀ, and Moana,” 170.

¹⁰ Māhina, “TĀ, VĀ, and Moana,” 170.

¹¹ I am reminded of the Ghanaian principle of Sankofa, meaning “go back and get it” which is visually represented by a bird with its feet forwards and head turned backwards carrying an egg in its mouth. I am also reminded of Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History, which is being propelled into the future with his back towards it and helplessly watching the ruins of the past in front of him - an apocalyptic version of non-linear time in European philosophy.

¹² Qtd. in Talei Luscia Mangioni, “Confronting Australian Apathy: Latai Taumoepeau and the Politics of Performance in Pacific Climate Stewardship,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 33, no. 1 (2021), 37.

¹³ For example, Terry Smith’s work on what contemporary art is.

definite cut between the present and the past happened and gave rise to the binary opposition of modern and the pre-modern, forming the foundation of ethnocentrism, eurocentrism, anthropocentrism, and techno-teleologism. According to this linear model of time, “the more ancient” would mean the less modern and logically the less contemporary, which makes Latai’s words a paradox. Rooted in the Tongan theory of tā and vā, Latai’s paradox is an example of the differences between the Western and the Moana cultures, and serves intentionally as a critique of the Western modernist thinking; Latai’s words and works invite us to rethink: what *is* contemporary and what *should* contemporary be? Through the etymology of the word, “contemporary” comes from Latin “con-” meaning “together with” and “tempus” meaning “time”, literally meaning “at the same time”. In Latai’s work, the past and future is brought back together at the present, face to face, conversing and interacting. Ancestral knowledge is not only referenced to structure her work, but it is reanimated with new energies from the present. As Latai’s works have shown, the most contemporary, “avant-garde”, or radical art - as the etymology of the word “radical” suggests - comes from the root. Together, this dance of the past and the present in “Deep Communion” calls to a future where deep-sea mining is eliminated and the Moana being given back its rightful peace and respect that have dwindled over centuries.

Hūfanga describes art as the genealogy of times and spaces, moderating and transforming tā and vā, fuo~form and uho~content, to create harmony.¹⁴ Harmony does not mean lack of conflict, but a state of synthesis and being a balanced whole. Hūfanga summarised three types of art, specifically in Tongan context: faivā, tufunga, and nimamea’a, which all take tā and vā into consideration and are always temporally-spatially composed. Faivā, meaning “do-time-in-space”, can be understood as performance arts; tufunga, meaning “beat-space”, can be translated to material arts; and nimamea’a, meaning literally “fine hands” or “hand-marking-time-space”, can be referred to as fine arts, though not in the conventions of what the term means in Western system. Nimamea’a includes mat weaving (nimamea’a lālanga), bark-cloth making (nimamea’a koka’anga), and flower-design plaiting (nimamea’a tuikakala), etc.; tufunga includes tattooing (tufunga tātatau), stone-cutting (tufunga āmaka), house building (tufunga langafale), etc.; faiva includes not only poetry (faiva ta’anga), music (faiva hiva), and dance (faiva haka), but also activities that are less commonly perceived as “art” such as surfing (faiva fānifo), boxing (faiva fuhu), etc. As these examples show, art in Tongan and Moana contexts is produced

¹⁴ Māhina, “TĀ, VĀ, and Moana,” 184

through its tā-vā complex and deeply embedded in the socio-cultural fabric; it is never an exceptional activity detached from daily life as seen in Western society.

These forms of art are also indivisible from their contents, as fuo and uho are concrete dimensions of tā and vā. In these three art forms, the body becomes a negotiator of tā and vā and manifests differently in terms of fuo and uho. Hūfanga describes faiva as based inside or on the body and therefore body-centered, and both tufunga and nimamea'a are placed outside of the body and therefore non-body-centered.¹⁵ The distinction of body-centered and non-body-centered art is then made by the body as an actor or medium of fuo and uho. In tufunga and nimamea'a, the body gives its space and energy to material outcomes that are not itself, therefore a means to an end, a medium to shape fuo and uho; however, in faivā, the body is used in a way that exercise its own agency, an end in itself that acts simultaneously as both fuo and uho. In Latai's work such as "Deep Communion" and "Repatriate", she has programmed the body to activate the performances, where the physical paddling and dancing of the body (fuo) and the socio-political significance of those bodily movements (uho) are co-constitutive, and by using the body to do-time-in-space, faivā becomes a radical artistic praxis that bridges tā and vā through the singularity of the body.

In Tongan and other Moana languages, there is no word translatable to the Western concept of "art"¹⁶, a common case for Indigenous cultures around the world. Speaking from a different context of Indigenous North America, Chiricahua Apache curator and writer Nancy Marie Mithlo discusses the socio-political significance of the "no word for art in my language" phenomenon where Native American artists make such declarations as self-determination and as resistance to Western categorization.¹⁷ Turning against the ethnocentric and essentialist gaze of Western art world on the arts of the ethnic "others", stating "no word for art in *my* language" is a gesture of cultural sovereignty that honors and dignifies the Indigenous traditions of art making as a more holistic activity in contrast to the narrow conception of "art". At the same time, the Indigenous ways of thinking, manifested in its linguistic systems, exposes the programming of individualism, elitism, commercialism, and neoliberalism in the conception of

¹⁵ Māhina, "TĀ, VĀ, and Moana," 185

¹⁶ Tēvita O. Ka'ili, Ōkusitino Māhina, and Ping-Ann Addo, "Introduction: Tā-Vā (Time-Space): The Birth of an Indigenous Moana Theory," *Pacific Studies* 40, no. 1-2 (August 1, 2017), n5.

¹⁷ Nancy Marie Mithlo, "No Word for Art in Our Language? Old Questions, New Paradigms," *Wicazo Sa Review* 27, no. 1 (2012), 113.

fine art in Western society where art as object is separated from and prioritized over its making and experience.

Latai describes herself as making “live-art-work”¹⁸. First and foremost a word play on “live artwork”, this hyphenated word can also be interpreted as a reunification of art as object and art as process in the holistic sense. The liveness of artwork invokes its complex spatiotemporal organization and demands that artwork should not be prioritized over the life that informs and actualizes it. In addition, art making is just an integral part within living-and-working, never autonomous or separated. Therefore, live-art-work reiterates the interdependence of *fuo* and *uho* both in the artwork itself and in the art making process: just as artwork (*fuo*) cannot separate from its cultural meaning (*uho*), art making (*fuo*) cannot separate from the labor of work and lived experience (*uho*). This unification of art, live, and work resonates the conception of art as a fundamental engagement with the interdependence of *fuo* and *uho*, *tā* and *vā*, that, according to Hūfanga’s third tenet of Tā-Vā theory, permeates “all things, in nature, mind, and society”.

In the context of Tongan philosophy, Adriana Māhanga Lear, a queer Tongan-Australian artist and academic who studied under Hūfanga and Tēvita, discusses ‘aati - introduced Tongan term for art - in relation to *ako* which means education, or collective sharing of knowledge. Not only are ‘aati and *ako* aligned as forms of disciplinary practices and social activities in Tongan culture, they are also under the same framework of the Tā-Vā theory of reality and comparable “by way of *tā-vā*[~]time-space, *fuo-uho*[~]form-content, and ‘aonga-ngāue[~]function-practice”.¹⁹ Both ‘aati and *ako* are transformations of *tā* and *vā*, the former in the subject matter or medium, and the latter in the mind, with an everlasting “physical-bodily, psychological-emotional, and social-cultural” impact.²⁰ For both ‘aati and *ako*, what they *are* - the intrinsic qualities - and what they are *for* - the extrinsic utilities or functionalities - are inherently connected, with the former logically precedes the latter: ‘aati that *is* *tatau*~symmetry, *potupotutatau*~harmony, and *mālie/faka’ofa’ofa*~beauty gives rise to its extrinsic utilities such as *māfana*~warmth, *vela*~fieriness, and

¹⁸ “Latai Taumoepeau,” *Intimate Spectacle*, accessed May 26, 2025, <https://www.intimatespectacle.com.au/artists/latai-taumoepeau/>.

¹⁹ Adriana Māhanga Lear et al., “Sio FakaTonga ‘ae ‘Aati FakaTonga: Tongan Views of Tongan Arts,” *Pacific Studies* 44, no. 1–2 (October 2021), 148.

²⁰ Adriana Māhanga Lear et al., “Sio FakaTonga ‘ae ‘Aati FakaTonga,” 148.

tauelangi~climatic elation and ako that *is* the search for 'ilo~knowledge precedes and supports the functionality of ako that is pototo~skills.²¹

Through this comparison, beauty and utility is shown to be indivisible, as “the more beautiful, the more useful, and, by the same token, the more useful, the more beautiful”²². Therefore, art *is* always work. Interestingly, ako is also called faiva ako which includes education or the sharing of knowledge in the realm of the performance arts.²³ Rather than regarding this as elevating education to the status of art in Tongan culture, I would understand art as more expanded and integrated with social-cultural practices across the Moana, which echoes what Latai has said that “[f]aivā is the art of organising and performing social duties related to place, the body and environment”.²⁴ The Western system of separating artistic, cultural, and social practices originates from the binary thinking where art can be judged by either aesthetic (formal) or social (functional) values, by either form or content, instead of a holistic entity holding complex interweaving of fuo and uho, tā and vā.

²¹ Adriana Māhanga Lear et al., “Sio FakaTonga ‘ae ‘Aati FakaTonga,” 148-9.

²² Adriana Māhanga Lear et al., “Sio FakaTonga ‘ae ‘Aati FakaTonga,” 149.

²³ Adriana Māhanga Lear et al., “Sio FakaTonga ‘ae ‘Aati FakaTonga,” n22.

²⁴ “Latai Taumoepeau.”

~ Interlude I ~

A few different streams had taken me to the Moana. In the first year of my MRes program, I participated in developing an exhibition project with my friends at the MRes Theory and Philosophy titled *HYPERSEA: out of body, out of mind - into water*, which drew on feminist environmental theorist Astrida Neimanis' concept of hydrofeminism. Hydrofeminism considers water to hold socio-political potentials for a radical connectivity that is anchored in humans' innately watery bodies, and hypersea - a biogeographical concept that Neimanis extended from the paleontologists Mark and Dianna McMenamin - is what we retained inside our bodies when we moved out of marine water²⁵. With that shared water lineage, hypersea reminds us that we are deeply connected: me, you, us, humans, animals, plants, ecology, the elements, water. "Water is what we are and where we are from."²⁶

I grew up between different lands, some geographical, some cultural, some ideological, and knowing my water lineage gives me emotional reassurance when I am not sure where I am from. Especially as the hegemonic system pressures me to categorize myself as certain identities to become legible, embracing my water lineage becomes an act of resistance and liberation. Knowing all oceans are interconnected, I have long included the oceans in my bio where I introduce myself as "having lived across the Pacific and the Atlantic", though "across" means flying over from high above instead of vicinity with the ocean. Before writing this piece on the Moana, I worked on the Atlantic Ocean as a site of critical enquiries in Black Studies. On one hand, the Atlantic is the means to examine and critique the brutality of slavery and racism that built European modernity; on the other hand, the Atlantic is theorized as a dynamic and vibrant space of cultural exchanges that gives rise to, as Paul Gilroy describes, a transnational black "counterculture of modernity"²⁷. From this light, me swimming into the Moana is a continuation of the postcolonialist critique of modernity and a celebration of Moana cultures that are still living and diverse.

²⁵ Astrida Neimanis, "Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water." in *Undutiful Daughters: Mobilizing Future Concepts, Bodies and Subjectivities in Feminist Thought and Practice*, edited by Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni and Fanny Söderbäck (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 86.

²⁶ Freya Shi and Jules Sokolowska, "HYPERSEA: out of body, out of mind - into water," exhibition text (2024).

²⁷ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Verso, 1993), 1.

