

MATALA:
POEMS

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ABSTRACT

The creative work in this dissertation is suppressed in the UH institutional repository, Kahualike, kahualike.manoa.hawaii.edu. Inquiries about the creative work should be made to Leora Kava.

Matala, a full-length collection of poetry, explores Tongan language and epistemology through poetic examinations of personal experiences piecing together a mixed-race, Tongan identity across and between California, Hawai‘i, and Tonga. The collection’s central image comes from a version of the kava origin chant, an ancestral story that figures the body of a Tongan daughter who was sacrificed in order to feed the Tu‘i Tonga (king of Tonga) (Velt). This origin story also narrates how the first kava and sugarcane grew from her burial mound. Across four sections—*kava*, *tohi*, *anga*, and *matala*—the collection arrives and departs from these central images in the kava story in order to document elements of Tongan poetics, Indigenous theory, decolonial politics, Pacific Studies, and Pacific literary studies within everyday diasporic experiences. The collection is grounded in found poetry techniques that incorporate language and archival knowledge from the Tongan-English dictionary (Churchward 2015), from family and community stories, and family letters. This piecing together of texts mirrors, and is intimately part of, the process of binding together understandings of Tongan culture in diaspora. Ultimately, through this series of binding meaning, *Matala* places the personal within realms of decolonial Pacific politics, liberatory imaginations for healing the past, planting seeds in the present, and growing Indigenous futures.

MATALA: POEMS
TALATEU—CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

- ∴ ***tala***, v.i., to tell, relate; to state, assert; to tell, command; to announce, or inform people of, as in *tala putu*, to tell people of a death and funeral arrangements; to tell on, give information about; to say. Sometimes used in the sense of to promise. N., telling, etc., or information; also, tradition(s), as in *tauhi e tala*, keep up the tradition(s). Compare to *fakamatala*, *fekau*, *fakahā*, *fetautalaaki*, *talaaki* ‘i, *tala* ‘ofa, *talatupu* ‘a, etc., *talā*.
- ∴ ***fakamatala***, v.t. (-‘i) or i. (*ki*), to explain; to describe; to report on. N., explanation, description, or report.
- ∴ ***matala***, v.i. to come off, come away or become separated: e.g., of what was stuck to something else, the wrapping of a parcel, or the oil contained in coconut cream.
- ∴ ***matala***, v.i., to flower, to come out in full bloom; (of a bud, *moto*) to open. N., flower (usually *matala* ‘i *akau*, or *matala* ‘i *heilala*, etc.). Cp. *fisi*, *hafu*, *lūpū*, *maheikau*, *malo*, *moa*, *puopua*, *tu* ‘umalo.
- ∴ ***kakala***, n., sweet-smelling flowers, or trees or plants bearing sweet-smelling flowers, of any kind; (poetical) girl, maiden. Compare to *namu-kakala*, *hiva kakala*, *ngangatu*, *fakakakala*, *manongi*.
- ∴ ***fakakakala***, v.t., to provide with sweet-smelling flowers, or to scent (oil) with such flowers.
- ∴ ***teu***, v.i., to prepare, get ready; to be ready or prepared; to be about to,—e.g., *teu ke* ‘alu, or *teu* ‘alu, about to go
- ∴ ***talateu***, n., preface, introduction, preamble, prelude—to a book, a law, a war, etc. *Ko e talateu ki he tohi*, or *ki he laó*, or *ki he taú*, etc. Cp. *tala-mu* ‘aki.

talateu: a preparation of flowers

Matala, a full-length collection of poetry, explores Tongan language and epistemology through poetic examinations of personal experiences piecing together a mixed-race, Tongan

identity across and between California, Hawai‘i, and Tonga. The collection’s central image comes from a version of the kava origin chant, an ancestral story that figures the body of a Tongan daughter who was sacrificed in order to feed the Tu‘i Tonga (king of Tonga) (Velt). This origin story also narrates how the first kava and sugarcane grew from her burial mound. Across four sections—*kava*, *tohi*, *anga*, and *matala*—the collection arrives and departs from these central images in the kava story in order to document elements of Tongan poetics, Indigenous theory, decolonial politics, Pacific Studies, and Pacific literary studies within everyday diasporic experiences. The collection is grounded in found poetry techniques that incorporate language and archival knowledge from the Tongan-English dictionary (Churchward 2015), from family and community stories, and family letters. This piecing together of texts mirrors, and is intimately part of, the process of binding together understandings of Tongan culture in diaspora. Ultimately, through this series of binding meaning, *Matala* places the personal within realms of decolonial Pacific politics, liberatory imaginations for healing the past, planting seeds in the present, and growing Indigenous futures.

In order to link layers of Tongan epistemology with experiences of being raised and educated in diaspora, *Matala* is anchored by my own poetic treatments of specific Tongan words—words that my family and communities have told stories about in ways revealing space-time definitions, etymology, and epistemology. The guiding inspiration for this kind of work in *Matala* comes from a particular experience I had in learning the word “fakamatala,” which means “to explain,” or to make something understood to someone else. The root of this word, “matala,” has multiple meanings: 1) to come away separately; 2) to flower, come to bloom; and 3) to be clear or fresh. *Matala* is nearly synonymous with our word, “mahino”—to be

clear in the mind, to understand. That our words for understanding are deeply connected to our words for the blooming of flowers reveals a relationship between the roots of our words and the life of growing things. For me, this reveals how our language intimately connects us with the worlds of our environment, and vice versa. As a mixed-race Tongan woman raised outside of Tonga and the Pacific for most of my life, it has been a profound and challenging experience to approach Tongan language as a poet, and be taught a history of poetics and an Indigenous “syntax of being” (Lyons, 2006) by the imagery and story within, and growing from, my language.

kakala: talateu design & overview

This talateu (introduction) is organized as a kakala, or Tongan lei, and draws from Konai Helu Thaman’s work on kakala as methodology and research framework. Thaman explains the symbol of kakala as follows:

Sourced from my own (Tongan) culture, *kakala* refers to fragrant flowers woven together to make a garland, and has many equivalent concepts in Oceania such as *lei* (Hawaii), *hei* (Cook Islands) or *salusalu* (Fiji). There exist, in Tonga and elsewhere, etiquette and mythology associated with *kakala* making. *Kakala* embodies physical, social and spiritual elements and reflects the integrated nature of Indigenous epistemologies and knowledge systems....*Kakala* provides me with a philosophy as well as a methodology of teaching and research that is rooted in my culture but has equivalents in others. *Kakala* requires me to utilise knowledge from global as well as Pacific (indigenous) cultures in order to weave something

that is meaningful and culturally appropriate for my students. (Thaman 2010, 360-361)

I draw upon this model in order to center kakala as a structure of presenting knowledge—an art of explanation—wherein Tongan epistemologies, aesthetics, and protocols entwine with and shape explorations of diasporic experiences and meaning-making. I also draw on the kakala framework because of its insistence on connections to genealogy and ancestral stories in conscious negotiation of creative and critical expression. In her work, Thaman describes specific steps within this methodology of gathering knowledge for a particular purpose, which are defined in the processes of *toli* (gathering materials for a garland), *tui* (binding/stringing materials together), and *luva* (giving the completed garland away). These three steps of kakala methodology were further expanded to include processes of *teu* (preparation), *mālie* (expression of pleasure), and *māfana* (warmth of feeling) by Tongan scholars Seu‘ula Johansson-Fua, Sitaniselao Manu, Tu‘ifua Takapautolo, and ‘Ana Taufe‘ulungaki in a research report on Pacific sustainability and education (Johansson-Fua et al 2006). In the following sections, I use the kakala framework to braid together the major arguments, genealogies, methods, methodologies, content, and form of *Matala*.

teu: genealogies, patterns, & motivations in Matala

Teu basically means to prepare, it is the preparatory stage before the work begins.

