

Teaching Women's Histories in Oceania: Weaving Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Being within the Relational Mat of Academic Discourse

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This article examines the experiences of a Pacific Islander woman creating and teaching a course on women's histories in Oceania in a Pacific Islands Studies program at Brigham Young University-Hawai'i. Weaving curriculum rooted in the experiences, encounters, and voices of Indigenous Oceanic women into Pacific Islands Studies programs is crucially needed to identify, recognize, and articulate why and how the making and remaking of women's spaces provides a more inclusive and fuller understanding of relational ontological, epistemological, and harmonious centric worldviews in and of Oceania. The *Women in Oceania* course is comprised of imagined, created, and expressed voices of Indigenous Oceanic women scrutinizing philosophical and ideological colonial imprints of what is present and what is missing in academic discourse. By opening her students to the legitimacy of Indigenous knowledges, the author shows how they can weave a rich mat of educational discourse that includes both Western and Indigenous methodologies.

Several years ago, I created a class called "Women in Oceania" to add to the curriculum within a Pacific Islands Studies program at Brigham Young University-Hawai'i. The first week I assigned the reading of Caroline Ralston's "The Study of Women in the Pacific" (1992). I read Ralston's work first as a graduate student at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa over a decade ago and it still resonates with me. In "The Study of Women in the Pacific," published in the early 1990s, Ralston seemed to consider how including "women" in the title would attach negative connotations to the scholarship by assuming it excludes men or creates a women (us) vs. men (them) binary (1992). When teaching my Women in Oceania course I have not been preoccupied with whether I should include "women" in my course title. Nor do I ponder how to address the erroneous preconceptions when people hear the title of my course in the

Pacific Islands Studies program and assume this course is “women against men,” another iteration of a feminist class for women, or perhaps a “woke” class in the current American #Metoo movement. I am focused on making and remaking women’s spaces and voices in Oceania in order to understand Pacific Islands and Pacific Islanders. In any Pacific Islands Studies program the making and remaking of women’s spaces is crucial to cultivating relational ontological, epistemological, and harmonious-centric worldviews in and of Oceania.

My paternal nanny used to treat pregnant women in her village of Manunu (Sāmoa) and surrounding villages, as a midwife with Sāmoan medicinal remedies. She traveled by foot when called upon for help. In Figure 1, my nanny, Tauavae Sinive Maugatai Keller, was in her 30’s, photographed here during a school event at Papauta Girls School. She



Figure 1. Tauavae Sinive Maugatai Keller, Papauta Girls School.

would walk to pregnant women in need and help them with Sāmoan healing remedies to not only alleviate pain but to also help them

throughout their pregnancy and share information about which medicinal properties from plants could help with different types of pain. Her Sāmoan medicinal remedies and treatments are not written in any language anywhere. I know of her experiences administering treatments in her district because she told them to me. Her stories are my stories. Her strength walking miles to treat pregnant women in need is my strength. I share her stories as a midwife in academic spaces because Indigenous epistemologies and Indigenous medicines directly improve and enhance academic discourse in various disciplines and college units. I have never felt that Sāmoan knowledges were outside academic discourse because in my mind they are equally useful and just as scientific as anything else we were being taught in “classrooms.”

However, what I’m seeing now are philosophical and ideological colonial imprints embedded into my students’ values; in their view their Indigenous knowledges such as Indigenous medicinal treatments are only parts of “story telling” and not valued as academic discourse. My curriculum sets a different tone and more importantly presents the research methodology of the production of knowledge assigned in class that leads us—as a class and as scholars—to how we know what we know. I oftentimes ask my students to think about how they know what they know, what they have learned from scholarly communities but also from experiences, family traditional practices, and the (re)production of culture and then I challenge them to include these different histories and different relationships to the canon of Western scientific knowledge in their academic work. The value in this reframing of knowledges and the production of knowledges is to discover uncomfortable truths about how we have been educated, what “expertise” or “experts” we resolutely were told to believe, and ultimately the limitless modes of seeing beyond Western seeing and ways of knowing. For me, here at Brigham Young University-Hawai‘i, the importance and value in learning and participating in the making and remaking of women’s roles in Oceania is because it is widely believed to be non-academic discourse. My Pacific Islands students didn’t learn their Indigenous knowledges from books or in schools but in homes and villages (Indigenous classrooms). My focus is to reinforce the value and importance of these Indigenous knowledges

and to show in my Pacific Islands Studies courses that they are just as important as any other philosophical or scientific concept taught in classrooms.