Environmental humanities is also my entry into Indigenous epistemology. My first encounter with Indigenous epistemology was at an undergraduate course at Humboldt-Universität about Berlin's urban ecologies. I read the paper "Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency Amongst Humans and Non Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go On a European World Tour!)" by Mohawk and Anishinaabe scholar Vanessa Watts, and it unsettled me. The paper challenges Western ontology with Indigenous Place-Thought, which is the understanding that place and thought are inseparable; the understanding of land and place as active and agential forces shaping human activities. What really struck me was how Vanessa, after starting the paper with the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe Creation Story of the First Woman and the Sky Woman, emphasizes that "these two events took place. They were not imagined or fantasized."²⁸ I was confused at first. After reading the entire paper I was able to comprehend that her declaration was intentionally made to challenge the Eurocentric framework of knowledge and reinstitute the sovereignty of Indigenous thoughts. Through reading the paper I also came face to face with my previously undetected framework of academic knowledge production, which proved itself to be partial and strongly biased.

Encountering the critical power of Indigenous epistemology, I have also learned that Indigenous knowledge system - existing for centuries before modern science came about - is carefully developed over time through the sustainable and reciprocal relationship between indigenous peoples and their environments. In the case of the Moana peoples, their systems of knowing, doing, and being are thus inherently shaped by their island environments among the biggest ocean on Earth. Not only can the ocean offer alternatives to land-based knowledge systems, it also resists Western epistemic impulse to map, abstract, and, therefore, control and exploit, which to a large extent resulted in the ecological crisis we are facing currently. While the Moana people live at the forefront of climate change, Moana indigenous knowledge and practices also hold incredible power in responding to the crisis on a local level. Thus, I feel an even stronger urgency to learning and amplifying the Moana indigenous knowledge and practices that may contribute to addressing pressing environmental issues.

While these streams of thoughts led my mental space to that of the Moana, there

²⁸ Vanessa Watts, "Indigenous Place-Thought and Agency Amongst Humans and Non Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go On a European World Tour!)," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no. 1 (May 4, 2013), 21.

are a few specific points of departure that guided my process of learning and writing around the theoretical concepts and critical potentials of indigeneity. These strands of interests provided pathways for developing each chapter featuring works of Moana women artists, and they, though not prescribing the argument of each chapter, certainly did shape my argumentation.

The first strand is how indigeneity challenges the preconceived notion of time that the Enlightenment has framed as linear, progressive, and future-oriented. Indeed, Western modernity, with its colonial footing, is established in opposition to what was regarded as “primitive” projected onto many Indigenous communities around the world. Thus, indigenous temporality - that is, circular, place-based, and relational - disrupts the binary of past and future and challenges Western colonialist and modernist mode of understanding time. I am interested in Moana artists who center their practices around indigenous traditions and ancestral knowledge and vitalize what was ancient through a contemporary lens. Therefore, in Chapter 1, Latai’s work has served as a strong reminder to return to ancient knowledge for better responding to contemporary crises with due urgency.

The second strand is how indigeneity can be understood in relation to diaspora. The word “indigenous” is often used to describe natural occurrence, first inhabitation, and long residence,²⁹ carrying strong connotations of place and rootedness. However, in our age of massive international migrations where many Indigenous peoples are no longer living on ancestral lands, questions are raised about the textbook definition of indigeneity and invites renewed potential of understanding indigenous and diasporic identities. In the context of the Moana, the first people of these islands were also voyagers who travelled across the vast Moana using wind patterns and star navigation, whose nature is, according to the Tongan-Fijian writer Epli Hau’ofa, inherently mobile³⁰. Therefore, I am interested in Moana artists who work from a place that juxtaposes and integrates roots and routes, exploring what indigeneity means in diasporic terms. An expansive area of research in itself³¹, this topic will be explored in Chapter 2 through the remixing work of Aotearoa-born and Moana-descent artist Rosanna

²⁹ “INDIGENOUS | English Meaning - Cambridge Dictionary,” Cambridge Dictionary, accessed May 26, 2025, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/indigenous>.

³⁰ Epli Hau’ofa, “Our Sea of Islands,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 156.

³¹ See Lana Lopesi, “Moana Cosmopolitan Imaginaries: Toward an Emerging Theory of Moana Art” (Doctoral Thesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2021).

Raymond.

The third strand is how indigeneity can help us build relationships with the environment and each other in our time of climate and political crisis. Based on reciprocity instead of extraction, most indigenous practices have been advocating for long-term relationality with the land. Indigenous knowledge is largely based on the harmony between humans and the environment, focusing on the interconnectedness of all things, elements, and lives. Spirituality, at the core of indigenous ways of thinking and being, manifests in respect and care for all living beings; in ecocentrism rather than anthropocentrism. In the Moana context, the ocean is always home to the Moana peoples, teaching interdependence through its “waves, lapping over and over and over in our minds eye”³². This deep relationality with the environment, shared among many Indigenous communities, also forms the basis for transnational and transoceanic solidarity. This topic will be discussed in Chapter 3 with works of artists, poets, and thinkers from Hawai’i including Meleanna Aluli Meyer, Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio, and Manulani Aluli Meyer who repair that people-land relationship.

Zooming out from the previous strands that correspond to the content of my chapters, the last strand engages with research as an activity itself, an overarching thread that frames the entire structure of my writing. My writing on/with/through the Moana artists is envisioned as a journey to *learn* about indigenous practices, and simultaneously *learning how to write* about indigenous practices. Research has had a bad reputation in many indigenous communities, often being regarded as “one of the dirtiest words”³³ in indigenous communities for its implication in exploitative practices in the name of “science”. Research from the 19th and 20th century contributed to the imperial, colonial, militarist, and capitalist violences on the Moana peoples, resulting not only in socio-political injustice but also epistemic injustice. As early Western researchers disregarded the fundamental differences between Western and Indigenous epistemologies, indigenous systems of knowledge were often excluded and invalidated and indigenous peoples were never regarded as “equal participants

³² Manulani Aluli Meyer, “Spirituality Centered around Aloha/ Pono: A Discipline of Love and Truth,” in *reSTORYing the Pasifika Household*, edited by Upolu Luma Vaai and Aisake Casimira (Pacific Theology College, 2023), 4.

³³ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2012), 1.

in the creation of knowledge or public policy”³⁴ that concerned themselves. While contemporary researchers have reflected on this issue of epistemic injustice³⁵, it takes enormous work in rethinking and recreating research paradigms and methodologies for the rectification of epistemic injustice and the revitalization of Indigenous thoughts.

My writing follows in that line of work and asks how I can decolonize research methodologies. With my writing, I explore the methods and methodologies through which research can benefit and reciprocate Indigenous communities, instead of extracting knowledge for its own sake. On a more general level, my writing explores the possibility of research in paying respect, practicing care, and making connections with peoples and cultures, itself being an example of decolonial practice. This task is taken up by the *Interludes* in my writing, which can be understood as lining the *Chapters* on a meta-level or baring the bony framework, aka methodologies, behind the research in each *Chapter*. While the *Chapters* embody the agenda of the *Interludes* - practicing decolonial research methodologies in real time - the writing of the *Chapters* also inform the *Interludes*, placing the practice (Chapter) and the theory (Interlude) of decolonial research in a dynamic and reciprocal dialogue.

This Interlude is an introduction to the decolonial practices in my research, and the discussion will be continued and furthered in the next two Interludes when you encounter them. My first decolonial practice, as shown with paragraphs above, is to clarify my positionality and its implication. I have explained why I was drawn to studying the Moana cultures, and what my references points are regarding specific questions around indigeneity. I touched upon my lived experiences across different borders, and I would like to briefly add my educational experiences which have shaped my own epistemologies. I have experiences in Chinese, Canadian, US American, German, and UK education systems and an academic background in comparative literature, interdisciplinary humanities, (Western) continental philosophy, and (Western) contemporary art. I am aware that my educational and socio-cultural upbringing position me outside the direct lineages of the Moana cultures, thus making this research predominantly a journey of learning and reflection.

³⁴ Rebecca Tsosie, “Indigenous Peoples and Epistemic Injustice: Science, Ethics, and Human Rights,” *Washington Law Review* 87, no. 4 (December 1, 2012), 1141.

³⁵ The term “epistemic violence” was coined by the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal 1988 essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

My second decolonial practice was regarding the use of languages in my research. Languages organize our realities and it is crucial to understand their operations in our research. While English is my research language and my predominant writing language, I also speak roughly four languages, all of them contributing to my understanding of the nuances within language and communication. Although I did not master any Moana languages within the scope of this research, I have been trying my best with my rigorosity and sensitivity to understand and express these indigenous practices, with and on their own terms.

As you have experienced from Chapter 1, many Moana words I use are introduced through a juxtaposition with their English translation, connected by a tilde symbol. The translations were chosen from the work of Moana scholars that I read and referenced, which were helpful to my learning and writing at the beginning of my research. However, I would like to emphasize that no translation can fully convey the meaning of its original word³⁶, and cautions need to be made regarding “the seduction of easy equivalency, of creating shorthands”³⁷ that overshadows the epistemic and linguistic backgrounds that give meanings to the original word. Therefore, the English translation presented should not be taken as equivalent for the Moana words, but are meant as bounce boards for my readers, the majority of whom do not know any Moana languages. It is also within this line of thought that I decided not to include a glossary in my writing, which is something that, not only do I feel unqualified to write properly yet, might also risk easy equivalency of the Moana concepts. However, I would encourage my readers to embark on their own search for understanding the complexity and beauty of Moana languages beyond this piece of writing.

The English translation only appears the first time a Moana word is used, and no translation will be offered after. The Moana words are never italicized or used with quotes as if they are “foreign”, designed to be an intervention in the reading process for my English-speaking readers. Giving readers a rough translation at the first instance helps them ground in epistemic worlds different from that of English, and through removing the English translation afterwards, I invite and challenge readers to make renewed sense of the Moana words through their own

³⁶ It has been a widely accepted concept in poststructuralist thoughts, and specifically Translation Studies, that all translations are interpretations and that perfect translation is a myth.

³⁷ Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada, *The Mana of Translation: Translational Flow in Hawaiian History from the Baibala to the Mauna* (University of Hawaii Press, 2024), 7.

journey of reading. By using the tilde (~) instead of a slash (/) between Moana words and their translation, I want to show the connections and consonance between the words, while also pointing out their incommensurability. As the tilde is also called the “wave symbol” in Chinese, I imagine waves of meanings to flow in both directions, creating generative spaces from the singular points of translation.

~ Chapter 2. Remix ~

We acknowledge the sacredness of unseen Divine energies and commit to uphold and sanctify them.

We acknowledge and commit to protect and sanctify country that nourishes us.

We acknowledge and commit to protect and sanctify the songlines and the custodians who have departed and they who survived.

We acknowledge and commit to protect and sanctify custodians and relatives of the land, relatives of the ocean, and relatives of the sky.

So that we may follow.³⁸

Latai Taumoepeau

I cry the ocean

I bleed the earth

I sleep with mountains

I greet you with my dead

May my waters greet your waters

May my mountains greet your mountains

May my house greet your house

May my people greet your people

Let us take a moment to acknowledge those who have passed, for we are the past, we are

the present, we are the future.³⁹

Rosanna Raymond

The first paragraph above is from Latai's blessing of her online seminar at OCEAN / UNI which invokes the Tongan tradition of fakatapu - faka meaning "make" and tapu meaning "sacred". The second paragraph is one that I have watched Moana artist Rosanna Raymond reciting over and over in videos online, every time before introducing herself in talks and conversations. This paragraph is a lauga amata, an opening speech in Samoan tradition that "lays out the mat and opens a space for the prose of the world,"⁴⁰ a sacred oratory ritual

³⁸ "O/U SPRING 2024 - Session 1." The original Tongan lines are omitted.

³⁹ Rosanna Raymond, "Conser.VĀ.tion|Acti.VĀ.Tion Museums, the Body and Indigenous Moana Art Practice" (Masters Thesis, Auckland University of Technology, 2021), 10.