It is a time for conceptualising, designing, and planning for the work ahead.

(Johansson-Fua 2014, 53)

In this *teu*, I trace the genealogies that made possible the form, content, and goals of *Matala*. I begin with my personal genealogies of place and belonging, tying these to genealogies to the research informing the collection.

I descend from Tongan and pālangi (white, European-American) genealogies, and I was born and raised in Sacramento, California. My experiences piecing together a diasporic Tongan identity—in California where I was raised, and in Hawai‘i and Tonga where I completed my graduate work—are major influences that drive me to teach, research, and write on ways of being that connect not just me, but my families and my communities, to our ancestors. It was my desire for the stories of my own people, and a worldview of the Pacific that did not make us invisible, that drew me to do my Masters work in Pacific Islands Studies at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UH Mānoa). My training in decolonial practice from a Pacific Studies foundation, which centering Pacific Islander narratives and ways of being, allowed me to do many things: I was able to deepen my understanding of organizing and activism through community work in Tonga and Hawai‘i; I gained a foundation in craft as a teacher, weaving Pacific Studies frameworks into and across multiple disciplines and departments; and I was able to begin my research on writing as a tool for liberation. Ultimately, in centering Pacific Islander narratives, ways of being, and ways of knowing—Pacific Studies frameworks not only empower us to speak, but also allow us to pay attention to our stories and what moves us to feel deeply in our bodies and with one another; what moves us to cross oceans, what moves us to directly address our borders, and what moves us to cross them. My personal, cultural, and intellectual genealogies serve as the foundations of experience and thinking that determine the major designs, patterns, and motivations of *Matala*.

The genealogy of my research begins with the kava origin story:

There once was a poor couple, *kava ko e kilia mei Fā'imata*
Fevanga and Feifafa,
who had a daughter who was very sick. *ko e tama 'a Fevanga mo Fefafa*
One day, the Tu'i Tonga [King of Tonga] came
and the parents had no crops to offer— *fahifahi pe mama*
in desperation they sacrificed
their daughter as food *ha tāno 'a mōno anga*
for the king
ha pulu mōno tata
the king, so moved that his people
would give so much, *ha pelu ki tau'anga*
refused to eat
the body of their daughter— *ha 'eiki ke olovaha*
instead he buried her
with the honors of a chief *ha mu'a ke 'apa'apa*
from her head grew first kava plant,
from her body grew first sugar cane. *ke fai'aki e holo taumafa*¹

I came to the written version of the kava story above in Tonga while organizing poetry workshops with creative arts organizations ICON Tonga and Seleka Inc. In 2014, I went to Tonga in order to do research on music and Tongan identity—only to quickly find out from family and community that folks didn't really need a thesis on music and identity. After being connected to some of the artists and community organizers in Nuku'alofa, I learned that there *was* a need for more teachers, especially people looking to empower the voices of the youth. Through family and friends, I was connected to Joshua Savieti and Lineti Piutau of ICON Tonga—a non-profit creative arts program for youth—as well as Taniela Petelo and Tevita Latu of Seleka Inc.—a community-based group of young painters and visual artists. My background at the time was as a teaching assistant in Pacific Studies and as a poet facilitator for Pacific Tongues, a non-profit organization based in Honolulu that focused on the very things ICON and

¹ This kava chant is quoted from *Langi Tau'olunga & Hiva Kakala* (2000), compiled by Kik Velt. The English that accompanies the Tongan here is paraphrased from the translation of the kava origin story from the same text.

Seleka were doing: activating creativity and community for youth, empowering their voices and identities through creative arts. With this background in mind, Josh, Neti, Nela, and Ti gave me the chance to design and facilitate community poetry workshops that would create spaces for youth to express their voices, shape original creative pieces, hone performance craft, and share their work with family and community in a public showcase. In this way, the Pacific Verse project was born. It became a 5-week poetry workshop series that could be repeated depending on the schedules of different organizations (at one point, we ran the series twice and gave three different showcases in one summer). These spaces were incredibly generative because of the spirit and voracious nature with which our youth poets and artists created powerful work, memorized pieces, and performed with passion and precision.

This was our activism; creating community through the power of what our youth wanted to say, and how they wanted to say it. Many of their pieces were funny, with a playfulness in using the art of everyday language. All of our youth's pieces were expressions of how they saw themselves as young Tongans, as people negotiating cultural protocols about respect, obligation, and familial expectations. At the same time, their poetry and performances revealed how they navigated their own voices and self-expression within contexts of art forms and ideas shared via social media and the pop cultures from New Zealand, Australia, the US, and beyond. Working with youth and organizing poetry workshops with Tongan community changed the way I saw the world, simply through the practice of being there and watching our writers take a form or prompt or question in workshop and transform it into something that would move their communities.

The experience of organizing for the Pacific Verse reinforced for me the power of the word as a tool for activating, documenting, and critiquing how we approach writing in Tongan

cultural contexts specifically, and Indigenous Pacific contexts generally. Because writing has been, and still very much operates today, as a technology of power developed and wielded to erase, infantilize, and subjugate entire histories, peoples, and communities, the poems of *Matala* specifically frame acts of wordcraft and performance within Tongan language. *Matala* defines and poetically explores writing as tohi (meaning both to write and to split) in order to emphasize how Tongan language provides ways of relating to writing as force that enacts change on our environment. The collection further explores acts of writing in Tongan terms deeply related to tohi, such as fahi (to split/to slaughter and cut up for food), and mama (to chew/or food which, after being chewed, is to be fed to a baby (Churchward)). Identifying and treating acts of writing as splitting and chewing serve as a direct reflection of the creative processes Tongan youth practiced during Pacific Verse. They fed—and desired to feed—themselves and each other with the energy, urgency, and precision of creative expression in our language. Tongan language therefore serves as a genealogy, a frame of reference, and an archive of strategies for approaching writing in the same ways we approach food in our communities. *Matala* argues that writing is something we pay close attention to because it has power; we use it to consume ideas and information we desire; we consume it in our bodies; we feed or deprive ourselves with writing depending on how we care for it in community.