Tama'ita'i Atamamai (Learned Women)

Teresia Teaiwa, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Haunani-Kay Trask, Selina Tusitala Marsh, Lupematasila Misatauveve Melani Anae, Tuiloma Manumaua Luafata Simanu-Klutz, Lisa Taouma, Konai Helu Thaman, Sia Figiel, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Maria Talaitupu Kerlake, Luamanuvae Luafataali'i Sa'iliemanu Lilomaiava-Doktor, Grace Mera Molisa, Tamasailau M. Suaali'i—each of these women and more before me tell the stories and experiences of Indigenous women. Teresia Teaiwa reframes learning within an Indigenous Oceanic worldview by reimagining the classroom not as a static space but as a metaphor for a canoe in her 2005, “The Classroom as a Metaphorical Canoe: Cooperative learning in Pacific Studies;” a journey where each member of the canoe is important to the cooperative learning process (Teaiwa, 2005). Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Haunani-Kay Trask, Tuiloma Manumaua Luafata Simanu-Klutz, Lisa Taouma, and Trinh T. Minh-ha collectively express the need to understand the devastating historical impact of Western cultural academe within institutional structures and approved research methodologies. They point out that the very act of research and the (re)conception of imperialism are embedded deeply in the systems and institutions we belong to and for the most part belong in at various levels. Linda Tuhiwai Smith's 1999 article, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, details how we see, literally, “through Imperial eyes” to neglect Indigenous ways of understanding and knowing; but that this may be overcome by encouraging Indigenous Oceanic scholars to conduct research and scholarship that embraces our Indigenous epistemology and axiology. Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Tamasailau M. Suaali'i, Konai Helu Thaman, Luamanuvae Luafataali'i Sa'iliemanu Lilomaiava-Doktor, Selina Tusitala Marsh, Maria Talaitupu Kerlake, Lisa Taouma, Grace Mera Molisa, Lupematasila Misatauveve Melani Anae, and Sia Figiel consistently contribute to women's histories of Indigenous scholarship, performance, poetry, and documentary

production of knowledge. They do this by situating the differences between Oceanic women and the Western conception of the “Oceanic woman” in order to dismantle fixed notions of identity and epistemic racism. Many students are shocked to realize school systems and the educators trained in these institutions decide not only which knowledge is superior, but also what constitutes “knowledge” in the first place.

These stories I weave together in a relational mat of Indigenous ontology, epistemology, and axiology, feeling I will widen our lens of perspective and understanding of Oceania. I find the Oceanic metaphor of weaving the mat useful in the analysis to untangle the dominant Western-centric relational mat, paving the way for constructive reweaving of inclusive non-Western epistemologies to enhance academic discourse. I first heard the metaphor of weaving the relational mat from Joan Tofaeono-Filemoni during her guest lecture in my Women in Oceania class as she discussed her book *Reweaving the Relational Mat: A Christian Response to Violence Against Women from Oceania* (2007).

Often times, Pacific Islands students entering university systems learn in postcolonial classrooms and in postcolonial education systems with school textbooks that erase our Indigenous epistemology and reeducate minds to Western methodology, theory, and pedagogy. In most classrooms, scientific methods are taught to be the superior mode to evidence science, knowledge, and validation of an idea (hypothesis), in opposition to Indigenous scientific inquiry and methodologies that are nice to talk about in homes but not scientific or academic enough to serve a global citizen in class discussions. Knowledge is not immutable. Indigenous knowledges deepen a collaborative dimension that embraces complexities of histories, experiences, events, and conceptions of the production of ideas and thoughts that have shaped growth and development. The production of knowledges continually happens in context, and Indigenous knowledges are central to the ongoing creation and recreation of academe.

Teresia Teaiwa poignantly lamented, “The university is undoubtedly part of our colonial heritage in the Pacific. But the paradox

of colonialism is that it offers us tools for our liberation even as it attempts to dominate us. Education is the perfect example of this colonial paradox” (Teaiwa 2005). For example, when Pacific Indigenous students courageously declare in classes that the Pacific Islands are the largest blue continent in the world, professors will quickly correct them with an atlas map, pointing out to them the “small islands” in the Pacific Ocean. The Pacific Indigenous worldview that the ocean is part of our personhood-landscape is challenged by colonial worldviews of Oceania in classrooms (Hau’ofa 1994; Teaiwa 2002).