⁴⁰ Raymond, "Conser.VĀ.tion|Acti.VĀ.Tion," 10.

comparable to fakatapu. Both lauga amata and fakatapu are an acknowledgement of the spirit, land, and ancestors and a recognition of tā and vā that are operating on people and land at this time-space. It is only through paying respect to these governing aspects beyond individual human capacities, will the speech after the lauga amata and fakatapu be rightful and meaningful. Thus, in the making of a proper tā-vā condition for human activities, Lauga amata and fakatupa become actions of faivā.

Faivā as an artistic-social activity can also be seen prominently in Rosanna's SaVĀge K'lub, an ongoing collaborative project that started in 2010. Inaugurated during Rosanna's residency at the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, SaVĀge K'lub has involved over 200 Moana artistic and cultural practitioners, convening across different museum spaces in the continents of Oceania, Europe, and America. The title references the 19th-century gentlemen's clubs in London named after the English poet Richard Savage, which spread to Aotearoa where a specific version of Savage Club was developed with a distinctly Māori format around the turn of the 20th century.⁴¹ The spelling of the term from "Savage" - pronounced /'sæv.ɪdʒ/⁴² - to "SaVĀge" - pronounced /sə'vɑ:dʒ/⁴³ - is Rosanna's centering of the concept of vā in her practice, now with the perspectives from her Samoan heritage.

What a "Samoan heritage" signifies in Rosanna's work is far from uncomplicated. In her master's dissertation from 2021, Rosanna talked about the importance of her body in her art practice as "a contested space" of Samoan, Tuvaluan, Kiribati, French, Irish, Norwegian lineages; "an introduced species descended from a multi-stranded genealogical legacy brought about by waves of migration to Aotearoa New Zealand from the Moana and Europe"⁴⁴; a bird that dwells in multiple forests.⁴⁵ Therefore, while Rosanna engages with her Samoan heritage in her works, her complex situatedness and her critical awareness of positionality resist simple categorization and the essentialist account of cultural

⁴¹ Billie Lythberg, "KRONIKling the K'lub—from 19th Century Savages to 21st Century SaVAgery," *SaVĀge KRONIKles*, accessed May 26, 2025, <https://savage-kronikles.webflow.io/nav-bar/ranga-toi>.

⁴² "SAVAGE | Pronunciation in English," *Cambridge Dictionary*, accessed May 26, 2025, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/pronunciation/english/savage>.

⁴³ My own phonetic rendering according to how Rosanna has pronounced it in her interviews.

⁴⁴ Raymond, "Conser.VĀ.tion|Acti.VĀ.Tion," 18

⁴⁵ Rosanna describes herself with a Samoan saying "Ua fuifui fa'atasi, 'ae vao 'ese'ese (flock together from many different forests)". See Raymond, "Conser.VĀ.tion|Acti.VĀ.Tion," 17.

and artistic productions that art from Moana and other Indigenous artists often receive in the global art world dominated by the West.

As a white-passing woman⁴⁶, Rosanna has worked to challenge the racial and exotic representation of Moana peoples and cultures as a historical legacy of European colonialism, especially in Western art canon. In her talk titled “We need to talk about Gauguin?” at the National Gallery of Australia for the 2024 exhibition *Gauguin’s World: Tona Iho, Tona Ao*,⁴⁷ Rosanna frankly admitted that she couldn’t really bother to invite the French artist Gauguin “into [her] most valued asset: [her] time and [her] headspace”.⁴⁸ While critiquing the impact of Gauguin on the Moana peoples constructing the Moana as “an ‘Island Paradise’, inhabited by the free-and-easy Dusky Maiden and the at one with nature Noble Savage”⁴⁹ in Western imagination, Rosanna works on her own terms to liberate representation of Moana women’s bodies from these colonial stereotypes. Since the 2000s, Rosanna has developed a series of performance work around/against the trope of the Dusky Maiden, reclaiming and, as she says, diversifying⁵⁰ the possibilities of women’s bodies in Moana context.

One of Rosanna’s most iconic Maidens is “Backhand Maiden” which, first shown in 2009 at the October Gallery in London, went on to have various second lives including at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2017 and Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art in 2023. It comprises a gown made of tapa~barkcloth which is designed to, as its name suggests, strike from behind with a bold opening at the back. The embodied presence of Backhand Maiden has been activated a few times, with Rosanna wearing it and channeling her mana~power in the museum spaces. The embodiment transcends mere performance and becomes ceremonial - a transformation where Rosanna’s “naked” body, adorned with Sāmoan tatau~tattoo, is both revealed and re-

⁴⁶ Rosanna describes herself as white-passing in our conversation

⁴⁷ “Tōna Iho: meaning Gauguin’s soul, spirit, heart, thought, ideas, opinions, views. Tōna Ao: meaning all what constitute and shape Gauguin’s world.” National Gallery of Australia, “What is the meaning behind the name of our latest exhibition, Gauguin’s World: Tōna Iho, Tōna Ao?” Facebook Reel, accessed May 26, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/reel/433294729291136>

⁴⁸ Rosanna Raymond, “We Need to Talk about Gauguin with Rosanna Raymond,” talk, produced by National Gallery of Australia, recorded March 23, 2024, posted August 6, 2024, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iK0p-_-9dfE.

⁴⁹ Rosanna Raymond, “A Body of VA’rt,” *Te Kaharoa* 9 (2016): 27.

⁵⁰ A statement that often appeared in the titles of Rosanna’s Dusky Maiden work is “The Dusky Ain’t Dead She’s Just diversified.” See Rosanna Raymond, “A Body of VA’rt,” 28.

covered. Backhand Maiden is thus brought alive to disrupt the exploitation of Moana women's bodies in art history and reclaims the agency of Moana bodies and Indigenous Moana traditions. By embodying the Dusky Maidens, Rosanna was able to subvert these stereotypes by presenting them with "a body that came from a time when we did not carry shame."⁵¹ Thus, her work not only diversifies Moana bodies, but also decolonizes the body and mind of Moana people for whom the shame imposed by these colonial stereotypes still linger.



Figure 3. Rosanna Raymond, "Acti.VĀ.tion – Backhand Maiden," 2017. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Performing the Backhand Maiden is Rossana's way of activating what she later described as the Vā Body. Building on top of Hūfanga and Tēvita's works of the Tā-Vā Theory of reality and of art, especially in terms of how the body contributes to the operation of vā in faivā, Rosanna adds that a concrete body is needed for the abstract vā. In addition to her own embodied practice, Rosanna is also influenced by Moana scholar Albert L. Refit's⁵² understanding of the body as a "gene-archaeological matter" where each individual being is understood in relation to "a line of ancestors/land/communty/family".⁵³ The body has always been a central agent in Moana and other Indigenous traditions, acting as the material manifestation of Indigenous time, space, and place and Rosanna imagines the body as "the physical connective tissue enacting all forms of the vā

⁵¹ Rosanna Raymond, "A Body of VĀrt," 29.

⁵² Albert supervised Rosanna's Master's dissertation, and is also now supervising Rosanna's PhD.

⁵³ Raymond, "Conser.VĀ.tion|Acti.VĀ.Tion," 57.

as being spiritual, social, tapu and noa[~mundane].”⁵⁴ Understanding the body as a gene-archaeological materialization of vā allows the body to bypass personification or identification and become a corporeal vessel that, with its specificity, can serve as unique portals for accessing and activating a genealogical past. Thus, the body in Rossana’s works such as the Backhand Maiden cannot be understood in the mundane sense to be “naked”, but a sacred body layered with histories and ancestors.⁵⁵

Central to Rosanna’s practice is the phrase “teu le vā”, which is a Samoan expression parallel with the Tongan concept of faivā. “Teu le va” means “to cherish/nurse/care for the vā” and was first presented by the Samoan poet and writer Albert Wendt when talking about tatau and the post-colonial body. Albert understands tatau as not only a traditional art, but a way of life that connects the person being tatau with their community, history, and beliefs rooted in the Indigenous Moana worldviews.⁵⁶ Tatau are “scripts/texts/testimonies to do with relationships, order, form”⁵⁷ that serve as reminders of Moana identities and resistance to colonialism. Therefore, tatau is an embodied action of “teu le vā” between the Moana bodies and Moana histories, as seen prominently in Rosanna’s work with her own body.

“Teu le vā” has been developed as a Moana framework for policy making in health, education, and the cultural sector, with the Auckland War Memorial Museum publishing a document titled *Teu Le Vā* in 2016 and creating a designated institutional position for the delivery of the framework⁵⁸. Rosanna describes “teu le vā” as a “critical cultural index”⁵⁹ in her engagement with museums and archives, from which she developed her Acti.Vā.tion practice in museum settings to create “an ongoing living dynamic engendered by artefacts themselves.”⁶⁰ Not only has she acti.Vā.ted Backhand Maiden and other works of hers collected by museums, Rosanna has also teu le vā with traditional Moana taonga~cultural treasures lying in the collection, reigniting their mana and

⁵⁴ Raymond, “Conser.Vā.tion|Acti.Vā.Tion,” 57.

⁵⁵ Raymond, “Conser.Vā.tion|Acti.Vā.Tion,” 57.

⁵⁶ Albert Wendt, “Afterword: Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body,” in *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific*, edited by Vilsoni Hereniko and Rob Wilson (Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 403.

⁵⁷ Wendt, “Afterword,” 403.

⁵⁸ Raymond, “Conser.Vā.tion|Acti.Vā.Tion,” 54.

⁵⁹ Raymond, “Conser.Vā.tion|Acti.Vā.Tion,” 54.

⁶⁰ Raymond, “Conser.Vā.tion|Acti.Vā.Tion,” 28-29.

mauli~life force. Challenging Western museum methodologies with a singular emphasis on material conservation, Rosanna recenters Moana onto-ethico-epistemologies in museum practices by “maintaining the past present future relationships” with taonga and thus putting the vā into conser.VĀ.tion.⁶¹ Through her engagements within the museum backstage, Rosanna was able to develop new protocols for teu le vā with collection items, connecting not only the institution with artists and its community, but also creating new relationships between the staff of the institution.

At its core, Rosanna’s work is teu le vā - acti.VĀ.ting the vā in her body to create and hold relations with histories, artefacts, and people. She further creates relational spaces to amplify contemporary Moana art making and collaboration, thus the initiative of SaVĀge K’lub. With its openness and extensiveness, the collective celebrates diverse arts, cultures, and peoples, collaborating on projects that activate hospitality and sovereignty following practices of the vā. Rosanna describes SaVĀge K’lub as,

21st Century South Sea SaVĀgery, influencing art and culture through the interfacing of time and space, deploying weavers of words, rare anecdotalists, myth makers, hip shakers, navigators, red faces, fabricators, activators, installators to institute the non-cannibalistic cognitive consumption of the other.⁶²

Flipping over the European construction of the Moana peoples as the “other”, SaVĀge K’lub centralizes Moana and Indigenous embodied knowledge and gives agency to contemporary Moana voices. With its playfulness and festivity, SaVĀge K’lub also provokes the non-camps and disrupts the Western traditional hierarchy of art and culture. The collective specifically focuses on engaging with museum spaces, serving as an intervention to institutional methodologies based on imperialist and colonialist logic while also creating relational spaces for and with communities.

When I first started to research the work of SaVĀge K’lub, I got a bit lost on their website⁶³, dazzled and distracted by its bold colors and animated Gothic fonts rendering texts a bit difficult to read. A similar sense of overwhelm happened

⁶¹ Raymond, “Conser.VĀ.tion|Acti.VĀ.Tion,” 80. Also see the title of Rossana’s dissertation.

⁶² Lythberg, “KRONIKling the K’lub.”