To illustrate the ways in which Tongan language guides perceptions of writing in *Matala*, below are three short stories about Tongan words I learned from my own family and community while doing organizing and curriculum work for the Pacific Verse in Tonga. These stories were the seeds that grew into the thematic and technical frameworks for approaching writing in *Matala*:

One evening, after talking with my Uncle ‘Inoke about the work we were doing in community, he got onto the subject of the wisdom in Tongan language, the stories our words tell. One example he gave me was of our word ‘atamai, which means “mind, understanding, intellect, intelligence, reasoning” (Churchward). Uncle told me that ‘ata means shadow, or reflection, while mai is a directional, a word that means an action is happening toward the speaker. Thus, ‘atamai, our word for intelligence, is literally the reflection or shadow of the world coming to you.

On another afternoon, I was talking with Ti, co-founding artist of Seleka. He told me about how our old folks used to call films and movies “hele‘uhila”: hele meaning knife, or to cut with a knife; ‘uhila, meaning lighting or electricity. Thus, when forming the word for the technology of film, our elders named film “cut light,” or “carved electricity.”

I desired the images, beauty, and possibilities of being in the world that these words provided. Seeing the power of creative expression and writing in community in Tonga further emphasized and encouraged my desire for these words and stories. The story of kava that I came across while doing community work in Tonga would eventually come to consume me, chew me up, spit me out, and give me a place from which to grow a space to examine body, desire, and writing in the Pacific. The Tongan-English dictionary became an archive of Tongan stories within our words. In the next section, I discuss how I braid these two texts—kava chant and dictionary—and formed the foundations for the found poetics *Matala*.

toli: selection of flowers

Toli is the collection and selection of flowers and other plant material that are required for making a *kakala*; this would depend not only on the occasion but also

on the person(s) for whom a *kakala* is being made. It will also depend on the availability of the materials themselves. (Thaman 2010, 360)

Each process of the *kakala* framework brings with it an Indigenous Pacific ethics—*teu* defines an ethics that we consult the space of creativity and honor the time of conceptualization before action. *Toli* is a space where the ethics of sourcing materials for a creative project are centralized, leading to broader considerations of responsibility that arise when considering what ground you are on, in whose home you conduct your work, and what your responsibility is to the materials you use to create something new. I have lived and done most of my poetic work outside of Tonga, and thus the materials I use to express experiences of diaspora become a necessary part of understanding the political aspects of my life and education outside of Tonga. One of the main materials I have benefited from is the space to learn and practice a decolonial politics in Hawai‘i. *Matala* is therefore crafted within a genealogy of other Tongans who have made Hawai‘i their home, written about and lived in these islands, and negotiated what materials they use to live lives as Tongans away from our islands, in Hawai‘i specifically.² The process of *toli* for *Matala* has been of gathering definitions of cultural practice alongside experiences of learning Tongan language in contexts where Native Hawaiians have worked to revitalize and reclaim the knowledge and wisdom of ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i (Hawaiian language). *Matala* draws from the liberatory and decolonizing work of Kānaka Maoli writers, educators, activists, and artists such as Haunani-Kay Trask, Noenoe Silva, Noelani Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua, Kaleikoa Ka‘eo, Auntie Terry Keko‘olani, Jonathan Osorio, Jamaica Osorio, Brandy Nālani McDougall, No‘u Revilla,

² A poetic example of this can be seen in the songs of the eminent Tongan punake, Tu‘imala Kaho. Kaho’s song, “Lose Hina o Kahala,” dedicated to her daughter, incorporates only flowers that grow around the Kahala district on O‘ahu. Other examples include: Epeli Hau‘ofa crafting “Our Sea of Islands” after specific experiences of land on Hawai‘i Island; Konai Helu Thaman’s poetic and critical work that reflect her academic and creative connections to Hawai‘i (see her introduction to her keynote address, “Decolonizing Pacific Studies” (2003)).

Joy Enomoto, ‘Ilima Long, Kahala Johnson, and Māhealani Ahia, alongside the legacies and practices of Aloha ‘Āina, the Protect Kaho‘olawe ‘Ōhana, Demilitarized Tours (organized by Auntie Terry Keko‘olani and Kyle Kajihiro), and Protect Mauna Kea movements. Perhaps the most succinct description of this part of the toli for *Matala*—the gathering of political consciousness and development of ethics within the poetry—is Kahala Johnson’s notion that we are “islands moving within islands” (Johnson 2018). As a writer carrying a Tongan genealogy in Hawai‘i, I craft the content and formal techniques of *Matala* to reflect experiences of braiding/unbraiding Tonga as place, memory, figure, and character in Hawai‘i. The majority of the decolonial training and writing of *Matala* was done in Hawai‘i, and the collection situates its arguments about connection, rupture, movement, desire, sovereignty, and solidarity between Indigenous Pacific nations and communities through imagery, voice, and arrangement of found texts based on experiences that happened in Hawai‘i. From the vantage points of Tonga moving in Hawai‘i—as well as Hawai‘i moving in Tonga, and the islands moving in California—the following sections of toli overview the selection of literary connections, political centers, inter/trans-disciplinary foundations, genres, techniques, forms, content, and major terms of *Matala*.

selection of flowers: literature review

The first major conversation informing *Matala* is the work of Indigenous, Pacific decolonial politics. Specifically, I draw from work by Pacific scholars such as Konai Helu Thaman, Haunani-Kay Trask, Albert Wendt, and Epele Hau‘ofa, whose works treat the creative as fundamental to decolonization in the Pacific. The poetry I craft is in conversation with their

work as I consider the personal as the poetic, and where poetry is an epistemological site for critical scholarship, which Konai Helu Thaman outlines and exemplifies in her work (Thaman 2003). The choice to craft *Matala* as a creative writing dissertation is itself part of a longer tradition of Pacific writer-scholar-educators who have shown writing in general—and creative writing specifically—as a critical space for Pacific theory and epistemology. Writing from our cultural contexts and histories is a source of Indigenous Pacific imagination that fosters methods of survivance, critical self-reflection, and spaces for decolonized Pacific futurities. I connect this approach to writing with the work of Albert Wendt and Epeli Hau‘ofa, who consider the space of the ocean as connector, contested space, and space of important storytelling (Wendt 1976, Hau‘ofa 1994). Ultimately, the work of these scholars within Pacific Studies foregrounds the fundamental thread of a decolonial politics, wherein creative expression shapes, and is shaped from, liberatory practices. It is in this genealogy of decolonization as the underlying intention beneath artistry, performance, and critical thinking, that I place the work of the collection.

The second major thread in *Matala* is in conversation with the Indigenous Pacific theory that has arisen from scholars such as Konai Helu Thaman, Teresia Teaiwa, and Lea Lani Kinikini Kauvaka, who have provided methods for deriving Indigenous Pacific theory through the examination and use of Pacific texts. I take particular inspiration from Konai Helu Thaman’s poetry and scholarship, which uses movement and distance as both vantage point *and* text. In a practice of Tongan poetics, Thaman interweaves her own poetry and prose in order to theorize Pacific thought and identity through experiences of movement (Thaman 1985). For me, Thaman’s use of multiple genres in order to portray a multi-layered approach to identity in movement is a strategy for expressing experiences of distance and the realities of movement in

and around the islands. As an artist and scholar, Thaman's form, content, and style provide important points of perspective and technique for critical self-reflection that I employ throughout *Matala*.

