

## Dialogue

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*Our Own Liberation: Reflections on Hawaiian Epistemology*

MANULANI ALULI MEYER

*The Ocean Imaginary*

SUBRAMANI

*Responses*

VILSONI HERENIKO, CAROLINE SINAVAIANA-GABBARD, AND  
DAVID WELCHMAN GEGEO

*An Interview with Subramani*

VILSONI HERENIKO

*(Re)visioning Knowledge Transformation  
in the Pacific: A Response to Subramani's  
"The Oceanic Imaginary"*

*David Welchman Gegeo*

It is a privilege to comment on "The Oceanic Imaginary" by Subramani, a very distinguished Pacific Island writer whose work I have long admired. His Dialogue article is especially welcome because it raises issues that lie at the core of my own research and that point the direction for Pacific Island writers and scholars who want to (re)create Native Pacific Islander ways of understanding and writing about Pacific issues. We Pacific Islanders have been trying to move in this direction for a long time, and it seems that we finally have enough of a critical mass to accomplish our objective. Among the many important points Subramani raises, I will confine my comments to the issues of decolonizing pedagogies and constructing indigenous,<sup>1</sup> native, or local epistemologies.

With regard to decolonizing pedagogies and discourses, it seems to me we take for granted several issues for which we must find solutions. First, as Subramani has pointed out, is the tension between the need to use English in order to get published and read by an international audience, and the desire to write in our own, various local and native language varieties. Subramani himself related his experience with trying to publish in Fiji Hindi. Yet writing in English undermines our ability to represent our native, indigenous, or developing meanings and epistemologies (as has been well demonstrated in the applied linguistics research literatures on language and authenticity and language policy). This problem leads outsiders to believe that we Pacific Islanders are not capable of thinking critically and deeply about issues, have nothing original to contribute from the basis of our native knowledge of our own culture(s), or that we have nothing new to say—that researchers and other scholars from the metropolis have exhausted all the possibilities. Yet we know when we read work by these researchers and scholars on the Pacific just how very much is missing.

Second, Subramani emphasized the need to move away from the vision of Oceania projected by Anglo-European scholars and writers. Surely this movement away must include a dehierarchizing of what seems to be an increasing tendency to celebrate a few Pacific Islander writers and to bypass others. Over the years I have often come across excellent work by Islander writers who have been essentially ignored by the Pacific Islander community. The writers who seem to be most recognized in the hierarchy are, ironically, those who sell the best in Anglo-European markets. They also seem to be those who have mastered the discourses of Anglo-European writing and scholarship. It is rather hypocritical of us to argue for a Pacific Islander voice while we uncritically employ the standards and evaluations of Anglo-Europeans.

Third, we need once and for all to eliminate the Anglo-European categories that still tend to imprison us in outdated, meaningless terminologies that divide us rather than unite us, as well as determine our discursive practices. Here I am thinking especially of category labels such as Melanesia, Micronesia, Polynesia, Indo-Fijian, Chinese–New Guinean, and the like. These category labels come with a host of assumptions that are deeply embedded in colonization. We need to develop a new vocabulary that is more equalizing and respectful of cultural diversity and gender. Certainly it is easy to get rid of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia, and refer to people by their islands, that is, by place and space. In fact, we Pacific Islanders never use such labels when we meet each other. Maori will say they are from Aotearoa, someone from the Cook Islands will say “I am from Rarotonga,” or another island of the group. We never say, “I’m a Polynesian” or “I’m a Micronesian” or “I’m a Melanesian.” The people who most need to be educated on this point are researchers from the metropolitan countries, especially anthropologists, because Anglo-European anthropological scholarship on the Pacific is deeply divided into “Melanesianists,” “Polynesianists,” and “Micronesianists.”

In a similar vein, we need to work for more interchange among our institutions of higher education in the Pacific Islands. We seem to hear more about the University of the South Pacific than we do about the University of Papua New Guinea or the University of Guam, the various colleges in Samoa, Tonga, and elsewhere. Yet some of the upcoming writers and scholars are located in these seemingly less-celebrated institutions.

Subramani has also correctly alluded to the need to change the educational systems in the Pacific Islands. There is a growing research literature on schooling in the islands, much of it produced by native or indigenous

scholars. An essential issue is the medium of instruction, which continues to be English almost everywhere in the Pacific Islands beyond first or second grade. The issues of language of instruction, curriculum design, pedagogical strategies, and so on are still inextricably tied to the colonial tradition, the new form of which is the global capitalist system to which Subramani pointed. The issue of language of instruction is also tied to the complex local language situations in many Pacific Island nations (eg, the Solomons, where there are at least seventy indigenous languages, a lingua franca, and several immigrant languages, in a population of about 400,000). What can we do about such complexities? We need to be working on this issue seriously, as Subramani has argued.

An educational issue we most need to deal with, according to Subramani, is the classroom as one of the most undemocratic spaces in the learning process in the Pacific Islands. Of course this issue is not unique to the Pacific, but has been written about extensively in regard to classrooms worldwide (and has generated a large educational research literature). An important approach for us is to draw from our native or indigenous cultures ways of reconfiguring classroom organization and pedagogical practices. Most important, teachers must be transformed. Doing so is not easy, because Pacific Islander teachers themselves have been educated and then trained in Anglo-European classroom practices, and often resist change. They often want to preserve the very power structure that must be dehierarchized. One strategy to assist change is holding classes in venues other than the traditional classroom. Another is to use modes of instruction derived from traditional strategies for teaching (eg, see Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 1992, 1994).

