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# INTERWEAVING CREATIVE CRITICAL SENSE-MAKING THROUGH A BODY OF KOLOA: AN EXPLORATORY EXAMINATION OF FALANOA AS AN INTERGENERATIONAL ARTS-BASED RESEARCH METHOD

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**Abstract:** Storytelling through the arts is embedded in Pacific cultural ways and is meaningfully expressed by interweaving history, genealogy, cultural values, and beliefs. My investigation into Pasifika students' success as Pasifika in visual arts was revealed through the students' artworks and stories. Visual art teachers' beliefs, attitudes and pedagogical practices were also examined to illuminate the critical role they play in affirming Pasifika student success as Pasifika. The inclusion of my own experiences and artworks as a visual artist of Tongan and German descent, grounds the research project and offers voice to my creative critical sense-making process. This article also presents an exploratory examination of *falanoa*, alongside Caroline Scott Fanamanu's analysis, as an intergenerational arts-based research method, specifically in the context of my own body of *koloa*, a personal collection of treasured artworks generated across a 30-year period. Recognising my duality of distinct ancestral worlds, this article suggests that *falanoa* can be a valuable method for arts-based research, particularly in the context of creative critical sense-making, cultural preservation, and intergenerational knowledge.

**Key words:** arts-based research; visual arts; creative critical sense-making; storytelling; intergenerational knowledge; culturally sustaining pedagogies; koloa; falanoa

As an interdisciplinary artist, social justice activist and art educator, I believe storytelling through the arts is a powerful lever for those like me of mixed ancestries, residing in *tu'atonga*,<sup>1</sup> to critically sense-make my (in)-between lived experience (Tielu, 2016). Furthermore, the Moana<sup>2</sup> constructs of *tā-vā* further enable my sense-making to understand and employ the nature of time and space and how I mediate my distinct ancestral worlds (Māhina, 2017; Seve-Williams, 2017). This notion is reflected in Hau'ofa's (1993) belief in an individual's right to be custodians of their own knowledge and identity so that their realities are not only learned and understood, but also shared.

Whatever we produce must not be a version of our existing reality, which is largely a creation of imperialism. It must be different and of our own making. We should not forget that human reality is human creation. If we fail to create our own, someone else will do it for us by default. (Hau'ofa, 1993, pp. 128–129)

From my earliest memories, I have felt my (in)-betweenness. I look different from those of the dominant culture here in Aotearoa, New Zealand. My name, Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck, looks and sounds different. My parents speak different languages, and our family traditions are different. Being different is part of the framework of my identity and has played a fundamental role in the way I see and relate to the world. My parents' well-meaning decision at the time to only speak English to their children compounded my sense of feeling like an outsider. Throughout my schooling years, I never had a teacher or lecturer who reflected me, nor did I have conversations with teachers about my chosen identity, an experience that made me feel culturally invisible. My art teachers, however, through their deliberate actions, recognised the creative capacity in me. They encouraged me to use my art as a platform and vehicle to tell my story (Lythberg, 2023). From that time onwards, my visual art teachers critically invoked the confidence I needed to pursue a personal journey of identity-making through the arts. My passion for the arts and desire to inspire others to discover the possibilities I found through this field, led me to teach visual arts at a full primary school, ranging from 5–12 year-olds. With ten years of art teaching experience, I embarked on a master's study to look at how a sample of Aotearoa New Zealand secondary teachers supported Pasifika students' success in culturally sustaining ways (Alim & Paris, 2017). My experience as an educator in a system that continues to endorse and perpetuate dominant Western discourses of power and knowledge led me to critically consider ways in which Pasifika learning contexts can be honoured, validated and embraced.

This article is prefaced with my master's research and examines the importance of understanding Pasifika success from Pasifika perspectives. The investigation involved studying teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and pedagogical practices and whether these could affirm Pasifika students' success as Pasifika. It also entailed exploring how Pasifika students' success was enacted through their artworks and stories. Students' voices were at the heart of the research, and I offer two students' courageous viewpoints. I review key concepts of culturally sustaining pedagogies and offer insights

into key findings. I proceed to locate myself in the research with a chronological examination of my art-making practice, highlighting aspects of my creative critical process, alongside major artworks. I endeavour to introduce the notion of *falanoa* in its infancy stage of conceptual thinking, reflecting the initial stages of my PhD journey. I also am grateful for a collective voice and welcome Tongan knowledge holders and scholars, Caroline Scott Fanamanu and Langi'o'uiha 'Isileli Lātū Tangulu (*Tufunga mea'a*) and Tongan academic Melenaita Taumoefolau, with their offerings to the conceptual possibilities of *falanoa* as an arts-based analytical tool. Beyond my personal creative journey, the more profound impulse of this research is providing critical discussion that could support the empowerment of my Pasifika<sup>3</sup> community through the arts.

### **See Me, Know Me, Believe in Me: The Potential for Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies in Visual Arts Education**

In 1995, at the age of 23, I was the first woman of Tongan descent to graduate from Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland, notwithstanding the first within both my ancestral lines to undertake tertiary education. Unpacking my road to perceived academic success reveals a journey fraught with inequities and barriers within a colonised art education system (Dyck, 2021), yet the attainment of success in terms of seeking a better quality of life is a topic that is inherently and consistently woven throughout the history of Pacific communities living in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Likewise, the drive to pursue further opportunities is the main cause of migration across the world. Such was the case of my ancestors, whose adventurous spirits propelled them to travel vast expanses of lands and oceans. By navigating their inner compasses, they sought to fulfil their dreams of a better life. From the stories of my paternal great-grandparents, Hermann and Martha Dyck owning a bakery in Sandhof, Germany, my maternal great-grandfather, Viliami Wolfgramm's talent as a boat builder, and my maternal grandmother and namesake, Vaikalafi Hemaloto's talent as a dressmaker, I learned that, through my veins, runs traces of my elders' creative and entrepreneurial capacities and a quest for determining their own destiny. Both my bloodlines reflect the idea that there are practices that communities have sustained over time and are a repository of historically intergenerational cultural practices (Lee, 2017).