In connection with themes of movement and interweaving multiple forms and genres to portray Pacific ways of knowing, I draw from poet-scholar-educator Teresia Teaiwa, whose work highlights critical points of exploration for Pacific epistemologies, such as the multi-sited, polygenic nature of Pacific literatures (Teaiwa 2010); the multiple sites from which to draw inspiration and theory about and for Pacific knowledge (Teaiwa 2014); and the critical importance of specific, creative approaches to the definitions of and approaches to “text” for the examination of Pacific historiography (Teaiwa 1994). With the critical attention to multiplicity in approaches to origin stories, text, and Pacific genealogies of knowledge and (hi)storytelling, I also draw from multiple kinds of archives—from dictionary entries, family letters, academic essays, photographs, ancestral stories, and everyday conversations. These texts connect to and comment on broader considerations of text and how multiple treatments of found material expand spaces for understanding epistemology. Thaman and Teaiwa's work on multiplicity and text connect to other scholars whose works focus on Pacific metaphors as theory. Examples of this work can be found in Albert Wendt's work on tatau (1996), J. Kēhaulani Kauanui and Vince Diaz's discussion of the canoe (2001), Robert Sullivan's koru (2005), ku'ualoha ho'omanawanui haku lei (2005), and Lea Lani Kinikini Kauvaka's navigation of berths and anchorages (2016). I draw from the work of these scholars as examples for how to express Pacific epistemology, craft theory, approach multiple forms of text as epistemological sites, and present purpose of such work.

The third major strand of *Matala* is based on connections between Indigenous Pacific experiences and Indigenous politics in the work of connecting solidarities. One of the major themes of *Matala* is looking directly at what is most difficult and move from there, as Lea Lani Kinikini Kauvaka discusses in her essay on Pacific theory (Kauvaka 2016). What is challenging to address for me personally—and what is difficult to address within my Tongan and Pacific communities—are the physical, emotional, and historical separations between us as Pacific people, which we have held onto and perpetuated as our own from colonial systems of racial hierarchy, gender violence, and systematic separation from land, water, and one another. The concept of healing is therefore a major theme of this work, and I take direction from writers such as Beth Brant, Paula Gunn Allen, Linda Hogan, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Thomas King. Each of these writers address the critical importance of a healing processes that link body, land, spirit, people, and nation. These writers also show how storytelling has the capacity to heal, changing the way we might respond to histories of systematic separation. *Matala* works toward this kind of healing through the processes of fostering relationships to Tongan language—a language that engenders connection between mind, body, spirit, and environment. On the levels of body, language, and land, I look to the work of Qwo-li Driskill, Haunani-Kay Trask, Noenoe Silva, Mark Rifkin, Mishuana Goeman, Jamaica Osorio, No‘u Revilla, and Kahala Johnson because these scholars make visible and speak back to colonial structures of desire that have been imposed to separate Indigenous bodies from land. I center their work within the broader spheres of healing in order to consider how I might, through poetry, contribute to: 1) ways of story-ing connection and desire for land; 2) portraying how our (is)lands also desire; and 3) exploring how

our movement away, between, and back to our ancestral homes structures our desires for one another, our lands, and waters as Indigenous Pacific peoples.

The fourth major strand guiding *Matala* is the most specific, and for me, the most central—Tongan poetics. A major challenge for me in my academic and creative work has always been how to center Tongan ways of knowing and expression. In light of this personal challenge, this collection centers Tongan poetics as a binding thread, drawing together all of the major threads described in the previous paragraphs. Centering Tongan poetics also allows a practice of interweaving relationships between my own decolonial, political education *outside of* Tonga—centered in my academic education in Hawai‘i—and the everyday, personal experiences of being part of a diasporic, mixed-race, Tongan family and community. A central question that *Matala* asks is therefore about how to negotiate terms of decolonization within Tongan contexts, and how Tongan experiences and histories inform a decolonial politics more broadly. This is contested space for me, from my own experiences of how my communities in Tonga relate to “decolonization” given our own political history and relative sovereignty through European contact and colonization. This history also shapes some of the tensions I have seen and experienced between Tongan communities and other Pacific peoples outside of Tonga regarding solidarity, sovereignty movements, and connection. Putting these considerations within the frameworks of Tongan poetics, I consider how portraying the personal as political, and vice versa, has been something always interwoven in Tongan poetic forms and expression. This can be seen in the ways Tongan composers work within and modify Tongan poetic forms to commemorate broader political events through specific, island/village-based, personal points of reference (examples of which are described in work by Wendy Pond (1990)). Because I

conceptualize the practice of Tongan poetics as inherently a process of interweaving, another major question of *Matala* is about negotiating decolonial, liberatory politics in Tongan spaces through Tongan poetics, and how it is that I personally work through Tongan poetics in my own, predominantly English-speaking, diasporic contexts. I draw inspiration and guidance from the work of Tongan poet-teacher-scholars such as ‘I. Futa Helu (1999, 2012), Sisi‘uno Helu (2011), Konai Helu Thaman (2000), ‘Okusitino Māhina (1993, 2005), and Epeli Hau‘ofa (1994, 2008) because these scholars have published works of and on Tongan poetry in both English and Tongan that, in different ways, examine the connections between the political and the personal in Tongan frames of reference.

The collection of major literary, political conversations of this section are explored more specifically in the genres, techniques, forms, and content of *Matala*, which are described in the next sections.

selection of flowers: genres & techniques

The kakala framework structures an approach to the major genres and techniques of *Matala*—found poetry. Kakala methodology serves as the guiding pattern and practice for selecting texts and approaching found techniques in ways that center Tongan poetics, aesthetics, and ethics. On the other hand, approaching Tongan cultural contexts through the work of found poetry creates space in *Matala* for examining desire and structures at work in choosing text, image, and voice to represent Pacific identities and knowledges. Selecting materials for kakala—selecting found texts—is therefore ultimately a set of questions about desire: what words, what pieces, will tell the story well? What combination of texts, genres, and techniques

will tell the story beautifully? What texts do I desire to tell our stories? These questions about the selection and presentation of found materials are implied and repeated throughout *Matala*; the poetry traces stories I desired to tell and texts I desired in order to tell those stories. Major questions of *Matala* center on the work, genealogies, and implications of desire in Pacific contexts.

For example, my use of the Tongan-English Dictionary brings up several conversations about desire for language, embodiment, definition, documentation, memory, and access to cultural knowledge in diasporic Pacific contexts. My first meeting with the Churchward Tongan-English dictionary is perhaps best described as hunger at first sight. This dictionary is thick. *Ngako e ngako* thick. It is full. It looks like it will make me full. The entries are tiny, each page full of all the juicy business of words. This dictionary is delicious. It is heavy. My copy is a loud, bright red all over. It is biggest amount of Tongan language I have ever seen, and I want all of it. All the time. This desire is, however, for a text that comes from a colonially constructed genealogy. Even so, while the dictionary operates as both template and practice of specific, Eurocentric, epistemological and ontological genealogies of definition and documentation, it is also an access point. The dictionary is a space in which I could complete part of my responsibilities to my family—to learn and honor the ways our ties and love for one another are defined in words of our island histories and language. The dictionary is a partial access point for me to understand the poetry my grandparents spoke, both in English and Tongan. The dictionary is also a diasporic strategy for self-reflection from which to examine relationships between: 1) personal experience, decision-making, and desire in diaspora; 2) the politics of Indigenous and diasporic Pacific meaning-making; and 3) the methods by which these realms are entwined in

poetry and writing. The work of selecting the dictionary, and examining why I desired it as a central found text for *Matala* in the first place, is just one example within the collection of tracing desire in order to widen spaces of critical self-reflection on desire as embodied, political, and genealogical.