As a political scientist I constantly confront my discipline’s dimensions and reframe Western-coded frameworks of colonized reality in spaces like the political and social view of “equality.” In my Women in Oceania course, my political science background may provide complex understanding within specific dimensions, but concepts like “equality” within my course curriculum can be dehumanizing and create feelings of “less than” in cultural spaces of learning. I see students trying to decolonize the colonized school systems and I try to not impose Western terms and meanings onto cultural spaces of learning. I can say honestly, this is a constant struggle for me. I think this is also a struggle for my Pacific Islands students. I reflect back to when I first read and felt a strong connection to Konai Helu Thaman’s “Decolonizing Pacific Studies: Indigenous Perspectives, Knowledge and Wisdom in Higher Education.” I continue to feel strongly that her positionality in locating colonized impacts to our minds, ways of knowing, and the importance of including what she argues as “the perspectives, knowledge, and worldviews of the Indigenous people of Oceania in the curricula of formal education, particularly higher education” are significant to decolonizing our internal colonized reality (Thaman, 2003). In making and remaking women’s roles in Oceania, I recognize our colonized reality in the colonized classroom, shared by both lecturer and student. My dual efforts are to reclaim Indigenous Oceanic philosophies, ways of knowing, and perspectives in academia; but more importantly, to decolonize our internal colonized reality.

From the outset, I reframe Indigenous students as experts of Indigenous Oceanic epistemology and axiology with much to contribute to academic discourse, including research and essays, and the continuation of their journeys into the professional workforce or graduate schools. Linda Tuhiwai Smith calls for this paradigm shift in higher education for the development of Indigenous students as researchers and as more than only “story tellers.” I make every effort to ensure my Pacific Islands students are (re)taught the value of Indigenous Oceanic philosophies; researching and writing about them to reimagine the canon of “classics” (Smith 1999). Students taking my class are sometimes enrolled in English courses that require them to read literature “classics”—authors like Robert Louis Stevenson, Herman Melville, and Jack London who continue to reinforce the foreign consumption of garlanded Pacific Island women who sit idly without contributing much to village economics or social interactions beyond reproduction and companionship. After Stevenson’s first encounter with Pacific Island women, he wrote that the island’s mountains became to his gaze “volcanic breasts.” *Typee* by Melville reeks with foreign desire, exploitation, and further sexualizes the “exotic” natural women of the Islands (Sturma, 2002; Said, 1979). Reimagining the “classical” canon means students confront and rewrite these assigned texts in their minds as they tell their lived experiences and invite each other into spaces of sharing to remake the imaginations of foreigners still consuming Pacific Island women (us) in literature that is about us but not by us (Vaeau, 2009; Marsh, 2009). This reworking and reweaving of the Western canon is the relational mat my course and my teaching aims to foster.

Potuaoga Saogalemu (Safe Classroom)

Cultivating a safe and inclusive space for learning, I seek to find similarities in imagining and philosophical mapping within the canoe (canoe being the metaphorical classroom). I assign Sia Figiel’s poetry, “Songs of the Fat Brown Woman,” in the unit of Women in Oceania titled, Third World Differences to Western Conception of Women. I use Figiel’s presentation of the imagery, fear of embarrassment, and collective conceptions of what is a “fat” woman, to facilitate honest and sometimes

painful discussions of body shaming that Western and Eastern dominant ideologies perpetuate through images of female beauty in the media, movies, and social media—particularly Instagram where #skinnygirl size 6 shoe is a symbol of beauty. I assign literature that is rooted in conceptions and language of similarities in experiences, contributions, obligations, and “fatness” as a symbol of beauty and strength, which in many spaces can be an indicator of being “healthy.” In “Songs of the Fat Brown Woman,” Figiel reconstructs the “fat” brown woman as the conception of beauty that is seen and reseen:

When the fat brown woman hops on the bus the girls
and boys whisper
and men and women whisper
and children and cat whisper whisper
and pigs too sometimes
watch her sway
sway sway
and her arms moving like dat
and a shaking like dat
is her tummy too
They make room right behind the skinny
bus driver who gives her a big fat wink
the fat brown woman takes out a bright red
hanky wipes the sweat off her brow
pats her cheek
adjusts her dress/her bra/
her hip
chase away the flies

give the bus driver a mean look
is going be a long way to market

So you can look all you want
and you can watch all you want
and you can stare all you want
but the fat brown woman will keep
swaying her hip
keep swaying her hip
all the way to town. (Figiel 2003)

Figiel directly centers the conception of “fatness” and her (re)conception of “fatness” and “brown woman” as a project to decolonize the Oceanic Indigenous human condition that has been imagined, defined, and shaped by the dominant Euro-American production of knowledge and influence. Figiel positions the understanding of the Indigenous social reality informed by everyday experiences and practices to rupture normalized categories of beauty and brown woman to oppose structures and languages that employ foreignness.