### **The Significance of Pasifika Success as Pasifika**

Pasifika art forms are interwoven into the everyday lives of our Pacific community and provide us, Pasifika peoples, with the means to enact our identities. From a Te Moana-nui-ā-Kiwa/Oceania lens, funds of knowledge, including the arts, are enacted in our communities through cross-disciplinary and relational experiences, with Indigenous creative knowledge holders nested in our own family or community (Bishop, 2003; Si'ilata, 2014). Thus, visual arts education is a powerful platform for Pasifika students to

embrace success as Pasifika (Dyck, 2019). As a conceptual umbrella, the term Pasifika entails linguistic, cultural, and geographical diversity. The Ministry of Education has found the term Pasifika to be a consistent and useful way to encompass the Pacific populations in New Zealand (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2007). Historically, Pasifika as a social label did not always consider the grounded island-specific identities and differences embedded within Pacific communities represented in Aotearoa New Zealand schooling. For this article, I have opted to use the term Pasifika because of my and the participants' grounded stories in the whenua (land) of Aotearoa predominantly, through birth or having grown up and been educated in New Zealand; yet, our expressions in visual arts learning echo language and representations symbolic of our ancestral cultural ties with our parent/s' homelands in the Pacific.

The significance of this study lies in its critical examination of Pasifika perspectives in visual arts education, since prevalent Western views in education tend to measure success in terms of individual efforts of performativity and efficiency, traits prized for financial wealth and economic independence (Nairn et al., 2012). In contrast, within Pacific communities, education is valued through reciprocal relationships, *talanoa* and *tā-vā* constructs. There is a need for a holistic approach towards education, where students are provided with a sense of belonging to a learning village (Helu-Thaman, 2000). A holistic stance brings students and their families to work together to achieve academically and feel comfortable as individuals. For Pacific peoples, successful learning is not restricted to effective teaching strategies; rather, it "sits on the pillars of the family, the community, cultural capital, collaborative relationships and institutional support" (Chu et al., 2013, p. 4). Pasifika success is enabled by validating what students bring to the classroom, which is reified when a safe space or *vā* relational connections are purposively created.

## **A Pasifika Approach to Methodology and Methods**

For this small-scale study, the research settings were two English-medium secondary school visual arts departments in Auckland. The Pasifika research methodologies of *talanoa* (Vaiolēti, 2006), the philosophical lens of *Teu le Va* (Airini et al., 2010) and the *Tapasā* framework (MoE, 2018) were all enacted to examine whether the teachers' visual-arts practice aligned with Pasifika cultural competencies. *Talanoa*, or co-constructed dialogue, were carried out with two visual arts teachers, one of Samoan ethnicity and one European Pākehā, and four Year 12 or Year 13 art students of Pasifika ethnicity. *Talanoa* with the teachers were framed similarly to semi-structured, in-depth conversations that included a range of guiding questions and were conducted face-to-face to facilitate a sense of belonging (Halapua, 2013). The students engaged in a group *talanoa* using a range of guiding questions. The decision to include visual evidence aligned with the view of *talanoa* as a storytelling method. This visual storytelling was a key qualitative component of the research since it enabled me to

explore the students' accounts of how different teaching and learning approaches can promote Pasifika students' success in visual-arts education. Triangulation consisted of finding connections between data collected from the schools' visions, the teachers' accounts, the students' stories, and artworks to validate findings.

## Notions of Success Through the Voices of the Students

Given that my secondary school experience as a student was over 30 years ago, I was intrigued to see how the narratives of Pasifika students were enacted in the current state of visual arts education. Luiz, a 17-year-old painting student, was a first-generation New Zealander of Samoan and American Samoan descent. For Luiz, the drive of his ideas came from recounting his personal story (see Figure 1). He said, "I want to use my story, but I want to put their stories into my art because that is me, that is authentic" (Dyck, 2019, p.42). This keen sense of resistance and social activism prevailed throughout Luiz's art-making process. It was evident that, for him and the other student participants, their storytelling articulated authentic Pasifika narratives that showed vulnerability, resilience, and courage. His determination to tell the complete story of his community describes an important aspect of culturally sustaining pedagogies where students' lived experiences are given space for expression yet recognise the blurry line that rests between sustaining *survival* and sustaining *liberation* (Wong & Pena, 2017, p. 119). He explained:

The city [South Auckland] is beautiful ... but most of our art comes from the streets. So, everything that is from our art is like all the situations like even the killing or whatever, that is our Polynesian stories like the dawn raids and all of that because that is art, like the art of protest and everything to me. That is art to me. (Dyck, 2019, p. 42)

**Figure 1**  
*Luiz's Final Printmaking Artworks*



Morgan, a 17-year-old painting student, was New Zealand born of Māori and Samoan descent. The selection of art as a senior subject offered Morgan the ability to “open up more and develop” her ideas. Morgan confided to me that she found a feeling of freedom in the art room. She elaborated: “You are given the standard, and then you are able to explore.” She reflected on other subjects that required her to “sit down in front of the computer.” Morgan voiced her frustration over the teaching methods developed in other subjects, in which structure and resources fail to reflect her Pasifika identity. Morgan critiqued the teaching practices in other subjects as disengaging. She said, “Teachers give you a piece of paper and tell you to do this essay and follow the criteria.” In contrast, she considered that her art class was the only subject where she was able to express her true and whole self and determine her narrative, an aspect that was evident in her art-making process and imagery (see Figure 2). Morgan’s experience echoes Beyerbach’s (2011) view of the arts as a field that has the potential of providing space for marginalised voices to be heard. This pedagogical aspect constitutes a powerful motivator for students’ success and offers the possibility of enacting a sense of social justice in the classroom.



**Figure 2**  
*Morgan's Final Printmaking Artworks*



### Key Findings: Students' Voices

**Visual arts offer students safe space to express their voices and stories.** The students' stories, both visual and verbal, reflected their position in the world. Their family background had clearly shaped students' awareness of their place in society, a knowledge that was reflected in their artmaking and personal imaginary. The students' storytelling articulated authentic narratives that showed vulnerability, resilience, and courage. The students' work provided me with the opportunity of witnessing approaches that embodied a sense of voice and social justice through the visual arts. By standing in their truth, the students demonstrated the potential that visual arts education can offer to the wider community as a space of dialogue and social empowerment (Beyerbach & Ramalho, 2011; Giroux, 2005). For the students, their stories were intertwined with their personal, family, and community worlds; there was no separation between these dimensions of their lives (Si'ilata, 2014). The students brought all these views to the art room, and, in doing so, they offered me the opportunity to observe deep connections between their ideas and social justice issues.



All the students viewed visual arts education as the only subject where they could determine their own narrative and express themselves. They considered the visual arts as crucial to explore personal issues and interests. Each student perceived the art room as a safe and inclusive space.