The genre and techniques of found poetry in *Matala* are what bind together the other genres of the collection. Kakala methodology as found technique method(ology) as experiential representation of Tongan identities in diaspora calls for poems that are narrative, documentary, confessional, and lyric. Along with epistolary and prose poems, the genres of *Matala* portray multiple levels of intimacy between text and memory, speaker and subject, voice and image, characterization and point of view. The use of these genres, in layered relationships with the major terms and contents of the collection (discussed in the next section), display the unfolding, interrupting, and bringing together of cultural meanings that mirror everyday negotiations of memory and meaning in diasporic contexts.

selection of flowers: content & major terms

Matala weaves the kava origin chant into several central terms—“matala” being one of these terms, or blooms—in order to form an entwined series of central arguments, or kakala (Tongan lei). Where kakala serves as the central method of the collection, kava—as chant, daughter, root, and ceremony—is a central image binding the collection together. The major terms of the collection are either sourced directly from the images and terms of the kava chant, or grow from the simultaneous meanings and synonymous relationships between these terms. The

other central terms of the collection are entwined as follows, (italicized words appear in the kava chant):

matala : tala
to understand/to bloom : to tell/thorn or barb

tohi : *fahi*
to split/to write : to split/to slaughter

fahi : *mama*
to split/to slaughter/to cut up for food : to chew/food that is chewed and fed to a baby

ta‘anga : langa
poem/to cut down trees : prefix for pain/to make a clearing (for a building, for a garden)

anga : ‘anga
in the habit, way, disposition of : shark

Matala works from these terms in ways that make use not only of the synonymy between them, but also of their polysemy. Kanaka Maoli scholar Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada discusses polysemy as it operates in the processes of translating Hawaiian language texts. Kuwada, quoting George Steiner’s description of polysemy as “the capacity of the same word to mean different things, such difference ranging from nuance to antithesis,” goes on to explain that the “deployment of polysemy, and the ability to bring those multiple meanings into play, were marks of skill in the Hawaiian language, and were greatly appreciated in forms such as poetry, writing, or oration” (Kuwada).

Matala is crafted to play with the timeline of language learning and the attainment of authority over meaning in and through translation. The collection documents how

language-learning—sometimes vocabulary word by vocabulary word—is layered with stories of language from community, and filtered through everyday experience. Learning Tongan vocabulary words is therefore not a linear process of “attainment,” where learning terms is a process of memorizing definitions and grammar structures until, at some point, I am ready to begin the work of translation and uncovering epistemology. Instead, learning new words, creating relationships to them, approaching translation, and engaging epistemology are simultaneous processes. An added layer of meaning to this simultaneity of language-learning, translation, and epistemology is that these processes happen in diasporic contexts, wherein the polysemy and synonymy of Tongan words mirror the major themes of binding meaning between Tongan contexts in Tonga and Tongan contexts in diaspora. *Matala* therefore works at polysemy as a form of telling different/same stories simultaneously: I examine what happens when meanings in Tongan language shape, and are shaped by, diasporic experiences. These simultaneous, spiral relationships between experience and language become strategies for healing ruptures, witnessing burials, and growing new possibilities of meaning in the collection. Working from the kava chant as a departure point, the poems of *Matala* explore how polysemy operates to bind diasporic, indigenous, Pacific Islander, language-learning, dictionary-referencing, poem-writing in U.S., academic, English-language creative writing contexts as simultaneous spaces.

A central example of the exploration of polysemy in *Matala*—which I discuss in the following sub-sections—lives in the term “tohi” and its interactions with the definitions, associations, and images of its synonym, “fahi.”

∴ *tohi*, to split, to write

Matala explores the possibilities of working from “to write” and “to split” as meanings that operate simultaneously, both within Tongan language and cultural contexts as well as within contexts of “writing” shaped by U.S., English-speaking, academic, research, and documentation structures (out of which this collection was partially created). The collection makes the argument that to “to write” is to “split (a leaf, usually a pandanus leaf) with a sharp shell,” is to make “marks or designs on (e.g. on *ngatu*, tapa cloth)” (Churchward 485). Through this deployment of polysemy, *Matala* makes the argument that writing is the presence and process of making marks or designs on the world; something that is intimately connected to and capable of changing the environment.

Matala presents *tohi* as a critical term, a space from which to ask questions about the epistemological, ontological, and historiographical work of writing and what happens when we shift our syntaxes about writing to see it operating in multiple realms, or registers, of meaning. What happens when we argue and demonstrate that “to write is to split” works simultaneously as both synonym and antonym to writing defined as “text on the page.” *Matala* positions *tohi* as a genealogy and Tongan cultural process of splitting and making marks on the world that happens simultaneously with writing as a process in English, happening on a page (or on a web page on a computer screen).

To write is to split, or make a mark or design, also works simultaneously at the definitions of writing as a technology of colonial genealogies. Here, writing denotes “text” on a “page” as: 1) a process of remembering; 2) a process of fact-making; and 3) that to “document” is to correctly remember. *Matala* presents *tohi*—to write is to split—as a syntax of

knowledge-making and being in the world. In placing the act of writing back in the body, the imagery and definitions of tohi provide space to question the work of writing when it is relegated to the page—that you must have specifically defined forms of writing in order to record, remember, and have authority over “facts.” *Matala* is therefore crafted in conversation with the work of scholars such as Teresia Teaiwa, Brandy Nālani McDougall, Konai Helu Thaman, Noenoe Silva, Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada, Noelani Goodyear-Ka‘ōpua, Epeli Hau‘ofa, and Albert Wendt, who discuss, analyze, and “poke holes in the veil” (McDougall 2018) of hegemonic determinations of writing as colonial tools for meaning-making and epistemology in the Pacific. As these scholars have argued and demonstrated, relegating definitions of writing to the page is part of how meaning, research, capital, and hierarchies of power are constituted through writing in genealogies of suppression and erasure of Indigenous forms of creation, freedom, and practices of (is)land- and water-ways (Teaiwa 2010, O’Brien 2010, McDougall 2016, Lyons 2006, Vizenor 1994, Tuhiwai Smith 1999).