With regard to epistemologies, we need to investigate and understand the epistemologies already in use among Pacific populations, as well as think about constructing new Pacific epistemology(ies).

When we think of existing epistemologies, it is useful to make a distinction between native or indigenous epistemologies and local epistemologies. By native or indigenous epistemologies, I mean ways of theorizing and constructing knowledge that are part of native or indigenous cultures in the Pacific (see Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo, and Meyer, this issue). Such cultural ways of theorizing knowledge date back to precolonial times and continue today, whatever changes they may have undergone in the intervening period. By local epistemologies, I mean ways of theorizing and constructing knowledge that reflect the hybridity of cultures and ethnicities living together in local spaces in the Pacific Islands. An example from

the Solomons is the ways of knowing and theorizing knowledge that are emerging in the urban context of Solomon Islands Pijin-speaking hybrid populations; contributions come not only from various Solomons indigenous cultures, but also from the immigrant populations of Chinese, I-Kiribati, Anglo-Europeans, and others.

Today there is a groundswell of work by scholars and writers in the third world on native or indigenous epistemologies and knowledge systems. By doing this work, we in the third world are demonstrating that we are on the threshold of decolonization at the level of dehegemonization. To achieve dehegemonization, we must question our own knowledge, to understand its sources and its impacts on our everyday life. We need to understand through critical eyes the ontology that this knowledge has defined and continues to define for us. Attendant on colonization is an ontology that defines Pacific Islanders as incompetent when measured against Anglo-European values and expectations. Such assumed qualities of incompetence have come to be seen as something within us—something we accept, believe, and take as a given—such that we are dependent on Anglo-European ontology and epistemology to function in contemporary Pacific societies and the larger world community. We “otherize” ourselves on the basis of this ontology. Native or indigenous and local epistemologies are viable avenues through which we can interrogate this artificial ontology with the aim of building ontologies that are more genuinely “us.”

How do we interrogate this ontology? Through epistemological questioning. We ask, What can we know? How do we know what we do know? Which beliefs can be justified and which cannot? What are we going to take as “justification”? What is the difference between “knowing” and “true beliefs”? What kinds of information constitute knowledge, and what kinds constitute mere opinion? What is the relationship between seeing and knowing? These questions are universal epistemological questions, of course. The important point for us Pacific Islanders is that when we ask these questions, we do so from the context and standpoint of our indigenous or native and local epistemologies. More critically, we ask these questions in the interest of epistemic transformation, which facilitates dehegemonization in the Pacific.

To examine our indigenous or native and local epistemologies themselves as epistemologies, we need to ask, What constitutes the process of knowing in this epistemology? Who can be the knower? What can be known? What is knowledge? What are the epistemological strategies for acquiring knowledge? What strategies of argumentation, inferencing, and

justification are employed in this epistemology? What are the discourse practices involved? How do different ways of (re)creating and (re)constructing knowledge within an epistemology and among varying epistemologies help us move toward the new ontology(ies) we want to imagine in the Pacific?

In addition to work on ontology and epistemology, we need to write about our indigenous or native philosophies. Toward this effort we must begin by deconstructing prior work on our Pacific cultures, which for the most part has lumped our native philosophies under the rubrics of “religion,” “magic,” “sorcery,” “ancestor worship,” and other sweeping labels. We need to do this, first, to set the record straight that Pacific Island cultures, like other human societies, engage in philosophy. Second, our indigenous or native philosophies are indispensable to our indigenous or native and local epistemologies and ontologies.

All this will no doubt read as being anti Anglo-European scholarship. Some will feel that we Pacific Islanders are simply trying to find excuses to slam the door shut in the face of researchers from the metropolis. But it's not about them. It's about us. It's about us Pacific Islanders ourselves and who we want to become. It's about our ontology, and what we want to create for our future generations. What good is political independence if we remain colonized epistemologically? if we remain unable to think outside Anglo-European frameworks? So much about our Pacific cultures has been (re)presented to us by researchers and scholars from outside our region that we sometimes doubt our own cultural knowledge. We have been charged with having only our lived experience to hold up against the privileged simulations from these outside scholars. That is why it is indispensable that we Pacific Islanders ourselves do this epistemological work.

Subramani has urged us to work together to create a Pacific voice. In my interpretation of his meaning, ontology would be that unified voice. However, a Pacific voice raises new questions. Are we going to develop a single Pacific voice? Or an umbrella sort of voice that embraces a multiplicity of Pacific voices? Surely it must be the second. To opt for a single voice simply replaces one hegemony with another and repeats our colonial experience. On the other hand, we all sense that there are unifying connections among us. This sense was reflected in the blossoming of publications on “the Pacific Way” in the 1970s. That work, however, turned out to be overly generalized and less helpful than we had hoped. The new work beginning now on indigenous or native and local epistemologies holds the promise of moving us closer to identifying converging perspec-

tives and understandings that transcend sociocultural and sociolinguistic boundaries in our islands, and that are meaningful to us as Pacific Islanders. The new work has the power to do this because it springs from within—within ourselves, both individually and collectively.

### Note

1 *Indigenous* now has two meanings among Pacific Island scholars and activists. First, it refers to fourth-world people such as M ori, Hawaiians, and Aborigines—people who were colonized and are still colonized in their own society; this is a political definition. Second, someone who is not of mixed blood. *Native* now means people who are of mixed ancestry living in the place of one or other parent. For example, persons of part-Hawaiian ancestry who were born and live in California can call themselves “native Hawaiian” but not “indigenous.”

### References

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