A common perception among students was the notion of the art room as the only place in the school where they were encouraged to bring their whole selves, providing both visibility and position to their artistic selves (Seppi, 2011). Here, rather than reproducing artworks, the students criticised, questioned, and challenged stereotypes about cultural identity and art (Beyerbach, 2011; Seppi, 2011). Through this framework, the students' voices are given space, and their narratives are validated (hooks, 2010).

### **Conclusions Drawn from My Findings on Pasifika Success**

Whilst small in scale, this research confirms that implementing a Kaupapa Pasifika and a *Tapasā*-inspired lens for visual arts education could make a valuable contribution to Pasifika secondary students aiming for success as Pasifika in visual arts. My investigation, however, revealed critical issues in relation to the external examination process and the lack of current Pasifika resourcing for artist models, aspects that reflect a discriminatory criterion. Despite these problems, my research established that the following factors contributed to the success of the Pasifika students as Pasifika:

- *Tapasā*: enabling and guiding teachers to realise Pasifika student potential and achieving and sustaining educational success through the cultural competencies' framework;
- Seeing the student through a holistic approach: acknowledging the multiple aspects and worlds that Pasifika students enact and relate with;
- Knowing the student: building reciprocal relationships based on mutual trust and respect that delve beyond surface features to deeply know, care, and understand the student, family, and community;
- Believing in the student: offering space for Pasifika students to explore and express their personal narratives.

The four Pasifika students strongly appreciated their relationship with their teachers and considered that this was fundamental to succeed in visual arts. This supportive and reciprocal relation enabled the students' ease in the art room and openness to express their whole selves through their artworks. This experience reflected the view of several theorists who emphasise the connection between success with students' relation with their teachers (Alim & Paris, 2017; hooks, 2010; Milne, 2017). Thus, for Pasifika students, success means implementing broad pedagogical practices that promote Pasifika to bring their own experiences, culture, and identity into the learning process.

## Final Thoughts on Reimagining Pasifika Visual Arts

The research revealed that there is still important work to be done to address the persistent disparities in the educational outcomes for Pasifika students through a collective effort to “challenge institutionalised racism and all other forms of discrimination embedded in national educational policies, practices and pedagogies” (Dyck, 2021, p.16). This critique focuses on decolonising education and seeks to examine issues about Pasifika reclaiming their epistemological and ontological spaces from ongoing colonising practices. Closing this section prompted me to reflect on the moment that propelled this research 30 years ago as a year 13 student of Tongan descent. These memories led me to ponder how different my life would have been without the critical support of an art teacher and the subsequent army of educators and members of the Pasifika community who have championed my growth and development. Despite the academic lens pursued through this research, at my core, I am an artist. As Lady Tuna has whispered into the chambers of my soul, “You can have all the perceived knowledge, but without a connection to your heart and your people, it is all for nothing.” (Personal communication, October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019). This journey is not individual; it has been and will always be community driven. In the next section, I contextualise and voice my lived experiences as a practising artist over the last three decades.

### **My Body of Koloa: *Papata Pe, Ka Na’e Lalanga* – It May Be Coarse in Texture, but it Was Woven**

**Early explorations: the 1990s.** Born of an immigrant family of hybrid cultures, Tongan and German, and raised in *tu’atonga*/diaspora, grappling with self-identity is a by-product of my seeking to connect and belong. I am cognisant of the dangers imposed through an imposter syndrome and the need to settle and unsettle notions of “blood, genealogy, kinship and *fonua* sense-making” (Dyck et al., p.45). The complexity of my experience is recognised here,

Problematic to my context with a multi-racial bloodline and an upbringing located in the diaspora favouring the English language is the validity of my interpretation of critical sense-making. Therefore, if epistemologies and ontologies are translated and demonstrated through lingual and embodied practices, how do those of us with partial or denied access find our sense of belonging and worth? (Dyck et al., p. 46)

As a visual artist, my modality of sense-making has found its strongest voice when anchored in my creative process. I appreciate when the confluence of ideas and materials offers invitation to methods of exploration and understanding, processes that require levels of vulnerability and curiosity. Early in my artistic career, I recognised the importance of referencing and rendering objects, patterns, and artefacts from within my

bloodlines. In this space, I felt the safety of my ancestors and the willingness to explore beyond what I could understand on the surface. In my early works, my investigation into historical ethnographic objects, often collected by eighteenth-century explorers such as James Cook, was made possible through ground-breaking catalogues, *Artificial Curiosities: An Exposition of Native Manufactures* (Kaepllar, 1978) and *The Art of Tonga: Ko e Ngaahi 'Aati' o Tonga* (St Cartmail, 1997).

**Figure 3**

*Cup, Coconut for Kava*



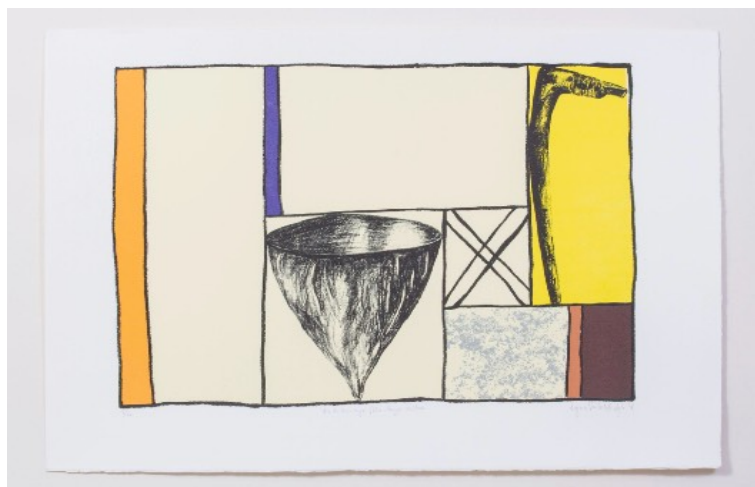
*Note.* 11.5cm. Collection of Auckland Museum Tamaki Paenga Hira, 1982.195, 50123.3.

**Figure 4***Hafted Adze with Handle*

*Note.* 1700s, Tonga, maker unknown. Gift of Lord St Oswald, 1912. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. Te Papa (FE000375).