∴ *fahi*, to split, to slaughter, to cut up for food

Fahi, root of the word “fahifahi”—from the “fahifahi pe mama” line of the kava chant—is a central form of transformation in *Matala*. From its relationships to “mama” (in the kava chant) fahi names the process by which a daughter is consumed and becomes the root of one of our most sacred rituals for sharing, conflict resolution, and community-building in Tongan culture—the kava ceremony. Fahi is an intense image, encompassing both the hypervisibility of a daughter’s sacrifice, as well as how her body and narrative are subsumed in order to be the ever present “blood in the kava bowl,” as Epeli Hau‘ofa has discussed in his own

poetry. Fahi is the central turning point of the kava life/story cycle: as a daughter, kava was sacrificed in order to be eaten; as a plant, kava must be chewed, or ground up, in order for its properties as a sedative and numbing agent to be activated. Fahi is also an intensifier of the transformations in the kava chant, which mirrors the transformation the root undergoes to become the center of the kava ceremony. Despite undergoing a process of being cooked and buried, kava (both ancestor and root) transform to grow new things and make new possibilities (the first kava plant, the first sugarcane, a ceremony). Fahi—to split, slaughter, to cut up for food—therefore serves (and is served) as a major transformative process and structure of imagery in *Matala*. Not only does it operate as a major image and theme throughout the collection, but it also serves as a formal poetic technique, which I describe in more detail in the tui section of this introduction.

∴ *tohi & fahi, entwining polysemy, synonymy, & central arguments*

Matala is shaped around the central arguments I make through the linked polysemy of tohi, fahi, and mama—where to write is to split is to chew. In this relationship, to tohi is to write/split/chew the kava chant. Drawing from these entwined meaning and stories within Tongan language, the following list of arguments comment on writing and poetry as forms of, and for, Pacific historiography and Indigenous Pacific epistemologies:

- ∴ to write is to split is to chew
- ∴ to write an ancestor is to chew their story, transform their body, again and again
- ∴ to chew the kava ancestor is to create spit
- ∴ spit is a process of transformation, to break something down

- ∴ spit is analysis
- ∴ and a process for making something safe
- ∴ for someone else to eat (mama)
- ∴ to spit is to activate agency—to choose what will go into the body, and what will leave it
- ∴ “spit me a poem” (Giles and Thompson)
- ∴ polysemic and synonymous relationships in our languages reveal expanded syntaxes, grammars, and registers of being (Lyons 2006, Goeman 2008)
- ∴ movements of meaning are an expression of desire
- ∴ movements of meaning are a source of desire
- ∴ anesthetics—that which dampens our ability to feel
- ∴ aesthetics—that which heightens our ability to feel
- ∴ poetry is an archive of feeling
- ∴ desire grows from the line
- ∴ liberation builds in the line break
- ∴ new syntax grows from chewed structures—the possibilities of rearrangement, the unexpected
- ∴ writing our desires is to chew
- ∴ chewing is to itemize, respond to, and dismantle colonial grammars
- ∴ of anesthesia
- ∴ of amnesia

- ∴ desire for the unexpected in the everyday defines s/pacific (Teaiwa 1994) forms of freedom and sovereignty
- ∴ once we experience these liberations, these freedoms, this māfana
- ∴ we will desire each other more (Yamashiro 2015)

These arguments are presented through the binding together of forms, techniques, genres, and texts, described in the next section.

tui: stringing flowers

Tui is the making or weaving of a *kakala*. The time taken to do this would also depend on the complexity and intricacies of the flowers and the type of *kakala* being made. In Tonga, flowers are ranked according to their cultural importance with the *heilala* having pride of place because of the mythology associated with it. (Thaman 2010, 360)

Where *toli* deals with the process and ethics of gathering materials, *tui* is a process of working specifically with poetic pattern and variation. As in *kakala* and lei-making, *Matala* places different forms of texts and poetic genres together in order to present the multiple tensions, resolutions, dissonances, and resonances of piecing together Tongan ancestral knowledge, cultural performance, and identity negotiation in the present. Text-wise, the collection arranges Tongan-English dictionary entries, the kava chant, family letters, and community stories. These chosen texts, in turn, are sources of formal poetic structure. One example is the 9-line form of the kava chant that serves as one refrain of poetic form throughout the collection (which I discuss a little later in the section overview of *Matala*). The goal of this

tui is to string patterns of image and theme to create spaces in which readers examine their own relationships to words and text in close conversation with Indigenous, Pacific narratives of body, emotion, spirit, and community.

Matala practices tui in a way similar to the work Robert Sullivan has done in his considerations on and practice of koru in the organization of poetry and prose. In “The English Moko: Exploring a Spiral” (2005), Sullivan explains and practices the organizing principles of the spiral, placing “beginning” ideas next to “closing” thoughts, working out from the middle and back again, all by using a numbering system to illustrate koru pattern-making. I place the kakala framework—a method of twisting and interweaving to make overall meaning—in conversation with Sullivan’s methodology by placing particular ideas and text in spiral and woven conversation throughout *Matala*. This spirality is achieved not just through the polysemy and synonymy traced across Tongan words, but also in the repetition and order of images, narrations, voices, and forms. Whereas Sullivan’s work has focused on Indigenous technologies of navigation—illustrated in his use of spiral numbering systems in his poetry (*Star Waka* 2012), and his prose (“The English Moko” (2005))—*Matala* presents patterns of repetition and variation based on concepts and practices of pattern-making with flowers, as in the craft of weaving a Tongan lei. In the following sections, I give brief overviews of the major forms and themes—the patterns and blooms—of the four major sections of *Matala*.

kava

The first section of *Matala* introduces the kava chant and the collection’s terms of writing, eating, ancestor, and iterations of kava in the everyday. Because I desired the kava chant

and the possibilities it created, I chewed on its structure to see what would come of its transformation, the writing/chewing of a chant as an ancestor. Below is my own line-by-line, translation of the chant. The left side of the piece is quoted directly from the kava chant in *Langi Tau'olunga & Hiva Kakala: Tau'olunga Dance & Love Songs* (2000) compiled by Kik Velt. The right column is my own, limited translation of the chant; all italicized words and phrases in this column are quoted directly from the Tongan-English dictionary:

chant (paraphrase)

<i>kava ko e kilia mei Fā'imata</i>	<i>kava, leper from Fā'imata</i>
<i>ko e tama 'a Fevanga mo Fefafa</i>	<i>child of Fevanga and Fefafa</i>
<i>fahifahi pe mama</i>	<i>butchered and chewed</i>
<i>ha tāno'a mōno anga</i>	<i>a bowl in the behaviour, conduct, demeanour, way(s) of a tāno'a</i>
<i>ha pulu mōno tata</i>	<i>a coconut husk as scoop</i>
<i>ha pelu ki tau'anga</i>	<i>a drinking-cup made from a banana leaf</i>
<i>ha 'eiki ke olovaha</i>	<i>a person of chiefly rank to be on the side of a kava bowl opposite the hanger</i>
<i>ha mu'a ke 'apa'apa</i>	<i>behind them two men sitting next to the sovereign (one on each side) at a ceremonial kava-drinking-ceremony (and acting as joint masters of ceremonies)</i>
<i>ke fai'aki e holo taumafa</i>	<i>to regard as sufficient or as good enough (or big enough) for the purpose of chewing (as was formerly done) or by pounding between two stones (as is done now) to drink kava</i>