Selina Tusitala Marsh’s “Fast Talking PI,” and Tuiloma Manumaua Luafata Simanu-Klutz’s “On Being Samoan, On Being Woman E au pea le Ina’ilau a Tama’ita’I,” show that as Pacific Islander women, they make and remake the roles of girls and women and the ways of understanding these roles in poetry (Marsh, 2009; Simanu-Klutz, 2002). We watch together as a class and listen to Marsh’s rhythm and captivating intonations inserted into the stereotypes of Pacific Island women in Aotearoa:

'Fast Talking PI', 'criminal PI, behind the bar graphs PI...
fale PI...harvesting PI, copra sacking PI...
heart disease PI...ava pouring PI...
go for God PI...I'm a size 15 in fuchsia please...
I'm a no shoe fits the foot of a earth mama.' (Marsh 2013)

There is peace and solidarity found in Marsh's cadence. The shared understanding is that we, as Pacific women, are reimagined by the observations, studies, and writings made about us, without us. Which is why Simanu-Klutz's poetry connects in a primal sense to our personhood and reengages the students with the multiple dimensions of themselves as women and the spaces they possess internally and how they can participate and lift their voices in remaking the roles of women in Oceania. She eloquently writes:

We, the *Tamaitai* —
We, the tualuga
Have perched our breasts at the rooftops
Basked in the sun; the leaves around our waists
rustle in the breeze.
We shout: Our Tautua, our Pule!
Our Service, our Power of being
Samoan, of being
Woman!

Not a bra burner; not a lone star
A Woman rethatching; a morning dew
settling the dust of the men's shame
Let not it drown it, but nourish it with

the Ina'ilau—the match, the thatch.

A remembrance of the *feagaiga*

Of being Samoan,

and being Woman.

'O ou mama na. (Simanu-Klutz 2002)

So often Pacific Island students engage with the expressions of poetry and the intellectual and philosophical freedom they feel and begin to challenge the internal colonized imagining of Pacific Island personhood with newfound ways of understanding and expressing knowledge outside the conventional Western-styled essay construction in university classrooms (Simanu-Klutz, 2002). The power Simanu-Klutz gives the Sāmoan woman within Indigenous Sāmoan personhood strengthens students' internal colonized imagining within the colonized classrooms to consider dimensions in which Indigenous personhood, values, and ways of knowing can be used in, with, in tandem, or in opposition to other theories presented to decolonize spaces. Then, from that space of recognition and strength perhaps the power of internalizing these strengths and critical self-reflection will translate into the ability and desire to speak on and through Indigenous ways of knowing with certainty and confidence. To feel, understand, recognize, and become empowered to share these ways of knowing is just as significant, scientific, and powerful for intellectual discourse in colonized classrooms to decolonize structures of epistemology, difference, and intellectual belonging. I believe this is where mana, intellectual empowerment, and Indigenous dynamism reveals itself, in the shadows of posturing unsurety to confront the internal colonized fear of judgment.

Instead, we acknowledge and proclaim that our Indigenous ways of knowing are significant to academic discourse. Frantz Fanon declared that decolonization can only be understood as a historical process that ultimately culminates in transforming the social order, dismantling narratives of differences (1963). These Indigenous poetry works collectively weave the mat to develop Indigenous knowledges, to

(de)construct narratives by reweaving the relational mat of awareness and difference that may not be easily understood in our own skin because of the cultural degradation we live in. Haunani Kay-Trask writes, “[a]s colonized people[s], we are colonized to the extent that we are unaware of our oppression” (Trask 1993).

O A’u O Lou Faiaoga (I am your teacher)

There are implicit bias obstacles in challenging the dominant Western discourse on non-Western knowledges, to understanding natural phenomena, political systems, or the perceived “accepted” protocols such as this little thing where students demand to know, “my qualifications.” Here at Brigham Young University-Hawai’i, I have had students ask for my qualifications during lectures where I employ non-Western methods for understanding the assigned curriculum. I had not experienced students demanding to know my qualifications during my lectures before and I wasn’t sure of the intention or purpose. This was not an isolated event but what I have noticed is that the students who questioned my qualifications were all non-Indigenous men. In those moments, Maria Talaitupu Kerslake’s face came to mind (Figure 2), and I could hear her gentle laugh. She doesn’t have a loud laugh like I do.



Figure 2. Maria Talaitupu Kerslake, Dean, National University of Samoa, and author.