*Die Kultur–Anga faka Tonga–Culture* (1998) is characteristic of my early print practice, revealing mixed references relating to my European and Tongan influences (see Figure 5). The deliberate use of the three languages in my title alludes to my cultural exploration. Importantly, it is restricted to visual and material references; the extension of the cultural concepts is yet to be developed. This selection of artefacts was indicative of my creative process in the late 1990s. At that time, the rendering of these objects “fascinated the artist due to their sculptural form, beauty and age” (Vallee, 2012, p. 10). The two artefacts (see Figures 3 & 4) were sourced from St. Cartmail’s (1997) *The Art of Tonga*. By recontextualising collected artefacts in my compositions, they are more than curious objects; they are also vessels of history, community and ancestry (Tonga, 2010). Integral to the overall image, I attempt to keep compositions simple, with a chromatic range that harmonises and enhances the deliberate open space. This decorative lexicon illustrates my earlier bodies of prints, namely vivid colours, areas to breathe, a harmonious structure, an irregular grid, Tongan historical objects, and an attention to objects’ materiality.

**Figure 5**  
*Die Kultur–Anga faka Tonga–Culture*



*Note.* 1998. Screen print. 620 x 460 mm.

**Developing knowledge, values and motherhood: the 2000s.** Moving from the 1990s into the 2000s was a transition period synonymous with becoming a mother. The development of my visual language mirrored my increasing interest in understanding the Tongan cultural referents through the values they imbued. This is summarised in an artist statement I penned during this timeframe:

Within the realm of Tongan culture, *koloa* is defined as textile arts. Women have focused on the production of bark cloths, mats, waist garments and woven basketry, and these are still amongst the most prestigious material objects to the Tongan people. Moving beyond the tangible objects, I have explored the intrinsic values of *'tapu'* (sacredness) and *faka'apa'apa* (respect) embodied in *'koloa*. Included in my works are forms of Tongan dress such as the *'kiekie'* (waist garments worn by women to formal events) as expressions of honour, respect and duty.

Threaded throughout my work is a visual process that documents the transformation of raw material to woven treasure. I am exploring layers and marks with a confidence that is intuitively led. The work remains sectionalised as tradition proclaims, but the palette combines the energies and colours of a modern Pacific landscape with the subtlety of customary bark cloth. (Dyck, 2012)

The return to my first love of painting and visceral shift in mark-making using drips of ink and thick streams of paint is evident in *Here She Comes ...* (2012) (see Figure 6). After spending the previous eight years raising my family, as the title depicts, a moment of arrival and celebration is captured. What is expressed within the vivid colours and the layers of gestural marks is a visual narrative depicting the personal complexity of balancing motherhood, a new teaching career in a primary school, and the rebirth of my arts practice and voice between cultural references and influences. Stevenson (2008)

recognises the deepening of *koloa* in my work as an opportunity to assert not only an identity, but also knowledge. Motifs that have previously been articulately rendered now sit between, under, submerged, and hidden from one another. Patterns are repeated through the accumulation of layers, differing in size and colour and the emphasis on balance, shape, line and texture. The application reflects the inner workings of the artist herself, someone that is becoming more confident and assured in her (in)-betweenness. *Here she comes* ... suggests a narrative that is affirmative, dynamic and (re)-energised. The unleashed expressiveness is personal and vulnerable, encapsulating a readiness and internalised reality to trigger further explorations of my personal voice. Vallee (2012) describes *Here she comes*... as an expression of my “full re-appropriation of the cultural references in a contemporary and personal voice ... and stands as a synthesis of an internalised reality, the pictorial/visual essential expression of the complexity of the artist’s self” (p. 41).

### Figure 6

*Here she comes...*



*Note.* 2012, Acrylic and ink on canvas and feta’aki. 2250 x 1500. Private Collection.

**Grounding my voice: The recent years 2016 to 2022.** The internal explorations surrounding my pictorial expression continued over the next decade, which acknowledges the (in)-betweenness of a sense of place and connection as a longitudinal theme throughout my oeuvre. Throughout these years of art making, I sought to move beyond the visual level of cultural referents and explore Tongan concepts embodied through the production of *koloa*. Deeper examinations of patterns and the stories they embody throughout the Pacific held my interest and became the impetus for my first public gallery exhibition, *Kofukofu Koloa* (see Figure 7), at the Gus

Fisher Gallery, the University of Auckland. My artist statement sought an understanding of the role and multiple meanings that the objects adorned with patterns held within their community and societal context:

There is no escaping the way in which pattern is woven throughout the stories of the Pacific, whether the patterns that appear are bound, knotted, wrapped, plaited, stamped, or rubbed using natural and local plant resources, they are simply an essential thread to each of our Pacific nations' societal structures. The Kingdom of Tonga is no exception.

Tongan-derived patterns of the past were produced with raw materials such as coconut palm and pandanus and found on all manner of artefacts within everyday life. Nowhere more exquisite are these patterns found than within the fibre and textile arts, known as '*koloa*', which are produced predominantly by women. These objects include *ngatu*, *fala*, *kiekie* and *kato alu*. These are the most prestigious material objects for the Tongan people.

The focus on the importance of women and their role in the production of everyday household items and those that had a ceremonial status within a Tongan context are critical aspects in honouring these artisans. As a result, I have sought to investigate not only the objects that Tongan women have created but also the multiple meanings in which these objects are expressed or, indeed, gifted back within their communities. As noted by Graeme Were (2005), 'Age-old and everyday, threads are a fundamental constituent of social life, and their continued transformation into textiles, baskets, mats and fabrics speaks volumes about their centrality in sustaining cultural beliefs, values and identity in society today.' (Dyck, 2016)

The exhibition investigated the notion that "within a Tongan societal context, the performance of ceremonial culture based on the production, exchange, and gifting of *koloa* is a rich and powerful way to provoke conversations that acknowledge the role and responsibility of women as conduits of recording history yet framing the future" (Dyck et al., 2022, p. 44).



## Figure 7

### Aunty Ungatea's Bed



*Note.* Gus Fisher Gallery, University of Auckland. Opening night of Kofukofu Koloa. Photo by Sait Akkirman.