This piece is followed by another translation of the chant, which itemizes what each line does, setting the pattern of a major poetic form throughout *Matala*:

the ancestor's recipe

chant the ancestor's recipe: call for all the
places you grew from

all your descent and how you got your names

tell the manner of your transformation, how
you will be chewed

list your tools: a vessel for body

something to stir yourself

something to hold only the certain pieces

and then name who you will feed

even the witnesses, who name you sufficient,
and good

enough: but you will name yourself
ceremony

Drawing from the terms of writing as chewing, this poem introduces the “recipe/definition” poem form used throughout the entire collection. These “recipe” poems are dispersed throughout *Matala* in order to present and explore the transformations and syntaxes at work in the polysemy and synonymy of meaning and story within Tongan words. These poems are all shaped in the 9-line structure of the kava chant above. For example, the poem “mama,” which appears in the *kava* section, is labeled below with the line numbers corresponding to the kava chant:

mama

1 the name shape our mouths make

2 from first pronunciation of *food*

- 3 *which, after being chewed, is fed to a baby:*
- 4 the name for what can be eaten, *mama*
- 5 the way teeth are named to chewing, *mama*
- 6 the name for who makes the first spit, *mama*.
- 7 is this also the name for consuming our mothers?
- 8 what do we make safe, and devour,
- 9 with the rest of our names?

Lines of group 1 in each recipe poem give a form of naming, while lines of group 2 name a genealogy, usually using terms of “from, between, of” etc. The third line group names the way in which what was named in the first and second lines undergoes transformation—in this poem, the transformation is through “mama,” or chewing. Line groups 4-6 names the tools, or implements, that aid in the transformation process narrated in the poem. The last three line groups, 7-9, present the results of, or commentary on, the transformation process.

The recipe poems of the *kava* section focus on the terms *kilia*, *mama*, and *fahi*, and introduce the major images of the collection which include writing, food, chewing, spitting, growing, cooking, burning, grounding, roots, women’s bodies, healing, rupture, and feeding.

tohi

Continuing from the images of writing as eating, the *tohi* section is dedicated to presenting multiple forms of writing as both the act and result of chewing; that to write is to chew structures of being in order to spit them out and transform to make them safe (for someone

else to eat). This section sources not only the recipe poem forms, but also includes a series of epistolary poems—love letters—addressing colonial structures of desire that were constituted through writing into and over Pacific bodies. Following these love letters, *tohi* focuses on the images of everyday writing—family communications, text messages, emails, diary rules, *tatau*, writing on walls, and excerpts from Pacific Studies academic texts. The convergences and departures of these sources are crafted to show the simultaneity of different contexts in creating meaning around and through writing.

anga

This section works at experiences of habit and fear, as brought up by the definitions of *anga* (way, habit, disposition) and ‘*anga* (shark). By working through terms of goodness, badness, and associations with the images, movements, and definitions surrounding sharks, this section addresses the movement between *anga*, ‘*anga*, *langa* (prefix for pain/to build/to make a clearing for a garden), and *ta‘anga* (poem/to cut down trees). This section therefore works between the registers of growing plants, grounding, finding roots, burning/cutting down to make room, tied in with teeth, jaws, fins, and water.

matala

As the final, title section, *matala* works at the power of *tala* (to tell, assert, command/barb, thorn). This section focuses on the movies and stories I loved as a child—including, but not limited to *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Secret of NIMH*, *Beauty and the Beast*—in order to chew up, spit out, and transform structures of desire and definition in these

stories. Working from the vividness of image in films, or *hele‘uhila*, this section ends the collection by using these images to argue for the importance of story in (re)shaping our relationships to the world, our syntaxes of being.

luva: flowers given away

Luva is the final process and is about giving the *kakala* away to someone else as a sign of peace, love and respect. (Thaman 2010, 360)

Luva is a process to consider what this work does and for whom—addressing why it matters to look at the world in ways that center and move around Tongan, diasporic, Indigenous cultural contexts. My aim is to hold up and examine notions of Pacific identity *through* movement, addressing the experiences and knowledge that come from leaning into the uncertainties of claiming ancestral land/place/identity after being raised outside of the islands and Tongan-speaking communities. With this in mind, I identify my intended audiences for *Matala* as my own Tongan communities, families, teachers, students; my fellow Indigenous/Pacific students, writers, scholars, activists, educators; Pacific communities moving within and between our island homes in diaspora; and activists, educators, and writers within and beyond the Pacific who dedicate their efforts to decolonial, Indigenous futures.

My intention in giving this collection to my communities is to promote strategies by which we reclaim trust in our genealogies of creativity and our capacities for blooming new spaces of possibility. This we can do using the tools we have with us now, meeting ourselves where we are at. It is my hope that *Matala* contributes to clearing space and building trust in our intellectual, cultural genealogies, which I believe is a process foundational to transforming

hegemonic syntaxes, grammars, colonial genealogies of separation, surveillance, and erasure.

The goal is that the poems in *Matala* might, in some way, allow my communities to look colonial documents, structures, and processes directly in the eye to say, *we will eat you up, chew you, spit you out, and transform you into something new—something safe for our next generations to eat.*

mālie: expressions of desire and pleasure

Malie is said when an audience appreciates a performance; it is an expression of “bravo” or “well done”. It means that the audience, at least in the Tongan protocols for performing arts, has not only understood, but appreciates the inter-play between the music, the dance, the costumes, and the performers. In order to appreciate a performance in the Tongan context, it normally requires a certain level of understanding of the music, the costume, the performers, and the expressions of the story being performed. This means that there is a shared understanding between the audience and the performers and when this is executed well, there is *Malie*. (Johansson-Fua 2014, 54)

For Johansson-Fua, *mālie* defines both an ethics and process for evaluating the effectiveness of research that is held accountable to Pacific communities. In the contexts of *Matala*, I identify *mālie* as an ethics and process requiring me to address my own understandings and intimacy with formal elements of aesthetics—particularly, within Tongan poetics. *Mālie*,³ which is both a word for, and expression of, pleasure and appreciation in Tongan, is also an

³ You can hear expressions of *mālie* [here](#), given throughout a performance by family members and former students of the late Professor ‘I. Futa Helu in Tonga, 2010.

ongoing process of considering what specific aesthetic elements intended audiences might recognize, enjoy, and grapple with on levels of body, emotion, mind, and spirit. I work through questions of pleasure and joy that mālie bring in three major threads: 1) through a formal engagement with specific elements of Tongan, Pacific, Indigenous, and liberatory/decolonizing poetics; 2) through explicit engagement with concepts of pleasure and structures of desire; and 3) through conceptualizing the transformative work that desire can do in fostering decolonized imaginations and futures. I use this third thread, centered on considerations of transformation, as a foundation for understanding māfana, the final piece of the kakala framework.