Kerslake, my former dean and mentor at the National University of Samoa, was interviewed for the book, *Narratives and Images of Pacific Island Women*, and contributed: "I am your teacher" (Hippolite-Wright, Ram, & Ward, 2005). Her experiences in the 1970's are now mine. Kerslake recalls students questioning her credentials and qualifications to teach in Aotearoa:

But they kept asking me, 'Have you passed the university entrance exam?' 'Of course I have.' I even had to cough up my certificate although the school board had sent my marks. They wanted to see the certificate just to make sure it was a New Zealand university entrance examination.

I was teaching their sociology course and the midwifery option, and I was told that the lecture would be at nine o'clock in a certain room. I walked in, and there sat all these white, middle class women.

'Excuse me,' they said. 'Are you looking for the kitchen?'

'No,' I said.

'Are you lost?'

'No, I'm not lost.'

Then someone told me, 'The cleaning rooms are down the other way.'

And I said, 'No, actually I am in the right room. I am your teacher.' Even that experience was quite amazing because a lot of them couldn't take it, couldn't handle having a brown faced woman teaching them.

(Hippolite-Wright, Ram, and Ward, 2005)

I have queried colleagues on how they address demands for their credentials in their classes. Not surprisingly, the only educators that experience these, "what are your qualifications," demands are Indigenous women educators. I haven't found a papālagi educator come

across these demands during their lectures. Perhaps it could be because Pacific Islander women are still seen as the “Other,” faculty who - because of our race, gender, and assumed “FOB” or believed “foreigner” background - are not seen as the traditional faculty (O’Brien 2005). I/we am/are disrupting the traditional student-faculty relations where papālagi males are considered the traditional faculty and hold the positions of power; Pacific Islander women faculty of color are subject to being contested in the classroom. I use these experiences within academia to show modes and spaces in which we (re)make the roles of Pacific Island women. My doctorate, two master’s degrees, and over a decade of teaching experience are the standard of “traditional faculty.” These classroom encounters are opportunities to remake the image of the “brown-faced woman teacher” into the lexicon and imagery for Pacific Islander students, giving them the future confidence to assert, “I am your teacher.”

Reweaving the Mat of Indigenous Knowledges in Academe

I have found that teaching women’s histories in Oceania requires me to not only delve into spaces of culture and identity but also correct how those roles have been twisted inside the relational mat of academic discourse by colonization, patriarchy, and definitions of what is “traditional” by established exclusionary structures of power. Trinh T. Minh-ha (1986) has challenged the “traditional” conception and discourse by arguing:

Words empty out with age. Die and rise again, accordingly invested with new meanings, and always equipped with second-hand memory. In trying to tell something, a woman is told, shredding herself into opaque words while her voice dissolves on the walls of silence. Writing: commitment of language. The web of her gestures, like all modes of writing, denotes a historical solidarity (on the understanding that her story remains inseparable from history). She has been warned of the risk she incurs by letting words run off the rails, time and again tempted by the desire to gear herself to the accepted norms. But where has obedience led her?

We must question and challenge even what's been taught as "traditional." Producing ways of knowing and learning empowers learners; this is not power over anyone but the real power of higher education, the transformative power. Reweaving the mat of Indigenous knowledges in academe requires rethinking what questions are necessary in critical inquiry and encouraging the interplay of diverse methodologies, techniques, and strategies in order to broaden anticolonial discourse in studying women and histories in Pacific Islands Studies. Teaching women's histories in Oceania offers a space to facilitate the awareness, recognition, and validation of the legitimacy of Indigenous knowledges as pedagogic practice and praxis. This teaching supports diverse knowledge representations for structural, collective, and collaborative reconstitution of spaces in academe. The challenge is to develop discursive frameworks that address different philosophical traditions of Western, Eastern, and Indigenous theories and practices to achieve a fuller theoretical and philosophical understanding of the varied systems of knowledge. In this process, internalized colonial reality and oppression may be reseen and restudied in paradigms, philosophies, languages, metaphors, and symbols that recognize—as David and Karen Watson-Gegeo reveal—"Knowledge is never captured in its entirety, its end being beyond reach. Epistemologically, the idea is that when the knower can see the horizon, it means that person can also see what lies between the knower and the horizon, and can therefore develop strategies to create knowledge" (2001). In my experience, this process reweaves the mat of Indigenous knowledges and frameworks to reconsider what is social science knowledge and how to conduct research that embraces paradigms rooted in cultural frames of reference and Indigenous epistemologies.

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