⁶³ “SaVĀge KRONIKles,” accessed May 26, 2025, <https://savage-kronikles.webflow.io/>.

when I accessed the 3D capture⁶⁴ of SaVĀge K’lub’s recent exhibition *Te Paepae Aora’i – Where the Gods Cannot be Fooled* at the National Gallery of Australia, curated by Rosanna. Opening the 3D capture, I was immediately welcomed by colors of blue, red, and yellow with vibrant patterns lining the walls and the ground, creating strong contrast with the “white cube” museum space to its side. The walls in the 3D capture are covered by interactive green dots, which, once clicked on, expand to be digital labels of objects displayed. In this corner, historical collections from NGA are juxtaposed with contemporary work from members of SaVĀge K’lub, all lively in dialogue in this welcoming space. There are prints, posters, photos, paintings, sculptures, instruments, ornaments all over the walls, as well as a few installations and a mat on the floor that hosts visitors and workshops.



Figure 4. Exhibition view of *Te Paepae Aora’i – Where the Gods Cannot be Fooled* at National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Photo by ArtsHub.

Paepae in the exhibition title means “threshold” in Samoan and other Moana languages and refers to an area of stone pavement marking the foundation of important buildings. Aora’i is the third highest mountain in Tahiti and one of the most iconic peaks in French Polynesia. Situated at the entry to the parallel exhibition at NGA, the aforementioned *Gauguin’s World: Tōna Iho, Tōna Ao*, the threshold of Aora’i becomes an opening that reframes the entire context of its accompanying exhibition and a portal to generate new art historical milieu in

⁶⁴ “Explore SaVĀge K’lub in 3D,” accessed May 26, 2025, <https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=WpBzvhh8Rto>.

relation to Gauguin. While people have thought of *Te Paepae Aora'i* as a “nice counter-narrative” to Gauguin’s depiction of the Moana people, Rosanna responds by saying, “We are not the counter-narrative. We *are* the narrative.”⁶⁵ Activating Pasifika agency, the paepae is a place where historical Pasifika taonga could be brought alive in conversations with contemporary Pasifika voices. With the many cultural programs and workshops happening with the exhibition, the paepae also provides a place for visitors to connect with their histories and connect with each other; “[a] place to create new memories and construct our past, present and future”⁶⁶; a place to *teu le vā*.

Opposite the rectangular shape of the Paepae are a few mannequins dressed in melanges of colors, materials, and styles. These are works of a few members of the Pacific Sisters, another collective to whose importance Rosanna said “there is no SaVĀge K’lub without the Pacific Sisters”⁶⁷. “Collective” might not be the most fitting word, as the group sprung off from friends doing fashion shoots and catwalks on the streets and in warehouse venues in the urban centres of Aotearoa in the 1990s. Coming together for their “shared love of fashion, activism, and collaboration”⁶⁸, what the Pacific Sisters also share is a connection to the Moana, being Māori, Tongan, Sāmoan, and Cook Island women, soles~young men and fa’afafine~third gender men⁶⁹. Over three decades, the group has been constantly reforming and evolving, encompassing friends and family and making connections beyond distinct organizational boundaries of a collective. This fluidity also reflects in the work of the members,⁷⁰ past and present and in passing, who are not only fashion designers, but also artists, storytellers, performers, musicians, educators, mentors, and so on, strong on their own practices while collaborating across various scenes of culture and art.

Pacific Sisters had their first institutional exhibition *Pacific Sisters: He Toa Taera* -

⁶⁵ “Rosanna Raymond Ans Bec Mac NGA,” interview, posted August 26, 2024, by POPSART BEC MAC, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FOkYK7ZUjRA>.

⁶⁶ National Gallery of Australia, “SAVĀGE K’LUB Te Paepae Aora’i – Where the Gods Cannot be Fooled,” accessed January 29, 2025, <https://nga.gov.au/exhibitions/savage-klub/>.

⁶⁷ Shared to me by Rosanna in our talanoa, taken place online on March 17, 2025.

⁶⁸ Hawai’i Contemporary, “HT22 Artist Pacific Sisters,” accessed May 26, 2025, <https://hawaiicontemporary.org/artist-pacific-sisters>.

⁶⁹ Literally translating to “in the manner of a woman”, fa’afafine is a Samoan term that refers to men who are raised and identify as women.

⁷⁰ The core members besides Rosanna include Suzanne Tamaki, Selina Haami, Niwhai (Nephi) Tupaea, Ani O’Neill, Henry Ah-Foo Taripo - a non-exhaustive list.

Fashion Activists at Te Papa Tongarewa⁷¹, Museum of New Zealand in 2018. Having in recent years hit major stages of the international art world such as the 24th Biennale of Sydney in 2024 and the Hawai'i Triennial in 2022, it is peculiar that the Pacific Sisters' first major exhibition was only a few years ago. The significance of the exhibition is evident as it marked the 20th birthday of the national art institution and the opening of Te Papa's new art gallery Toi Art in 2018 - yet why did institutional attention and recognition come so late, more than twenty years after the initial formation of the group? It seemed unlikely that the activities of the Pacific Sisters didn't reach the ears of the institution before 2018, especially with several Sisters becoming nationally and internationally established artists and designers throughout the years. Why and how did major art institutions, belatedly after all these years, come to recognize and engage with the Pacific Sisters, especially with national recognition?

Outside institutions, the Sisters' strong presence in the creative arts is well-known in the Moana community as a part of a much larger movement in Aotearoa of the 1990s known as Urban Pasifika, which emerged with a subgenre of hip-hop music. Over the years, Pacific Sisters made exhilarating contribution to the development of art, culture and representation of the Māori and Polynesian peoples in Aotearoa, with the former battling for recognition in mainstream society while the latter looking to establish its identity through the diaspora around the turn of the century. In the review of the exhibition, art writer and curator Bruce E. Phillips reminisces his own teenage years with influences from the Pacific Sisters since the 90s as a "pivotal cultural movement that permeated the country's best art, fashion and music."⁷² These cultural movements have gradually become crucial to national self-identification and positioning of New Zealand in the Pacific region and beyond, noticeably with Lisa Reihana, a Pacific Sister, being the first Māori woman representing New Zealand at the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017. Writing on this retrospective of the Pacific Sisters, art writer and curator Ioana Gordon-Smith⁷³ observed that contemporary art institutions in New Zealand have in recent years "jumped on the Pacific as both a marker of

⁷¹ Te Papa Tongarewa is a Māori phrase meaning "container of treasures", and the museum prioritizes the name of Te Papa over the English title throughout its website. See Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, "Our History | Te Papa," accessed May 26, 2025, <https://tepapa.govt.nz/about/what-we-do/our-history#The%20meaning%20of%20Te%20Papa%20Tongarewa>.

⁷² Bruce E. Phillips, "Review," *Artlink*, June 2018, 97.

⁷³ Ioana herself went on to co-curate Yuki Kihara's representation of Aotearoa New Zealand at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2022.

difference and a means to position themselves within a larger geographical frame” as leaders in contemporary art in the Moana⁷⁴.

On a personal note, Rosanna shared that the Sisters were invited by Nina Tonga, the inaugural Curator of Pacific Art at Te Papa who initiated and curated their exhibition. Nina belongs to the younger generation of Bruce E. Phillips who, growing up under the Sisters’ influence, has now worked to expand the Sisters’ work, bringing to center what was at the fringe twenty years ago. Rosanna shared in our conversation that they were really touched by Nina’s invitation, as it is a reminder of a younger Moana generation “watching all [their] crazy aunties getting into trouble”⁷⁵ and being inspired to push for positive changes for Moana arts and communities. Therefore, the exhibition not only pays homage to the artistic creations and collaborations between the Pacific Sisters, but also exemplifies intergenerational *teu le va* in the Moana communities that was nourished through artmaking.

The exhibition surveyed more than 30 major designs of the Sisters⁷⁶, accompanied with photography, films, and archival footage of early performances. In Moana societies, garments are the venues to communicate values and beliefs, and the Sisters, born in urban centers with their Moana heritage, have used body adornment to celebrate their Moana cultures. The Sisters collaborated on mixing vintage clothes, urban materials, and natural elements, showcasing dynamic and daring images of Pasifika energies in the styles of punk, drag, and streetwear. Yet their work expands from fashion to activism because they work against the socio-political context of marginalization and exclusion that persisted against the Moana communities and cultures in Aotearoa over the decades. These pieces then became political statement for the Sisters to “assert the indigenous as an urban experience”⁷⁷ and reclaim their indigenous agency. And they served as a call to action for urban Moana communities to establish their identities as both traditional and contemporary, indigenous and diasporic.

⁷⁴ Ioana Gordon-Smith, “From the Margins to the Mainstream: Pacific Sisters at Te Papa,” *Pantograph Punch*, accessed May 26, 2025, <https://pantograph-punch.com/posts/pacific-sisters>.

⁷⁵ Shared to me by Rosanna in our *talanoa*.

⁷⁶ In addition to the names referenced in footnote 33, Sisters in this exhibition also include Lisa Reihana, Feeonaa Wall, and Jaunnie ‘Ilohahia.

⁷⁷ Rosanna Raymond, “A Body of VA’rt,” 26.

For example, “21st Century Cyber Sister” made by Rosanna, Ani O’Neill, Suzanne Tamaki, and Niwhai Tupaea in 1997 is described as the alter ego of the Sisters’ multimedia practice, and the kaitiaki~guardian of the collective’s mana.⁷⁸ The costume includes 27 components for which Rosanna describes that “each individual piece gains strength from coming together with the others”⁷⁹, a metaphor also for the Sisters’ mode of working within the collective. Using materials including tapa, feathers, nylon, shells, seeds, and plastic, the cyber sister is a new outlook envisioned at the turn of the century that fuses the natural with the synthetic, the traditional with the novel, the indigenous with the urban. The fusion of materials also mirrors the Sisters’ own navigation of diasporic existences, where a waistcoat made of shells and bones meets a hula skirt - a traditional Polynesian dance skirt - made of videotape. The cyber sister is “[d]edicated to the preservation of [Moana’s] tribal culture and [Moana’s] struggle towards self-determination”⁸⁰, and, through this futuristic yet deeply rooted figure, the Sisters have shown the power of Indigenous identity to remix ancestral wisdom with urban landscape and adapt to hybridity within diasporic and digital currents.



Figure 5. Exhibition view of *Pacific Sisters: He Toa Taera - Fashion Activists* at Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand, Wellington. The display to the right is Pacific Sisters, “21st Century Cyber Sister,” 1997.

⁷⁸ Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, “21st SENTRY Cyber Sister,” accessed May 26, 2025, <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/object/301427>.

⁷⁹ “21st SENTRY Cyber Sister.”

⁸⁰ “21st SENTRY Cyber Sister.”

Another more personal piece on identity is Rosanna's "RePATCHtriation". The tapa that made this work was collected by Rosanna herself from kerbside household rubbish in the suburbs of Auckland between 1999 and 2013. While aligning with upcycling as part of the Sisters' vision, Rosanna also wants to "mak[e] something good out of the unwanted bits"⁸¹ - relating to the discarded tapa to her own experience as "a half-caste child"⁸² where the complexity of va in her body was often disregarded. This act of recycling and repatching then becomes restoration and repatriation, healing the uneasy relationship between Rosanna and her ancestry through teu le va with the material of tapa. Traditionally made through beating tree bark into cloth, the fabric of tapa carries generations of Moana knowledge. In "RePATCHtriation", the discarded tapa is remade with denim, plastic, and boar tusks, each with different symbolic significance. Boar tusks signify Polynesian rank, while denim and plastic are modernist products fraught with questions of labor, consumerism, and environmental violence. Tapa then becomes the foundation of these complex overlapping material genealogies, not to resolve the tension inbetween, but to shed light on a more comprehensive understanding of Indigenous Moana identities in contemporary time. Instead of a geographic return as the title of repatriation suggests, the return here is a homecoming to the self as a gene-archaeological being, its fragments of va no longer contested but deliberately recomposed. Here, remixing becomes an act of teu le va: while each material and ornament has its own genealogies, the physical act of stitching and remixing then becomes a spiritual negotiation of va. Along with her relational work of social and artistic organization in Pacific Sisters and SaVĀge K'lub, Rosanna has faiva and weaved new relational realities not only for Moana artists, but for wider Moana communities.