Throughout *Matala*, I draw from elements of Tongan poetics for formal and conceptual guidance and grounding. Specifically, I draw from the work of ‘I. Futa Helu and ‘Okusitino Māhina, whose works explore dimensions of Tongan poetic concepts laumātanga⁴ and tala-e-fonua. Futa Helu discusses laumātanga as follows:

Tongan nature poetry differs from many other poetical traditions in that it is never generalised Nature, never Nature in the abstract, that the poet speaks of or addresses....Tongan nature poetry, therefore, has two principal features—specificity and localness. The observance of these two principles has given rise in our system to the poetical category of *laumatanga* (*lau* lit. to verbalise; *matanga*, lit. beautiful place or spot.) (Helu 1999, 272)

In connection with the poetics of laumātanga, I also draw from ‘Okusitino Māhino’s discussion on tala-ē-fonua, which he defines in essence as “[the] interplay between people and the land, in

⁴ Regarding italics: within the poetry manuscript, I use italics to indicate found materials. Everywhere else, I do not italicize Tongan words. Regarding Tongan orthography: throughout this talateu and the collection, I use the Tongan fakau‘a (‘okina, glottal stop) and toloi (kahakō, macron) unless I am quoting from a source that does not include these diacritical marks.

non-material and material terms” (Māhina 1993, 112). I place the work of *Matala* in conversation with the traditions of laumātanga and tala-ē-fonua as I work through a diasporic lens at the connections our language fosters between us and our environments. I place focus on a specificity and localness of Tongan words in contexts both within *and* beyond Tonga, considering what our words do when they travel with us and how we might understand connection and responsibility to place through the epistemology carried in our language.

In terms of interweaving the specifics of Tongan poetics from different vantage points of my own experience and relationships with my family, communities, and place, I look to Thaman and Hau‘ofa’s work as examples of how Tongan poetics are translated into different academic, creative, and political spheres outside of Tonga. Thaman’s poetry shows how Tongan poetics not only shape the English language but also how academic research and scholarship can be practiced and expressed (Thaman 1985, 1993, 2000, 2003). Hau‘ofa’s work, including “Our Sea of Islands” (1994), exemplifies how Tongan relationships to place and language can be expanded into a pan-Pacific political consciousness and practice of solidarity with Indigenous people globally. Ultimately, I craft *Matala* in order to contribute to the interconnection of place-based, specific poetics with the expansive, liberatory, and decolonial politics exemplified by these Tongan scholars.

māfana: transformation & heating up

Matala conceptualizes an integration between the formal aesthetic elements of the collection and the broader work of imagining and enacting indigenous, liberatory futures. In making these broader connections, I draw inspiration from Aiko Yamashiro’s discussion of

desire as a tool for demilitarization in Hawai‘i and the Pacific. Yamashiro discusses the transformative potential of transgressing colonial borders in order to practice decolonial love and desire against the structures of militarization in our islands by stating that:

Once we’ve experienced that freedom, that sovereignty, that pleasure and joy, in our own bodies, once we know what these things feel like, we will *want* them. We will crave them, demand them. We remember what we are fighting for.

(Yamashiro)

Yamashiro’s work makes the connection between pleasure, desire, and a decolonial imaginary in a way that I work through in *Matala* particularly in consideration of mālie and what I believe to be the liberatory promise of Tongan cultural expressions of pleasure. I work through the same questions that Yamashiro poses here:

What if we want a radically different reality? For all of us committed to fighting for science that values our ancestors’ wisdom, economies that do not destroy the land and ocean, pedagogies of freedom and community, the brave clarity that comes from facing our colonial traumas, *poetry and art and music that helps us imagine other futures*, sacred sovereign islands in the Pacific, how do we also mālama our most intimate spaces? (Yamashiro, emphasis my own)

Throughout *Matala*, I work from my everyday, intimate relationships with learning Tongan—and the intimacies between language and environment that the Tongan language expresses—to connect to broader questions of decolonization within Tongan contexts, drawing from the epistemologies within our language as a guide to imagine and desire sovereign Pacific futures. I utilize the transformative power of centering multi-dimensional experiences of

pleasure—from unfolding ways of thought from stories of Tongan words to treating colonial documents and treaties as love letters—as strategies for interweaving layers of sensuality that come from examining our politics as personal, and vice versa.

I apply the idea of striving for a radically different reality and transformation through creative expression to an understanding of the final piece of kakala methodology—*māfana*.

‘Okusitino Māhina defines the close relationship between *mālie* and *māfana* as follows:

The transformative effects the state of *mālie* has equally on performers and audience alike, are ones of *māfana*, warmth, *vela*, burning, and *tauēlangi*, ‘reaching-the-sky’. These emotional responses are characteristically ‘fiery’, suggesting a flow of energy through which both producers and consumers are transformed. (Māhina 2005, 172)

While *mālie* is an acknowledgement and recognition by an audience of specific aesthetics and precision of performance, *māfana* is the transformation that can take place spontaneously for an audience, based in the body, as “the transition from being a mere spectator to being part of the performance...a moment of great exhilaration, of *Mafana* and willingness to be part of something exciting” (Johansson-Fua 2014, 55). Because the transformation that comes from *māfana* is spontaneous, I cannot here predict or ensure when or where it will happen for an audience, or how it will be expressed. Instead, I look to *māfana* as another set of questions and ethics about how I have technically and thematically woven together what is pleasurable for me to think and write about with what might be pleasurable and moving for my audiences.

Crafting this collection in conversation with my ancestors, my families, my intellectual and chosen family genealogies, helps me consider writing as a space for reclaiming genealogies.

This is also a process of deliberately and collectively piecing together identity, working across disciplines and structures of thought in order to create spaces where we analyze structures of power, chew them up, spit them out, and re-form them in order to serve our communities, making space for our people to grow and live free. Writing is a space where we determine the syntax of our being, practice our language for reaching out to one another, embrace each others' resistances, and do the work of growing together. I believe the work of Pacific creative writing is to speak back to and transform the ways in which our multiple identities get pitted against one another inside our own bodies, and against one another, through the intersecting structures of violence such as racism, heteropatriarchy, and colonialism. This writing process grows out of the desire to heal and take action.

It is toward that center of healing that I orient *Matala*. The practice of blurring the boundaries between creativity, research, and teaching has helped me experience and begin to understand the transdisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and intersectional work of Indigenous Pacific politics and poetics, creative writing, and decolonial research. I do my work to remember what I have been taught as a teacher, researcher, writer, and daughter, working to bridge what might have seemed impossible, what might have seemed too hurt or too silent to heal. In that light, I would like to leave you with a poem inspired by the power of transformation in Tongan language, which I would not have come to without the guidance and insistence of my mother.

In Tongan, *langa* is a prefix that means pain, as well as a verb for making clearing, building something, or growing a garden:

langa

my mother never learned Tongan, but
understood *langa*, to ache, to be physically
painful from the very root of her spine

a result of hypercalcemia and possible
multiple myeloma is what it says on the death
certificate

which I have *cut up for food* and buried with
a poem by *way of shovel*

a list of names as *soil*

and I am mostly water

so the painkiller now lives in the rose bushes

baby cypress trees relieve the memory of
bone pain, the *langa-hui* in her hands and
knees

I *lift the soil*, naming each place where she
was in pain because *langa* is also the name
for what we *make into a garden*

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