The collection of works highlighted the gaps in my knowledge and understanding regarding the intricacies of manufacturing *koloa*; therefore, the creation of my own *koka'anga* (group of women) helped to shape different elements of the exhibition and signalled the ambitiousness to execute the creative vision. I enlisted the help of knowledgeable female relatives, Lesieli Tukuniu and 'Ana Hemaloto, to fold the *koloa* under *Aunty Ungatea's Bed* (2016) (see Figure 8). The *faiva* of stacking the bed was undertaken without an audience yet demonstrated a beautiful example of *mānava* and *manava*, recognising that the production of making *koloa* and then the process of maintaining and storing it, become opportunities for women to regenerate and share their knowledge (Dyck Et al., 2021). The order of the fold is critical, and each carefully placed object highlights how memory is created and embodied in material culture (Tonga, 2016). My aunt Ungatea's bed elicits such personal childhood memories of time spent in her home on stilts in the heart of Nuku'alofa, and a fascination with her tall, imposing four-poster bed, resplendent with a circular mosquito net. It was here that my sister and I were made to sleep, an act of *'ofa* (love) and *faka'apa'apa* (respect) beyond

my comprehension at the time. *Aunty Ungatea's Bed* toys with the notion of the readymade by re-presenting sourced objects and *koloa* within the gallery context.

### Figure 8

*Folding the koloa for Aunty Ungatea's Bed*



*Note.* Assisted by Lesieli Tukuniu and 'Ana Hemaloto.

Additionally, the site-specific installation *Seven Sisters* (2016) (see Figure 9) are to be read as a homage to the female art forms all sourced within *koloa*. The first and sixth sisters represent the weave of *fala*, the second and fifth feature *kiekie* strands, and the third and seventh depict *ngatu*. I am the fourth and middle sister, “soaking up the influence of all the other sisters who are represented through lines and colour” (Tonga, 2016, p. 77), effectively portraying a sense of wholeness, as my role as an artist, a woman and a connection to *koloa*.

**Figure 9**  
*Seven Sisters*



*Note.* 2016, Acrylic and Indian Ink on archival relief printed paper. Each 410 x 4200mm. Photo by Sam Hartnett.

A further significant exhibition, *'Amui 'i Mu'a: Ancient Futures*, presents the artistic culmination of a Marsden project funded by the Royal Society of New Zealand (see Figure 10). Alongside senior Tongan artist Sopolemalama Filipe Tohi, our roles were as artist-scholars on *Ancient Futures: Late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century Tongan Arts and their Legacies*. Over five years (2017–2021), we worked alongside art historian and anthropologist Billie Lythberg, historian and anthropologist Phyllis Herda and linguist Melenaite Taumoefolau – all based at The University of Auckland, art historian Hilary L. Scothorn and international colleagues to examine art objects of exchange and encounters between Europeans and Tongan islanders in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, now held in museum collections worldwide.



**Figure 10***'Amui 'i Mu'a – Ancient Futures*

*Note.* In situ 2021, The Pah Homestead. Photo by Raymond Sagapolutele.

A central intent of the project was bringing together our different knowledge bases to provide opportunities for the (re)interpretation of ancient items in contemporary works and (re)claiming of Tongan narratives to (re)create legacies for the future. Drawing on new significant inspiration from the garments worn by my ancestors *Relishing the Splendour* (2021) (see Figure 11) continues my exploration of *ngatu* bark cloth motifs and tightly woven *kato alu* and *kato mosikaka* baskets, *kiekie* (waist adornments) and *fala* (mats). The title for this ten-colour screen print references a composition written by Her Majesty Late Queen Salote Tupou III, *Hā'ele ki Pilitānia – Her Majesty's Trip to Britain* (Tuku'aho, Kaeppler, Wood-Ellem, Taumoefolau, 2004 pp.192-193). It was composed during her official visit to attend the Coronation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in the month of June, 1953. The Queen, after the Coronation, visited other European Countries, including Geneva, the capital of Switzerland. She was impressed with the beauty and vastness of the Great Geneva Lake. Her *Hā'ele ki Pilitānia – Her Majesty's Trip to Britain* poem eloquently describes the majestic landscapes of my own other ancestral roots, yet gently reminds us Tongans that, despite the geographical distances, Tonga never leaves us. It evoked a tacit connector to the hybrid nature of my cultures and an opportunity for further critical, creative sense-making.

**Figure 11**  
*Relishing the splendour*



Note. 2021, Limited edition screen print. 0950 x 0650.

### **Hā'ele ki Pilitānia – Her Majesty's Trip to Britain**

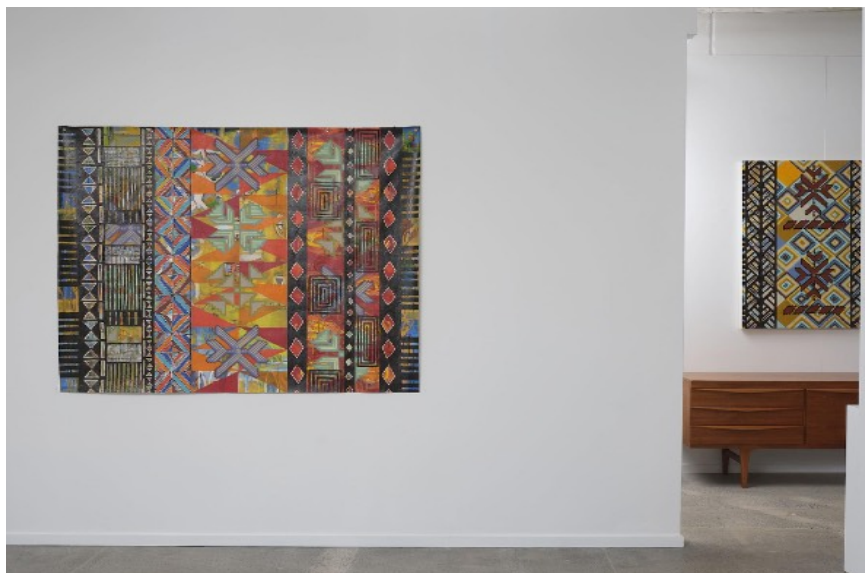
Mata me'a fo'oua	Seeing new things
Siofia he masani	Relishing the splendour
Mātanga e fonua	Scenery of the land
Mo e hala he kanali	Route through the canal
Vai tō he mo'unga	Waterfalls on the mountains
Mo e 'akau he tele'a	Flora of the valleys
Fakalelu ne hounga	Timely comfort
Ki he loto kāvea	To a love-torn heart
Ko e matangi kehekehe	Varied winds
Angi he 'otu tahi na	Blowing in the seas
Ko e talanoa 'eke	Inquiring
'O ha'ate fiefia	About my pleasure
Tala hono fakaofu	Wonderous is
Si'i le'o 'o natula	The dear voice of nature
'Oku ongo he loloto	Echoing in the deep
Ko hoto pāletu'a	My shield and support
A'usia 'ete 'alu	My journey reached