⁸¹ Wall text for Rosanna Raymond, "RePATCHtriation," 1999-2013, exhibition at Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, *Pacific Sisters: He Toa Taera - Fashion Activists*, March 17, 2018 to July 15, 2018.

⁸² Wall text for Rosanna Raymond, "RePATCHtriation."

~ Interlude II ~

Ngāti Awa and Ngāti Porou Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's 1999 book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* is a pivotal work in systematically exposing and critiquing colonial and imperial logic operating in Western research paradigm and knowledge production. She disrupts the hierarchical relationship between non-indigenous researchers and indigenous subjects of research, "between a colonizing institution of knowledge and colonized peoples whose own knowledge was subjugated, between academic theories and academic values, between institutions and communities, and between and within indigenous communities themselves."⁸³ Therefore, Linda also advocates for centering Indigenous ways of knowing through developing Indigenous research agenda that benefit and support Indigenous communities, and anticipates further applications of Indigenous practices and protocols within research methodologies. The decolonization of research, Linda argues, is necessarily situated within the decolonization of Indigenous peoples and the development of Indigenous research agenda within the development of global indigenous alliance and solidarity⁸⁴.

Linda proposes an example Indigenous research agenda that focuses on the self-determination of Indigenous peoples and the representing chart uses the metaphor of the ocean tides from the perspectives of the Moana peoples. The four major tides are survival, recovery, development, and self-determination, and the four directions are decolonization, healing, transformation, and mobilization. The tides are concurrent conditions that indigenous communities move in and out of, and the directions are processes that "connect, inform and clarify the tensions between the local, the regional and the global"⁸⁵ in the movement of the tides. While the tides are goals to achieve, the directions are not ends in themselves, but tools that can be incorporated into practical methods and methodologies to support the achievement of the tides. Using Linda's chart as a reference, I have situated my writing in the directions of decolonization and healing, and within the tides of development and self-determination of Indigenous Moana thoughts.

⁸³ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, X.

⁸⁴ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 112.

⁸⁵ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 120.

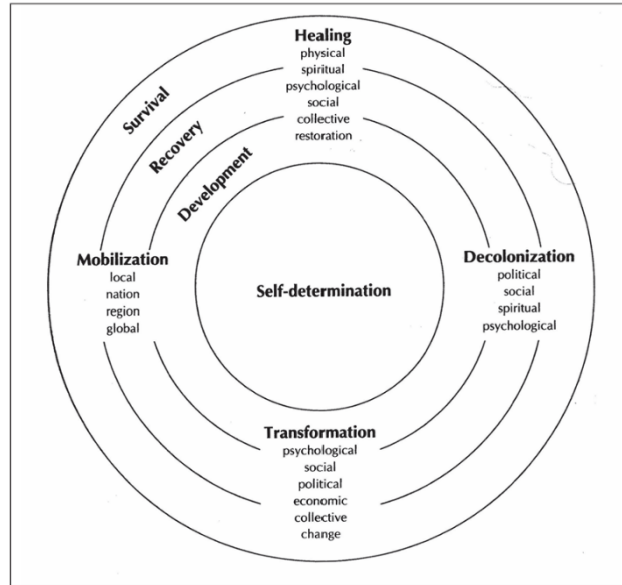


Figure 6. The Indigenous Research Agenda, from Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2012), 120.

Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson followed up on Linda’s work with his 2008 book *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. In his book, Shawn develops from his own personal and academic experiences a research paradigm shared by Indigenous scholars and academic practitioners in Canada and Australia that could benefit many other Indigenous communities around the world. Shawn describes paradigms as “broad principles that provide a framework for research”⁸⁶, which are composed of researchers’ beliefs and assumptions about the reality in terms of ontology - how we view reality - epistemology - how we know this reality - methodology - how we gain more knowledge about this reality - and axiology - the value of our knowledge about this reality. While the dominant Western research paradigm may dissect the elements of this paradigm into isolated entities, Shawn emphasizes that these concepts are interrelated with one another, forming a circle where “the whole of the paradigm is greater than the sum of its parts”.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Fernwood Publishing, 2008), 33.

⁸⁷ Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 70.



Figure 7. The Indigenous Research Paradigm, from Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Fernwood Publishing, 2008), 70.

The indivisibility of ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology reflects a relational model of thinking embedded in Indigenous thoughts and Shawn explains that the key to understanding Indigenous research paradigm is relationality. The shared aspect of ontology and epistemology is “a process of relationships that form a mutual reality” and the shared aspect of methodology and axiology is “maintaining accountability to these relationships”⁸⁸. In other words, based on the understanding of *relationality* as reality instead of forces that shape reality (ontology and epistemology), there comes a *relational accountability* which can be put into practice through every step of research (methodology and axiology).⁸⁹ Thus, an Indigenous research paradigm is based on relationality and relational accountability.

Shawn points to another difference between Western and Indigenous research paradigms in terms of how knowledge is understood, referencing his earlier article on Indigenous research methodology:

An Indigenous paradigm comes from the fundamental belief that knowledge is relational. Knowledge is shared with all creation. It is not just interpersonal relationships, or just with the research subjects I may be working with, but it is a relationship with all of creation. It is with the cosmos; it is with the animals, with the plants, with the earth that we share this knowledge... you are answerable to all your relations when you are doing research.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 70.

⁸⁹ Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 7.

⁹⁰ Shawn Wilson, “What Is an Indigenous Research Methodology?,” *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 25, no. 2 (2001), 177.

Just as the four elements of an Indigenous research paradigm cannot be understood on separate terms, the production of knowledge from an Indigenous perspective is never an individualistic activity for which ownership could be claimed, as is the often case in Western research paradigm. Shawn describes that appropriation of Indigenous culture and knowledge takes place when proper relationships are not established or honored⁹¹, and therefore understanding knowledge as relational asks researchers to frame their research within a context of relationality and to carry out their research with accountability to that relationality.

Shawn embodies relationality in his book through building a relationship “between the readers of this story, [himself] as the storyteller and the ideas [he] present[s]” so that a more holistic understanding of an Indigenous research paradigm can be developed.⁹² His writing alternates between two styles and two fonts, one more academic and another more personal, the latter initially addressing his sons and later expanding to reflections and narratives. The two styles then become merged in the second half of the book. As Shawn calls research by and for Indigenous peoples as a ceremony that “build stronger relationships or bridge the distance between aspects of our cosmos and ourselves”⁹³, his writing has achieved to not only bridge the academic and the personal voices, but also bring readers, ideas, and himself closer in connection through an Indigenous paradigm.

Following the teachings of the Indigenous research paradigm and the *vā*, I envision my research work as relational work, and the key to decolonizing research as relationality. The decolonial practices in my research are therefore relational practices: as elaborated in the last Interlude, my first practice is positioning my own academic, socio-cultural background as a researcher in relation to Moana thought and cultures, and my second practice is creating and curating the presentation of languages that helps readers build their relationships with Moana concepts. My third practice regards writing, its format and style. My style of writing fuses the academic with the non-academic, instating my embodied and personal experiences of research within my writing. While Shawn and other Moana scholars⁹⁴ have written on cyclical writing and

⁹¹ Wilson, “What Is an Indigenous Research Methodology?,” 177.

⁹² Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 6.

⁹³ Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 8.

⁹⁴ Lana Lopesi’s doctoral dissertation was also an inspiration in its oscillating format. See Lopesi,

written cyclically, I have also adopted a cyclical format of writing, oscillating between *Chapters* on contemporary art of Moana, and *Interludes* on the research processes and methodologies. My writing does not have a linear organization of introduction, literature review, methodology, case studies, analysis, and conclusion, but interweaves these sections throughout my writing. The process of writing has also been meandering and in flux.

Shawn especially discusses literature review in the dominant Western research paradigm, which often involves critiquing others' work. Shawn admits that criticizing and judging others' work does not fit within his own cultural framework because it implies that he "know[s] more about someone else's work and the relationships that went into it than they do themselves"⁹⁵, failing the Indigenous axiology of relational accountability. Rather, he does the review in a style that is "not critical, but builds upon the work of others,"⁹⁶ and provides the context for relational accountability. Similarly, I have attempted to write in a less critical and more relational model, applying relational thinking in addition to critical thinking. I do not direct critique on Moana concepts and philosophy considering my relationality with them which is based on learning, and yet I maintain my criticality, as appropriate in my current academic-cultural system, through critical reflections on myself and my research processes throughout my writing. I believe this is a generative and constructive use of critique that maintains relationality and relational accountability indispensable to the Indigenous research paradigm and retains criticality essential to Western research paradigm.

Now that I have discussed positionality, languages, and writing as my relational practices, my fourth practice regards people and it is to actively build relationships with people behind the works and words I study and reference. I emailed all the Moana artists and scholars that play important roles in my writing to have a conversation, or *talanoa*, so that I can build real-life relationships with the names that have informed my writing. As a non-Moana researcher, these *talanoa* are crucial to me learning more about Moana cultures and thoughts. I have also brought myself over to Hawai'i and met some Moana artists and scholars in person, and I will discuss my embodied learning and practice of relationality in the next Chapter and Interlude.

"Moana Cosmopolitan Imaginaries."

⁹⁵ Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 43.

⁹⁶ Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 44.

My first talanoa was with Laki, a Samoan researcher based in Auckland who co-founded the podcast *The Moana*⁹⁷ with his friend Gen. At the time of talking, I was struggling with my position as an “outsider” to the Moana cultures and Laki pointed out that the insider-outsider dichotomy is a Western construct. Holding the matai~chief title of Ili from his village of Nofuoli'i, Samoa, Laki told me that chief titles in Samoa are not only hereditary, but might be given to anyone who has done significant service to the village, including “outsiders”. He also shared the feedback to an episode of *The Moana* with Professor Richard Moyle⁹⁸, an Aotearoan ethnomusicologist who has worked across the Moana islands for over 50 years. Where a few people questioned Professor Moyle’s work for him being White and non-Samoan, the vast majority of the community responded positively, many mentioning their connection with Professor Moyle through his local involvements and expressing gratitude for his work.⁹⁹ While the question of positionality is always important, Samoan and many other Moana communities hold a more fluid and relational understanding of positionality based on specific contexts in the community.

In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda also discusses the complexities of the insider and outsider model of research, explaining that “there are multiple ways of being either an insider or an outsider in indigenous contexts”¹⁰⁰. Both models require the researchers to be ethical, respectful, reflexive, and critical,¹⁰¹ and it is the practice of research, instead of the position, that determines its quality and value. Similarly, what Shawn understands as the source of any research project, insider or outsider, is the “heart/mind of the researcher”: an open mind and a good heart “[guarantee] a good motive, and good motives benefit everyone involved”¹⁰². With these considerations in heart/mind, I also wish to express that I come to the Moana cultures with an open mind and a good heart. I am learning to build and maintain relationality through my research, while also decolonizing research through various relational practices.

⁹⁷ “The Moanan,” accessed May 26, 2025, <https://www.themoanan.com>.

⁹⁸ “EP 04 - Richard Moyle Pt1,” *The Moanan*, podcast, published February 22, 2024, <https://www.buzzsprout.com/2230397/episodes/14552183-ep-04-richard-moyle-pt1>.

⁹⁹ The Moanan (@themoanan), “Did you know about this healing chants from Samoa?”, Instagram post, February 27, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C32B0DuxS9I/?igsh=YTZxbmU50TltYWV5>.

¹⁰⁰ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 138.

¹⁰¹ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 140.

¹⁰² Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 60.

Although I wasn't able to have a talanoa with all whom I reached out to, another relational practice I have adopted is referencing the first names of people that I write on¹⁰³. While this practice partially came to me naturally once I established face-to-face relationships with Laki, Rosanna, and many others through our talanoa, I also intentionally apply this practice to bring subjectivity into the formal space of research, challenging the sense of institutional authority and ownership over knowledge associated with the academic standard of using surnames. As Chickasaw scholar Eber Hampton calls "[e]motionless, passionless, abstract, intellectual research" a lie,¹⁰⁴ the use of first names introduces the personality and emotions behind the research, making knowledge relational. It helps readers see that "[h]umans - feeling, living, breathing, thinking humans - do research,"¹⁰⁵ inviting personal affiliation and relationality. Thus, it is a decolonial practice that follows the Indigenous methodology.

¹⁰³ Or in certain cases, honorary as seemed fit by the cultures.

¹⁰⁴ Hampton 52 qtd. in Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 56.

¹⁰⁵ Hampton 52 qtd. in Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 56.

~ Chapter 3: Repair ~

*E Hō Mai ka 'ike mai luna mai ē
O nā mea huna no'eau O nā mele ē
E hō mai
E hō mai
E hō mai ē*

*Grant us the knowledge from above
Concerning these songs and sacred spaces
Grant
Grant
Grant us these things*

“E Hō Mai”¹⁰⁶

I wasn't expecting to shed so many tears in this part of the research.

My first tears were shed on a December morning when I clicked open “Aloha 'Āina”, an episode in Emergence Magazine’s documentary series “Shifting Landscapes”. It was before I even started writing for this project, when I had only vague ideas of who my first two artists would be. Setting against a mountain landscape, a poetry reading, or spoken word performance, takes place, powerfully traveling through chapters on faith, courage, devotion, anger, and aloha from the perspective of a Kanaka Maoli~Native Hawaiian wahine~woman. Interspersed between each chapter are critical reflections on the existing and historical conditions of Hawaiian society as impinged by settler colonialism, US militarism, and capitalist alienation, the conditions to which the poem responds. The poem is titled “Call to Prayer” and, as its name suggests, recounts the experience of “standing in the malu[~shade and protection] of the sacred”¹⁰⁷ and calls for living through the difficult conditions in pursuit of liberation with protections from the kūpuna~ancestors.

¹⁰⁶ “E Hō Mai”, composed by Edith K. Kanāka’ole (Aunty Edith) for a 24-hour community vigil in January 1993, is a powerful chant requesting wisdom and guidance from deities, seen and unseen.” Excerpt from the chant card of “E Hō Mai” printed by Native Books.

¹⁰⁷ Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio, “Call to Prayer,” *Borders in Globalization Review* 5, no. 1 (Fall & Winter 2023/2024), 48.

And yet I still have *aloha*
But only because I am still here
With all my kūpuna beside me
And when I stand in your malu
You
Tower over me, like a recollection
Like a mountain
With so many stories I will never know
In languages I will never speak
Thousands of miles away from your home
And the ‘āina and alchemy that made you
The hands that formed you
Like an island, consecrated
You are here
Pointed even in the wrong direction
A desecration
And still your kaumaha Is not foreign to me
You feel more family
Than stranger
And in your magnificent shadow
I hear our calls to prayer¹⁰⁸

“Aloha ‘āina”, the title of the documentary, is translated to “love of/for the land” and after the poetry performance the audience is led through the upbringings of the poet, Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio, a Kanaka Maoli wahine who has been a poet and activist sharing her love of/for the land since her teen years. Jamaica has won three-time (US) national poetry champion and performed at the 2009 White House Poetry Jam in front of the then US president Barack Obama, always voicing Hawaiian histories, cultures, and identities through her immensely touching storytelling. As Jamaica said, what aloha ‘āina teaches is that we are connected to each other only because we are both connected to the land, the ‘āina that feeds us. Poetry, then, is Jamaica’s way of practicing her aloha ‘āina, weaving the timeless intimacy between peoples, lands, and stories in her work.

We also see Jamaica participating in a series of protests and demonstrations for Mauna Kea, the most sacred mountain in Hawai‘i, to fight against the thirty-meter telescope project proposed to build on top of the mountain in 2019. While protests have taken place since the earliest attempt of construction in late 2014, it was in 2019 that thousands gathered to block the access road to Mauna Kea with a peaceful protest encampment. The protestors, including kūpuna, lived on

¹⁰⁸ Osorio, “Call to Prayer.”

the site for five months and maintained a pu'uhonua~sanctuary where daily rituals were offered with chants, prayers, and hula dances, workshops were run to teach Hawaiian knowledge, and free food and medicine were provided by volunteers. More than a protest for resistance, the pu'uhonua has become a site for Hawaiian cultural revivance, showing the strength and power of a community unified by their aloha 'āina and aloha for each other. Mauna Kea is where Jamaica, while participating to stand for her love of/for the land, also found her own personal love.

Jamaica, in her academic work, unpacks the complexity of aloha 'āina and recovers it from Western political terms such as nationalism and patriotism that are often associated with the protests at Mauna Kea. Different from the political narratives of nationhood, aloha 'āina describes a reciprocal and geneological land-people relationship, with the power to “transform and feed each other”¹⁰⁹. That specific pilina~relationship is central to understanding Kānaka Maoli cultures because aloha 'āina not only exemplifies the pilina between land and people, but also results in people's pilina with each other, bonding people in intimacy “because of [their] shared intimacy and connection to [their] land”¹¹⁰, that aloha 'āina within each Kanaka. The thirteen smaller telescopes that have already been built on Mauna Kea before, Jamaica argues, are marks of how “colonialism has been successful in Hawai'i to force [their] forgetting of [themselves] and [their] places.”¹¹¹ Therefore, the protests since 2015 and the pu'uhonua in 2019 for Mauna Kea are not only about the protection of the 'āina, but, more importantly, about giving the Kānaka the opportunity to reclaim their pilina with the 'āina and their communal identity as Kānaka.

Recognizing aloha 'āina as a “diverse and vibrant collections of multibodied relationships”¹¹² between Kānaka Maoli, their past and future generations, their land, and the environment also illuminates the spiritual integrity within Kānaka Maoli ethico-onto-epistemology. Working from the position of Indigenous feminism, Jamaica places aloha 'āina within the network of desires, memories, bodies, and relationalities of Kānaka Maoli, queering the normative structure of nation-building based on patriarchy and reviving holistic model of being,

¹⁰⁹ Jamaica Heolimeleikalani Osorio, *Remembering Our Intimacies: Mo'olelo, Aloha 'Aina, and Ea* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 10.

¹¹⁰ Osorio, *Remembering Our Intimacies*, 13.

¹¹¹ Osorio, *Remembering Our Intimacies*, 170.

¹¹² Osorio, *Remembering Our Intimacies*, 13.

thinking, and loving that are based on Indigenous spirituality.

~

My second tears were shed watching an interview of Meleanna Aluli Meyer, or Aunty Mele¹¹³, whose biography I encountered on the website of the 2025 Hawai'i Triennial. Making work on canvas, in films, and through written words, Aunty Mele calls herself “a visual poet - alchemist of light and moving image, translator of ‘ike Hawai’i[~Hawaiian knowledge]”¹¹⁴. Aunty Mele has long been an artist, activist, and educator and in her interview with Reel Wāhine of Hawai’i, a short documentary series on Hawai’i women in the film industry, she talked about how art is her “love letters to the planet, love letters to the culture, and love letters to [her] family”¹¹⁵ which also helped herself find healing. At the edge of giving up art making during a difficult time in her youth, Aunty Mele received a message in her dream, saying “Pumaika'i e Mea hana e Likoliko no'eau walu wai a'u”, which means “Blessing on the doer of the work, sparkling and radiant, of benefit to all.” As a sign that the spirits and the ancestors are supporting her, Aunty Mele kept making her art, healing herself while offering it for community healing over four decades.

Besides teaching, organizing, facilitating, and supervising projects and initiatives for the Hawaiian community, Aunty Mele’s service to the healing of her community in the form of art is countless. Aunty Mele has made films on her own Aunty Irmgard Farden Aluli - one of Hawai’i’s best beloved composers - social movements commemorating Hawaiian history and Hawaiian sacred sites, including a 2020 documentary for the pu'uhonua at the base of Mauna Kea titled “Maunakea: Sacred Mountain, Sacred Conduct”. Through the films she makes, Aunty Mele creates visual records of Hawaiian stories and gives voice to Hawaiian history that can be shared to build transnational solidarity. Besides film, Aunty Mele has made over 18 murals over three decades, creating space for artists, families, youths, and school children to participate in the making of art

¹¹³ In Hawaiian tradition, calling someone Aunty is a gesture of respect and after meeting her in person I have felt compelled to address Meleanna in this way.

¹¹⁴ Hawai’i Contemporary, “HT25 Artist - Meleanna Aluli Meyer,” accessed May 26, 2025, <https://hawaiicontemporary.org/ht25-artist-aluli-meyer>.

¹¹⁵ “Reel Wāhine of Hawai’i - Meleanna Aluli Meyer,” documentary, directed by Erin Lau, produced by Hawai’i Women in Filmmaking, posted November 7, 2022, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=scUChB0sVmU>.

and to connect as a community in creative and spiritual activities. One of the murals is “Āina Aloha”, a double-sided mural on canvas made by six friends and artists¹¹⁶ that was initiated by Aunty Mele’s question “can we paint away pain”¹¹⁷. Āina Aloha, meaning “the land loving us”, became a space to recognize and grieve the historical trauma that has happened on and to the ‘āina of Hawai’i, an offering of hope, and an invitation to healing as the work opens discussions and connections in its tourings around Hawaiian islands and beyond.

The most recent work of Aunty Mele is “‘Umeke Lā’au”, a giant immersive installation located at the Honolulu Hale, the official seat of government of Honolulu, created for the 2025 Hawai’i Triennial. Nearly 2.5 meter tall and over 6.5 meter wide, the installation is a larger-than-life ‘umeke~bowl made of lā’au~wood which is a traditional object in Hawaiian culture highly prized for its craftsmanship. ‘Umeke is used to store food and other precious items, and is associated with holding the divine breath of life in Hawaiian cosmology¹¹⁸. It is often chosen to be “receptacles for keepsakes and for protocols of ‘ike Hawai’i”¹¹⁹ and respected with rituals and prayers. Now enlarged and blessed with opening rituals, Aunty Mele’s ‘Umeke can welcome people in and become “an architecture for spiritual gatherings”¹²⁰. Its presence is especially substantial considering its location within the house of the City Council, the civic center that directly serves the daily life of Honolulu residents.

¹¹⁶ The artists are Al Lagunero, Meleanna Meyer, Harinani Orme, Kahi Ching, Carl F. K. Pao, Solomon Enos. See Lili’uokalani Trust, “ĀINA ALOHA,” accessed May 26, 2025, <https://onipaa.org/aina-aloha>.

¹¹⁷ Meleanna Aluli Meyer, “EWPC 2024: Remarks on Āina Aloha (2016) by Artist Meleanna Meyer,” talk, produced by UH Manoa - Department of Philosophy, posted September 15, 2024, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FV15oE8Z-U8>.

¹¹⁸ “The Hawaiian Tradition of the Circle by Kalani - Ways of Council,” *Ways of Council*, February 7, 2017, <https://waysofcouncil.net/the-hawaiian-tradition-of-the-circle/>.

¹¹⁹ Meleanna Aluli Meyer, “UMEKE LĀ’AU Cultural Medicine,” Handout.

¹²⁰ Hawai’i Contemporary, *Hawai’i Triennial 2025 ALOHA NŌ*, guidebook (2025), 15.



Figure 8. Meleanna Aluli Meyer, “‘Umeke Lā‘au,” 2025. Exhibition view of the Hawai‘i Triennial 2025 at the Honolulu Hale, Honolulu. Photo by Lila Lee.

Entering the Honolulu Hale, me and my companions immediately saw the ‘Umeke at the center of the lobby, self-evident with its size. No staff is seen invigilating it, and we were naturally drawn to the enormous installation. The ‘Umeke sits on patches of lauhala mats, which are traditional mats hand-woven with dried leaves of the hala tree, native to the Hawaiian islands; therefore, these mats are literally grounding the ‘Umeke in Kānaka Maoli’s living traditions. Walking around the ‘Umeke to the other side, I encountered a board explaining the theme of the Triennial “ALOHA NŌ” that frames this work. Right opposite the billboard is a table full of plants and lei~garlands for ceremonial purposes, a sign with protocols for accessing the ‘Umeke, and an opening into the ‘Umeke. We took off our shoes and crossed the lei-laid entrance with a prayer, stepping onto the inside of the ‘Umeke. Being immersed in the ‘Umeke was a ceremonial experience and, sitting in the belly of the ‘Umeke, I felt compelled to offer a guided meditation to connect with the energy present and pay my respect.