Kolomu'a e maama	The city of lights
Ko e fakatalutalu	From ancient days
Ne ngangatu hono tala	Its fragrant tales
Seti'anga siueli	Where jewels are set
Tapa 'aho mo e pō	Radiant day and night
Kalauni 'o e 'ofa	Crown of love
Ko si'oto manako	My heart's dear choice

Kolo 'o e fakauō	Festive city
'Uta'anga fiefia	Source of joy
Si'i taloni e melino	Throne of peace
Mo e ano 'i Siniva	The lake in Geneva
Tuku e tāpuaki	Blessings received
Lau ai 'ete mālō	Gratitude recounted
Foki 'i he 'alovili	Returning in the longing
Ki he vaha mama'o	For the great ocean

<i>Tau:</i>	<i>Chorus:</i>
Fie lau si'a ipu	Let me speak of the cup
Ne fonu mahuohua	Overflowing with goodness
'O tatau ai pē	The same
He la'ā mo e 'uha	In sun and rain
Kaekehe ne takua	Depicting
'A e 'Otu Felenite	The Friendly Isles
'I he langi 'oku nunu	In a sky studded
Ai e palanite	With planets

**Positioning the now: 2023 and beyond.** The forging of a new gallery relationship late in 2022 provided the catalyst for my most recent body of *koloa*. As in many Pacific languages, the word *talanoa* (Fa'avae, 2017) is used to describe telling a story, having a conversation and connecting with others. My latest collection of *koloa* entitled *falanoa* is an ode to this Indigenous concept associated with communication and expression. It situates the foundation of *fala* (woven textiles) as the medium for activating my voice, critical reflections and an ongoing process of sense-making as a German-Tongan woman living in Oceania's diaspora (see Figure 13). The embodied form of knowledge historically woven into our Tongan *fala* is my starting point of exploration as I engage, sense-make, and plait together the strands of my hybridised culture. Her late Majesty Queen Sālote (Bain, 1967, p. 77) eloquently describes this as “Oku ‘ikai hiki hotau hisitōliá ‘i he ngaahi tohi, ka ‘i hotau ngaahi fala,” “Our history is written, not in books, but in our mats.”

**Figure 12***A gift of thanks (left) and Signs of Industry II*

*Note.* In situ at Orexart Gallery, Auckland, February 2023. Photo by Sam Hartnett.

My art making process again involves my own *toulālanga* (collective weavers). I recognise the assistance of Māori contemporary visual artist Alexis Neal in her technical assistance and support in bringing *fala efu* (Figure 12) to life. A metaphorical insight to understanding the interlacing wefts of *fā* (pandanus) fibres and the artform of *lalanga* (weaving) within Tongan society reflects a “commoner women’s textile-work as a key medium in the ongoing process of hybridising Tongan culture for the contemporary ‘modernity plus tradition present’” (Young-Leslie, 2007, p. 115).

A studio visit and *talanoa* with Caroline Scott Fanamanu<sup>4</sup> offered time and space for acknowledging the creative process and intent. I include Caroline’s abridged reflection of our afternoon together:

As much as we delight in Queen Sālote’s truth, our histories are written in our mats, so too, is our Tongan saying, “*Oku hangē ’a e Tangata ha fala’ oku lālanga*”, mankind is like a mat being woven. I have been blessed to grow up with Tongan treasurers and lived experiences, but I must admit, life, not just in *Tu’a-Tonga*, but in this day and age, much work and knowing has dwindled, been reformed, lost and replaced.

You have rejuvenated memories of my grandmothers’, aunties’, mothers’, our Tonga women’s gentle voices of guidance, confidence of delegation. We cannot separate ourselves from this extraordinary *koloa* we have created. Before we come to this earth, a *fala* is already woven to welcome us and, through our life, we will come across some kind of woven *koloa* til the day we die and wrapped



with our final adornment, the mantle of *efu*, the *fala* that returns to the land, the dust, *efu*. I wondered at your work and thought about the kinds of *fala* that are purposed for our Tongan lives. We are the writers, the narrators of our existence. Just as we are the biological carriers of our blood and genealogy, we are the practical storytellers in our *lālanga*.

**Figure 13**  
*Fala efu*



*Note.* Wall installation, twenty-seven pieces of unique screen print and relief printed, hand cut and woven works on Hahnemuhle paper. Photo by Sam Hartnett.

Within the Tongan cultural practice of *talanoa*, communicating understanding and expression relies on one's application of *tala* (story, stories) to explore and unpack *noa* (ordinary, unknown) from others during their social interactions (Vaioleti, 2006). My deliberate use of *falanoa* positions the *fala* (as a cultural material/object) as the initiator of exploration and unpacking of *noa*. Placing the term *fala* in front of *noa* positions the material mat as the vehicle (and source), enabling stories and meaning making of *noa* as an unknown. For an oral society, Tongan material objects also matter to the practice of storying. This way of invoking reflections and stories resonates with Tongan (and

other Indigenous) peoples' appreciation of onto-relational epistemology (Dyck et al., 2022; Vaai, 2021), bringing forth a relational understanding that knowledge and perceptions of reality are deeply interconnected in our ways of becoming in the world. And that material objects carry understandings of such cultural knowledge and lived realities.

## Introducing *Falanoa*—*Fofola e fala kae talanoa e kāinga*—Roll out the Mat So the Family Can Dialogue

*Falanoa* is in its infancy of exploration and conceptualisation as a potential tool for analysing our own Indigenous-specific methodologies and methods (Matapo, 2021). As a visual artist, I am often challenged by the idea to name my creations, reflecting my emphasis on the creative process and preferring the viewer to remain open in their reading of my artwork. In the struggle to title my most recent exhibition, my good friend, Samoan educator and artist, Pip Laufiso, prompted me to describe the body of work and the impetus behind it. I explained that, as part of the continuum of my research and exploration around Tongan *koloa* (Herda, 1999), I chose to focus solely on *fala*. It was then that Pip highlighted the connection between *tala/fala* and *noa* and suggested merging it to become *falanoa*. The light went on, and I intuitively knew it was the title that held not only the physical body of work together, but, more importantly, the essence of my intent to explore *falanoa*'s potential as an analytical tool.