Accompanying the physical installation of the ‘Umeke is an audio piece that sounds the name of more than 38,000 Kanaka Maoli who signed the Kū‘ē Petitions¹²¹ in 1897 against the annexation of Hawai‘i by the United States. Leading up to 1897, the Kingdom of Hawai‘i was overthrown in 1893 through a coup d'état by a group of non-Kanaka Maoli businessmen and politicians - primarily US American or of US American descent - who had interest in sugar

¹²¹ Kū‘ē means opposition.

business. The Republic of Hawai'i was imposed in 1894 until Hawai'i was annexed by the United States in 1898. Although the attempts to restore political power to Queen Lili'uokalani through rebellions were unsuccessful and she was forced to abdicate her throne in 1895 for the release of her jailed supporters, many political groups were formed by Kanaka Maoli to keep fighting for their rights.

The Kū'ē Petitions, one petition against annexation and another for the restoration of Hawaiian monarchy, were organized by Hui Aloha 'Āina and Hui Kālai'āina in coalition with the Queen, and mass petitions were held across Hawai'i, collecting over 38,000 signatures in total¹²². Over 95% of the indigenous population signed the petitions and the petitions were successful in defeating the treaty of annexation at the US Congress of December 1897. However, two months later, the Spanish-American war over Cuba and the Philippines quickly made the US government reconsider the strategic value of the Hawaiian islands, and the US Congress illegally proceeded with the annexation of Hawai'i in 1898.

On the 100th anniversary of the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom, then US President Clinton signed a legislation called "Apology Resolution" acknowledging that the overthrow was illegal and apologizing for the involvement of the US government and personnels.¹²³ While the legislation granted justice in words, it did not have any legal effect regarding the rights of Kanaka Maoli or the land of Hawai'i. Though symbolic in effect, the apology did legitimize the grievance and anger of Kanaka Maoli over the injustice done to their land and energize growing activism for sovereignty. Not long after, the Kū'ē Petitions, obscured over the century, re-entered public consciousness in 1998, when the then PhD candidate Noenoe K. Silva¹²⁴ rediscovered the pages of the petitions at the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

Aunty Mele said she found her grandfather's name on it, signed when he was only

¹²² Kapena Shim, "Hawai'i - Kū'ē Petitions Anti-Annexation," *University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Library*, accessed May 26, 2025,

<https://guides.library.manoa.hawaii.edu/c.php?g=1165243&p=8661656>.

¹²³ National Library of Medicine, "1993: President Clinton Apologizes for 1893 Overthrow of Hawaiian Monarchy," accessed May 26, 2025,

<https://www.nlm.nih.gov/nativevoices/timeline/578.html>.

¹²⁴ Noenoe K. Silva later published her 2004 book *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonialism* based on the Kū'ē Petitions. She is now a professor of political science at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

17 years old, and many Kānaka Maoli have reconnected with parts of their own geneologies that were forgotten. By sounding these names and holding their spirits, the 'Umeke Lā'au creates a space of remembrance, channeling the past and making histories present. Physically being inside the 'Umeke Lā'au presents another opportunity to engage with these histories and to have conversations around these histories that are deeply personal and emotional. Situated in the Honolulu Hale, 'Umeke Lā'au helps the community, in coming together, "[regain] and [reimagine] what has been stolen, forbidden, and forgotten"¹²⁵ and thus holds potential for collective healing and cultural revival - it becomes cultural medicine.

The 'Umeke Lā'au has many pewa on the exterior, which are patches of fishtail or butterfly shape used commonly in traditional Hawaiian woodmaking for reparation and mending. Instead of a sign of damage, pewa was ascribed with values, because it shows that the owners took care and effort to preserve a 'umeke. More than tools of repair, pewa are considered "marks of beauty and worth"¹²⁶ and symbols of resilience and connection. Through the use of pewa, the 'Umeke Lā'au honors the effort of restoring and healing the Kanaka Maoli communities through education and connections.

Talking about the activation of pewa in the Umeke Lā'au, Aunty Mele says, "the privilege to help understand pewa is actually to work with people who you love and trust, who can help you in the process of healing yourself."¹²⁷ Just like Aunty Mele's many past projects, the making of the "'Umeke Lā'au" is collaborative, community-based, and intergenerational, involving not only fellow artists and community members but also seventeen carpentry students at the Hawai'i Community College and art students from Hawai'i at Mānoa. "It's all about pilina," Aunty Mele says in an interview,¹²⁸ since the 'Umeke, made possible entirely because of relationships, is a physical manifestation of spiritual pilina. Yet the pilina doesn't stop at the making of the 'Umeke - after the work is open to the

¹²⁵ Meleanna Aluli Meyer, "'UMEKE LĀ'AU Cultural Medicine," Handout.

¹²⁶ Sharon Doughtie, "'UMEKE LĀ'AU A Rich Hawaiian Tradition," *American Woodturner* (October 2017), 51.

¹²⁷ "Pewa: Healing and Truth Seeking | Art Summit 2024," roundtable discussion, produced by Hawaii Contemporary, posted September 20, 2024, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a8jpwvLq_4.

¹²⁸ Katie Helland, "Inside the 'umeke with Artist Meleanna Aluli Meyer," *Aloha State Daily*, published March 1, 2025, <https://alohastatedaily.com/2025/02/28/inside-the-umeke-with-artist-meleanna-aluli-meyer/>.

public, Aunty Mele has personally led over two dozen tours for visitors from school children to artists abroad, bringing communities closer to their histories and each other. The focus of the tours is ho’oponopono, which, literally meaning “making right”, is an ancient Hawaiian practice of reconciliation where responsibility is acknowledged, apologies made, forgiveness given, gratitude expressed, and aloha shared.¹²⁹ Ho’oponopono is a healing process of pilina, a pewa not only between individuals, but also between people and their land, histories, and spirits. In the face of Hawaiian’s history of dispossession, the practice of pilina such as ho’oponopono therefore becomes central to the cultural revivance and self-determination of Kānaka Maoli as a community, a people, and a nation.



Figure 9. Aunty Mele with the students she worked with inside the ‘Umeke.

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My third tears were shed watching the keynote of the 2024 Hawai’i Contemporary Art Summit by Manulani Aluli Meyer, or Aunty Manu. The Summit was a thematic precursor to the 2025 Hawai’i Triennial, delving into its theme and title *ALOHA NŌ* with participating artists, curators, and scholars. Used ubiquitously as a greeting in modern-day Hawai’i, aloha carries complex meanings of love, care, and compassion that have been central to Hawaiian culture for centuries. The curators of HT25 frame aloha as a vital practice in our contemporary world that strengthens connectivity between people and land,

¹²⁹ See Meyer, “Spirituality Centered around Aloha/ Pono,” 5.

ocean, natural elements, and each other, reclaiming its socio-cultural significance from capitalist commodification. At the same time, with the coalescence of “no” in English meaning negation and “nō” in Hawaiian as an intensification, aloha also manifests self-determination and becomes an act of resistance “against colonial occupation and capitalist violence”, resonating with other sovereign lands fighting similar fights.¹³⁰

It is from Aunty Manu’s work that the title and theme of the 2025 Hawai’i Triennial *ALOHA NŌ* was drawn. Aunty Manu is “the fifth daughter of Emma Aluli and Harry Meyer who grew up on the sands of Mokapu and Kailua beach on the island of O’ahu”¹³¹ and was raised in the Aluli ‘ohana~family composed of scholar-activists working in diverse fields of Hawai’i including education, justice, land, health, economics, arts and culture (if you have paid attention, yes, Aunty Manu and Aunty Mele are sisters). Aunty Manu is currently a professor at University of Hawai’i at Hilo working in indigenous epistemology and “its role in world-wide awakening”¹³² where aloha plays the key role. In her keynote, Aunty Manu introduced her own journey of aloha following learnings from Western philosophy, quantum physics, Buddhist philosophy, her kūpuna, and, most importantly, her own lived experiences. Aunty Manu invited her twin sister Moana on to the stage, because it was with Moana that she grew up and struggled to “learn to love what is different”. She called Moana her first teacher in a Buddhist sense, because “all calamities become your teacher”.

All these were shared with laughter, tears, and sometimes quivering voices. It is not only a discussion of aloha, but a practical activation of it. Aloha, Aunty Manu describes, is the essence of Hawaiian culture and the basis of shared intelligence. As seen in the case of aloha ‘āina, aloha implies deep connections to the environment and other people, and a long-term commitment to maintain and nurture those connections, fueling collective solidarity and resilience. In addition, aloha is an inherently spiritual force guiding Kānaka’s way of seeing and living the world and their emergence as a collective. Aunty Manu describes aloha as “the embodiment of Spirit and thus the practice of an awakened mind”¹³³,

¹³⁰ Hawai’i Contemporary, *ALOHA NŌ Art Summit Reader*, reader (2024), accessed May 26, 2025, <https://hawaiicontemporary.org/art-summit-2024>.

¹³¹ “Manulani Meyer,” *UHWO Faculty Profiles*, accessed May 26, 2025, <https://westoahu.hawaii.edu/facultyprofiles/user/manulani/>.

¹³² “Manulani Meyer.”

¹³³ Meyer, “Spirituality Centered around Aloha/ Pono,” 6.

situating aloha at the centre of spirituality, as the “source of all values”¹³⁴ and “the genesis of how [Kānaka Maoli] will evolve”¹³⁵. Pilina is an aspect and a vessel of aloha, and so is healing necessarily embedded in aloha. Aloha also extends to Pasifika/Moana spirituality as seen in the shared nexus of aloha ‘āina and ‘ohana¹³⁶: love of/for the land and service to people.¹³⁷ According to Manu’s kupuna Aunty Pilahi Pahi, “[a]loha is the essence of relationships in which each person is important to every other person for collective existence.”¹³⁸ Thus, in recognizing and honoring the interconnectedness and relationality of all things, aloha also echoes the Indigenous Samoan and Tongan tradition of the vā and teu le vā discussed in previous Chapters.

In a Western philosophical paradigm, Aunty Manu translates Indigenous epistemology with the mechanism of a hologram, where a three-dimensional image is created with three laser beams and each part contains the whole like a fractal. With this metaphor, Aunty Manu (re)introduces spirituality as the “animating third beam”¹³⁹ to the philosophy of knowledge and (re)instates the trilogy of mind, body, and spirit for knowing the reality, which has long been common sense in Indigenous epistemology. An example is the Hawaiian word na’auao~wisdom, which, literally meaning “enlightened stomach”¹⁴⁰, places knowledge at the center of the body where the spiritual and the earthy are believed to meet in Hawaiian tradition¹⁴¹. Besides embodied and spiritual knowledge, what has also been common sense to Indigenous epistemology is relational thinking that understands the interconnected of all beings, which quantum mechanics has confirmed with “establish[ing] the primacy of the inseparable whole”¹⁴² from the perspective of modern science. In naming a “spiritual/quantum reality (aka: *culture*)”¹⁴³, Aunty Manu points to the limitation

¹³⁴ Pūlama Collier of Maui moku qtd. in Meyer, “Spirituality Centered around Aloha/ Pono,” 1

¹³⁵ Meyer, “Spirituality Centered around Aloha/ Pono,” 7.

¹³⁶ ‘Ohana literally means family, yet not in the sense of nuclear family or blood relatives, but includes anyone who is part of a loving support system.

¹³⁷ Meyer, “Spirituality Centered around Aloha/ Pono,” 2.

¹³⁸ Meyer, “Spirituality Centered around Aloha/ Pono,” 3.