The perpetual creation of a new visual language reflects the unknown *noa* (space) in which I work and the mobilisation of a vast lexicon of visual references. It is my response to making and developing a unique syntax reflecting my intuitive creative interests in mark-making and painting and where I am with that in the studio. American contemporary visual artist of Ethiopian American descent, Julie Mehretu, whose paintings and prints depict the cumulative effects of urban socio-political changes, processes complex history with the present moment. Mehretu (2021, n. p.) explains the paintings become “visual neologisms” that combine the work and inventions of past artists “to address when language isn’t enough.” Visual neologisms offer a fresh perspective on established ones, an opening for things to come together and evolve differently, thus enabling an ever-expanding vocabulary for the audience. *Falanoa*'s origins reflect this fluidity and innovative field of exploration.

Recognising my lack of understanding of the nuances of Tongan ways of talking (Taumoefolau, 2012), my creative sense-making process requires further exploration and guidance. Enacting elder pedagogy (Dyck, 2021), a conversation with Melenaite Taumoefolau (see Figure 14) elicited from her the following abridged musings:

*Falanoa* is a neutral place of the object (mat) that allows people to navigate in their equal sense, invoking an inclusive feel when rolling out the *fala*. The intention is for people to join you and sit there. *Fala*'s position before the *noa* allows the stories to sense-make of the ordinary or the unknown. The *fala* itself

activates the stories rather than the oral (*talanoa*), and there is something that the *fala* does in activating those stories. This approach to analysing *talanoa* by privileging the non-living material (*fala*) presents an opportunity to explore arts-based methodology through three layers of analyses, the decorative, the functional and the symbolic. (Personal communication, April 3, 2023)

### Figure 14

*Dagmar Dyck with Dr. Melenaite Taumoefolau and Caroline Scott Fanamanu at her artist talanoa on fala*



*Note.* Orexart Gallery, February 2023. Photo by Lee-Ann Turton.

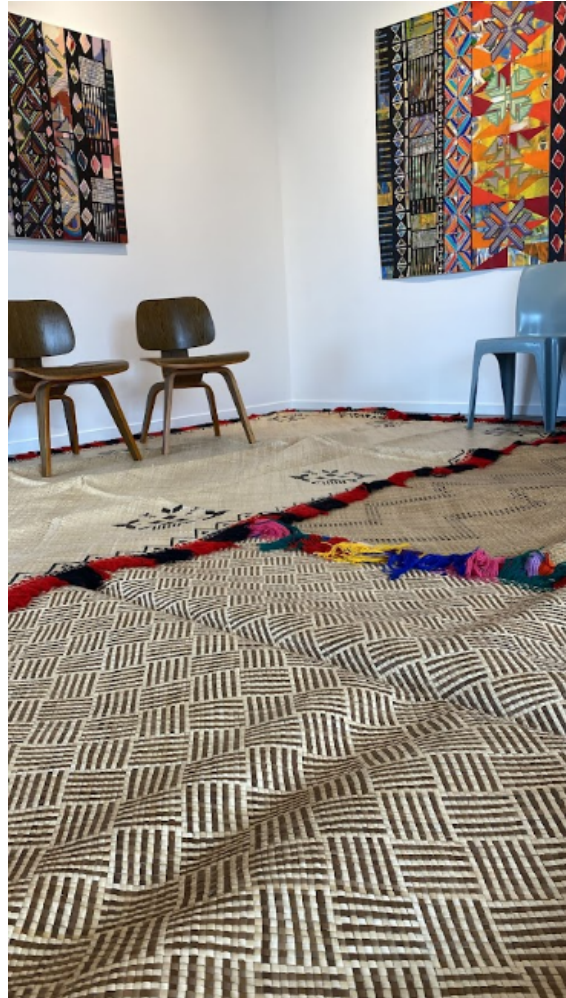
Further adding to our collective *talatalanoa* Caroline Scott Fanamanu presents an analysis of her experience and insight into how *fala* is embodied:

**Kalo (Caroline) Scott Fanamanu.** My relationship and experience with *fala* are natural and generational. It is in my blood, on my body. I walk on it, sit on it, sleep and eat on it. I receive counsel on the *fala*, I speak out, and *talanoa* (talk) on the *fala*. Birthed into this world, from the womb, I am laid onto my prenatal cradle of *ngatu* held together on *fala*. I am received with *fala* into this world, and I am accompanied with *fala* to *Pūlotu* (the afterworld) upon my earthly death. *Fala* and these forms of communication are interwoven, embedded and grow within each other. It can be comfortably argued *fala* cannot solely rest its entire value, existence, in static perceptions of use and purpose. If we are to think *fala* can only be a *fala* in the physical

form of pandanus weaving, we instantly refuse *fala's* natural ability to transmit knowledge and other woven forms of communication through generations. To underestimate its transformative nature diminishes preserved and new knowledge, more importantly, its *mana*.

As I walk into the art gallery featuring *falanoa*, the *fala* laid down on its floor is already a striking perception, unfamiliar and provoking one to think and speak (see Figure 15). There are three, one of which has the bold *efu* (dust) motif, which alludes to the *fala efu*, one's burial *fala*. In addition to *fala* on the gallery floor is *falanoa* on the walls. *Fala* is not only *fofola* (rolled out) on the floor but also on the walls. They surround me. The only other time *fala* presents this experience to me is when it is physically wrapped around and over my head when I wear a large bereavement *fala* as a *liongi* (the lowest ranking relative of the deceased). *Fala fihu*, *fala efu*, *fala pāongo* and other *fala* are terms to describe different physical materials that embody ideas constructed to symbolise status, wealth, artistry, mark an occasion, enact noble character, all of which are acknowledgements of people and place. They are the *fala* of the people. In general, the Tongan psyche perceives *fala* to be possessive of cultural values and power; however, it is not possible for anything, and something such as *fala*, not to have its own life source. Tongan spirituality accepts that nothing is without something of its own. The continual transference of any *koloa*, cultural treasures like *fala* is propelled by its own essence recharging in time outside of our minds. Considering this, *falanoa*, in my opinion, is, therefore, the *fala* of the *fala* itself, ultimately, and very rarely an acknowledgement of the pandanus, the essence as a receiver rather than the commonly known giver. This entails generations of evolving nourishment, a compelling nature that sets *falanoa* apart from its tangible form, the freedom from temporal constraints.

**Figure 15**  
Orexart Gallery laid with *fala* for the artist *talanoa*



*Note.* February 2023. Photo by Leela Bhai.

I wear my parents' *fala* on my right thigh, and on my left is my own *fala* (see Figure 16). I was marked with these *fala* by Papua New Guinea *tufunga* Julia Mage'au Gray. The *fala* I wear on my skin embodies my parents' physical '*fala efu*' and my *fala pae*, I was born onto. My parents' physical *fala efu* will never be seen again since their burial. My physical *fala* is frail, in multiple places tattered and torn. Their transference onto my skin has preserved its beauty, its symbolic values and maintained its function to clothe and enact *talanoa*. My skin *fala* is an example of *falanoa*, the living presence of *fala*. These *fala* will be passed down to my children and future generations either in the same way or in other forms they choose. Re-sourcing the essence of *fala* preserves it, multiplies it, remains sharable and accessible, it empowers individual strength rather than highlighting social power and status.



**Figure 16**

Caroline Scott Fanamanu's markings by tufunga Julia Mage'au Gray



*Falanoa*, in my opinion, is a recent and modern form of *fala*, that creates the same purpose as the traditional context of *talanoa* and *fala*, that gives meaning to the Tongan saying, “*fofola e fala kae talanoa e kainga*” – “let’s roll out the mat so our kinsmen can talk.” It is a platform symbolic in terms of a physical mat that is being rolled out. *Falanoa*, is another art form of *fala* hanging on the wall with the same patterns of weaving but on canvas. The term *fe’unu* is the prepared flax that has been cut, lined, dried, and stripped. They are interwoven to form *fala*. *Falanoa* is the interweaving of the colours with brush strokes, weaving in materials in a similar manner and patterns.

While physical *fala* is still very much around, this *falanoa* is now being introduced into our society, a different form of *fala* that will allow us to preserve and sustain our *fala* knowing and knowledge beyond natural resources. Langi’o’uiha ‘Isileli Lātū Tangulu (Tufunga mea’a). (Personal communication, April 3, 2023)

The imposing question, now, is not what is a *fala* but, rather, what kind of *fala* is presented? As noted by Taumoeofolau in our collective conversation (Personal communication, April 3, 2023), if the physical woven *fala* is decorative, functional, symbolic, then, arguably, *falanoa* is the feeling, emotion, voice and time of *fala*. Its *mana* is independent of human bias. As Tufunga Langi’o’uiha mentioned, *falanoa* is a form of *fala*, rather than an art form of *fala*. I go further and argue *falanoa* is the *fala* of *fala* itself, the life source and essence even before its chosen physical form. *Falanoa* to me, reminds us that physical forms of pandanus *fala* are only a portion of its existence and

importance. The concept of *falanoa* is the physical and spiritual, the life source of *fala*, connecting with human life source, creating an opportunity to balance power dynamics, to balance dominant and subdued voices that are often accentuated on the physical *fala*. *Falanoa* brings us renewing energy to create any form of *fala* to amplify its beauty, function and symbolic value from within its essence, and less with purposes that produce division. In reality, *fala* is free from this.

### Ongoing *Talatalanoa*

Threaded throughout Caroline's embodied references is her rallying cry to recognise *falanoa*'s transformative nature, its potential to bring forth new knowledge and opportunity to balance power dynamics. In essence, *falanoa* presents a duality of sense-making expression and modality, regardless of one's chosen identity. For me, personally, it depicts my ongoing journey of critical, creative sense-making and a space to explore my (in)-betweenness. My art practice is rendered in the (re)constructing, (re)contextualising, (re)purposing and (re)imagining of Tongan art forms that I have long admired. I may not speak fluent Tongan but translating and galvanising traditional and ancestral knowledge into contemporary art forms is my personal response and resistance work to 'being Tongan' (Dyck Et al., 2022). Additionally, *falanoa* evokes an ontological positioning that activates perceived non-living things that carry lived stories and experiences to activate comprehension beyond the abstract or the mind and into the locked door, soul and heart. As Melenaite describes, "It offers a platform for rigorous *talanoa* – it is modern yet traditional at the same time and has the potential to withstand the onslaught of modernity and globalisation, and it can champion the local and traditional and give them balance." (Email communication, 24<sup>th</sup> July, 2023). Therein lies the aspiration to write a new version of history in our mats.

*'Oku 'ikai hiki hotau hisitōliá 'i he ngaahi tohí, ka 'i hotau ngaahi fala.'* 'Our history is written, not in books, but in our mats' – The Late Queen Salote



## Acknowledgements

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For my elders,  
for your teaching, healing and expertise in survival and resistance.

Lady Dowager Tuna Fielekepa

*“Ko e me’a mahu’inga taha ‘i he mo’ui ko ‘etau tauhi vā lelei mo e kakai. Pea ‘i he ‘ene pehee, kuo pau ke fai ia ‘i he manava ‘ofa māfana... pea neongo te ke ‘ilo faka’atamai ia, ka ‘e ‘ikai hano tatau mo hono fai ‘aki ia ‘a ho loto mo’oni.”*

“The most important thing in life is our relationship and connection with people. And, with this, there must be warmth ... you can know it in your head, but it is in your heart that matters.”

Fatu Feu’u

*“O Tufuga Tomai I Aganu’u o fa’amalama e fa’aali ai a latou Tu ma Aga I Fenua. Afai latou te le mafaia o le a le mafai foi ona Fa’ailoa Tu ma Aga a o latou Atunuu.”*

“Artists are the windows to their own cultures. If they fail, then their communities fail.”

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> A generative and constructive positionality that enables creative critical theorising utilising Tongan knowledge, ideas, values, and practices outside of Tonga, my maternal ancestral homeland.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'moana' refers to both the ocean and Oceania.

<sup>3</sup> Tanya Wendt Samu (2020) and Si'ilata et al., (2017) provide a historical account of the term Pasifika and its relevance during the 1990s in Aotearoa New Zealand. Although I use both Pasifika and Pacific when describing Pacific-heritage peoples, each has a different meaning. The term Pasifika collectivised our peoples from mainly Polynesia in the 1970s, speaking back to the injustices at the time. Today, as people from other parts of the Pacific choose to reside in Aotearoa New Zealand, the term 'Pacific' is also significant to their response to turangawaewae (sense of belonging in Te Reo Māori).

<sup>4</sup> Personal conversation with Caroline Scott Fanamanu, Pacific Studies Lecturer, University of Auckland.