¹³⁹ Manulani Aluli Meyer, “Holographic Epistemology: Native Common Sense,” *China Media Research* 9, no. 2 (2013), 97.

¹⁴⁰ Na’au means intestines and ao means light, see Manulani Aluli Meyer, “Our Own Liberation: Reflections on Hawaiian Epistemology,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 13, no. 1 (2001), 144.

¹⁴¹ Meyer, “Our Own Liberation,” 145.

¹⁴² Marco Bischof qtd. in Meyer, “Holographic Epistemology,” 94.

¹⁴³ Meyer, “Holographic Epistemology,” 96.

of Western epistemology in comprehending Indigenous ethico-onto-epistemology which can only be overcome when empiricism is understood as culturally shaped, and spirituality recognized as a valid source of knowledge in academia.

The trinity in Aunty Manu's holographic epistemology also reflects the structure of this Chapter in triangulating the work of Aunty Manu, Aunty Mele, and Jamaica, through which I have presented to you a series of concepts around spirituality in the Hawaiian context. Aloha, aloha 'āina, pilina, pewa, ho'oponopono, 'ohana, na'auao - these are constellations of words that relate to one another, complement each other, and of which the complete meaning can only be seen with Aunty Manu's third beam of light: spirituality. My tears for the work of these wāhine are moments of na'auao and embodied responses to the spiritual light of Hawaiian and Moana epistemologies which I have tried to unpack through my research. Jamaica, Aunty Mele, and Aunty Manu's work interrelate to show us the spiritual depth of Hawaiian knowledge in the form of art, and that aloha as the center of Hawaiian spirituality will exemplify, according to Aunty Manu, "how the Pacific world will save the planet."¹⁴⁴ They also respond to faivā and teu le vā in previous Chapters, with all of their practices utilising art as a relational tool for socio-political engagement that cares for histories and communities. These concepts across the Moana also complement each other: teu le vā is an act out of aloha, and the practice of aloha manifests in faivā and teu le vā. With insights from Hawaiian spirituality, vā can also be understood beyond an intellectual concept, but a spiritual force that organizes Moana reality.

¹⁴⁴ Meyer, "Spirituality Centered around Aloha/ Pono," 4.

~ Interlude III ~

Late March and early April, I undertook a week-long trip to Hawai'i, visiting the 2025 Hawai'i Triennial in Honolulu. Two months before the trip, a conversation with Elisa Adami and Wing Chan at Afterall led my research to Hawai'i; we then shared thoughts around Hawaiian concepts and works of Kānaka Maoli that have touched us. While Elisa and Wing were planning to do a series of writing workshops and a book launch as a part of the HT25 program, traveling to Hawai'i was outside of my agenda. Not only because the travel hours and expenses are demanding, but also because my original plan was to travel with my mom during my visit in China over the Easter break. However, as my travel would not go as planned, I asked to join Elisa and Wing's work trip to Honolulu and they gladly accepted me into the 'ohana¹⁴⁵. Therefore, I was able to bring my mindbodysoul over to this island(s) that I am writing about and build a more holistic and embodied relation with it.

My trip was made possible by pilina: I was there thanks to Elisa and Wing's pilina with Binna Choi - one of the three curators of HT25 - and with Janine Armin - whose book on the work of Sung Hwan Kim¹⁴⁶, a participating artist in HT25, was published with Afterall and would be launching at HT25. Janine, Elisa, Wing, and I shared accommodation for four nights in a 23rd-floor flat in the business district of Honolulu, right around the corner of Chinatown and a few minutes walk from the Davies Pacific Center, where HT25 has claimed as its HUB. I connected with Aunty Mele on two occasions, once through my own reach and another through a tour of the 'Umeke Lā'au organized by Hawai'i Contemporary, the organizational team of HT25. I also met Maile in passing, who is Aunty Manu and Aunty Mele's sister and the owner of Native Books at Arts & Letters, a bookshop, cultural center, and sanctuary of Kānaka Maoli thoughts where we frequented almost daily during our time there. At an opening at Native Books, I also happened to meet Jamaica and Malia with their kids there.

While on the second day of our trip we are already running into the same people from the day before, it is the practice of pilina that makes such encounters meaningful. We have built pilina with the neighborhood, knowing our ways around and the best local coffee and poke spots. We have also built pilina with

¹⁴⁵ We had a WhatsApp group chat named "hawai'i aloha 'āina" and a shared album called "aloha 'aina 'ohana."

¹⁴⁶ Janine Armin, *Sung Hwan Kim: A Record of Drifting Across the Sea* (Afterall 2025).

the curatorial team of HT25 and the team of Hawai'i Contemporary, being taken on curatorial tours and blessed by food recommendations¹⁴⁷. The HC team also helped connect Afterall with a group of artists and curator from Ireland as a part of the HT25 initiative Kīpuka Ireland. At the dinner party organized by the HC team, one curator told me that she is a close friend of Aunty Manu's twin, Moana, and a woman involved in Kīpuka's program came up to me, turning out to be Rosanna's partner. "I sent [Rosanna] a photo when you talked", Rosanna's partner said, "and she replied 'I know this girl! We just met last week!'"

These recounts are more than behind-the-scenes anecdotes; I am telling my stories about pilina. Storytelling is not only an important tradition in Indigenous communities around the world for its pedagogical, memorial, and ceremonial function, but also an activity shared by all cultures. Storytelling has transformative effects¹⁴⁸ for each listener to make sense, relate, and learn without abstractions, thus allowing "holistic use and transmission of information"¹⁴⁹ required by an Indigenous research paradigm. In Hawaiian language, mo'olelo is the word for stories; yet mo'olelo also includes prophecies, chants, and genealogies etc. that were not only written or spoken, but also sung and felt.¹⁵⁰ Jamaica points to mo'olelo as inherently counter-hegemonic, as it troubles historiography and hierarchy of knowledge, "reveal[ing] the need for dismantling the borders between the academic and the creative."¹⁵¹ While Jamaica's work shows that studying mo'olelo requires a "rigorous creativity"¹⁵² to uncover 'ike Hawai'i, my practice of writing stories is an act of creative rigor necessitated by the Indigenous research paradigm. I have chosen to tell stories about pilina because it is a concept deeply rooted in everyday practices of Kānaka Maoli and it is only through the Hawaiian way of mo'olelo that the complexity of pilina can be best expressed. Telling stories is also my practice of pilina with Hawai'i, and with my research.

With "an open mind and a good heart", I also practiced being open and truthful to my pilina as much as I could during the seven days in Hawai'i. I learned to build

¹⁴⁷ The food recommendation can be found in HT25's guidebook.

¹⁴⁸ Judy Iseke, "Indigenous Storytelling as Research," *International Review of Qualitative Research* 6, no. 4 (2013), 573.

¹⁴⁹ Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*, 32.

¹⁵⁰ Osorio, *Remembering Our Intimacies*, 14.

¹⁵¹ Osorio, *Remembering Our Intimacies*, 14.

¹⁵² Osorio, *Remembering Our Intimacies*, 14.

pilina holds radical potential to connect people across cultural and biogenetic differences, adding a renewed layer to what Donna Haraway calls “making kin” in a posthuman world.

In fact, building pilina has increasingly become difficult because of all the conflicts and crises that we have experienced and are experiencing. Histories and present legacies of colonialism and extractivism, though promoting critical reflection within “First World” countries, also leads to cultural provincialism as a defensive retreat out of the fear of criticism. Discussions between communities on issues like cultural appropriation frequently escalate into antagonistic condemnation, as systemic inequalities rooted in colonial violence still shape these exchanges with deep acrimony. Meanwhile, institutional apologies, often issued too hastily or too belatedly, risk becoming performative gestures that obscure deeper structural harms. This is especially true for Indigenous communities, whose ongoing resistance and reclamation of sovereignty expose the need for transformative relationships between institutions and people beyond the mere narrative of victimhood.

While we must keep confronting systematic inequalities of the past and present, transformation demands us to move beyond the fixed categories of victims or perpetrators. Positionality, after all, should serve as a starting point of understanding, not the end goal which risks fossilizing and totalizing our identities. The intersectionality of identities provides us tools to critique the operation of hegemonic systems, and still, it invites us to understand our positionality more holistically and, in light of that positionality, build more open and plural relationships with others. Understanding identities as relational entities - as pilina - allows us to move beyond the essentialist and proprietary conception of identity and culture, and the binary opposition between self and others, or right and wrong, helping us repair and rebuild the relationships that were broken by imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism. By building that pilina, we are putting the pewa in the ‘umeke, enabling cracks to be mended and fullness of the bowl restored; by doing ho’oponopono, we can reconcile, heal, and move forward with genuity and love - our only way forward to make communities, and make kin.

This is what my research has shown me. Initially, I was uneasy about the lack of cultural or genealogical relation between me and the Moana; through my

University Press, 2019), 243.

research process, I understood that relationality is built, not found, and it is the practice of relation that matters. Through building relationships with others, I have also built stronger relationships with myself. Some unnamed callings led me to step out of my comfort zone where my positionality is unknown and, in this voyage into the “others”, I traveled all the way around back to myself, becoming a drop of water in the vast ocean of Moana. My tears have shown me that my calling to Moana arts is indeed a calling to spirituality at the core of Moana cultures, a calling to aloha, a calling to love.

I have always been drawn to love from the beginning of my academic life. I encountered queer theory in my first year of college and was absorbed by it¹⁵⁵; one of my first papers was on polyamory as an anti-capitalist model of love. I wrote on love in relation to touch through haptic visuality in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) and Merleau-Ponty’s embodied subjectivity. I did close readings of Plato’s *Symposium* and hung on to quotes from bell hooks’ *All About Love*. I have studied love and desire from a variety of critical and philosophical angles, and this journey of research has shown me love as the spiritual core of Indigenous Moana epistemology, which fundamentally shifted my understanding of academic work I do as a researcher. In my practice of relationality, I saw the limit of criticality that is essential to Western research paradigm and have thus perceived critique as no longer a tool to deconstruct but one to construct and care. In the process of this research, I became spiritualist - unattached to any tradition or religion, I have developed my own spiritual path through learning about Moana arts, cultures, and epistemologies, and practicing Indigenous research methodologies.

Aloha is an inherently spiritual concept; so is pilina. Aloha shows us the way to connect between humans, and between humans and their lands. Pilina as a practice of aloha teaches us that community, beside identity-based and blood-based, can be built through love - love of/for the land, and love of/for each other. This spirituality has great potential for us to repair, rebuild, and regenerate our intimacy not only with nature, but also with each other. In essence, nurturing these relationships is nurturing our own relationships to ourselves, mindbodysoul: it shows us the spiritual dimension of reality, knowledge, and ourselves that connects us all. When Aunty Manu said that “there is nothing

¹⁵⁵ Writers and scholars that inspired me most at that moment of my life were Jack Halberstam, Sara Ahmed, Dean Spade, Lauren Berlant, José Muñoz, Judith Butler.

outside of the self,”¹⁵⁶ it is because, spiritually speaking, we *are* nature, we *are* aloha, and we *are one*.

Before leaving Honolulu, Elisa, Wing, and I received a gift from Janine. Left on the dining table of our accomodation, it is a pocket dictionary of Hawaiian language that we had said to get many times during the week. Janine wrote on the back of the cover page a few words for each of us, and for me she wrote, “Mahalo... Freya, for embodying aloha, above and below.” That was when I knew that my journey of research had fulfilled its calling.

¹⁵⁶ Shared to me by Aunty Manu in our talanoa, taken place online on March 12, 2025.

~ To Close ~

Congratulations, wayfinder, for completing this journey of research.

I sing praises for your time, your energy, and your courage.

Before you depart, take a deep breath in ~

to receive the wind's wisdom,

and a deep breath out ~

to weave your mind, body, soul.

Remember, the end of one journey is always

the beginning of another.

Remember, you are never lost.

May you navigate by the stars' ancient light,

and journey to find your heart's desire.

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