

Heka He Va`a Mei Popo:  
Sitting on a Rotten Branch of the Breadfruit Tree:  
Reading the Poetry of Konai Helu Thaman

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BRIAR WOOD

*It is these very tensions, and not their absence, and not any possibility of resolving them, which makes me believe that the woman poet is now an emblematic figure in poetry, much as the modernist or romantic poets were in their time.<sup>1</sup>*

For me the *post* in post-colonial does not just mean *after*; it also means *around, through, out of, alongside, and against ...*<sup>2</sup>

... I believe that we in the Pacific ought to devise our own ways and means of judging and evaluating the worthwhileness of Pacific writing, a body of literature that is culturally rooted, meaningful and relevant for *our* particular contexts.<sup>3</sup>

The tensions to which the Irish poet Eavan Boland refers concern the entry of women as subjects into an English language poetic tradition that has predominantly, at least in the recent past, cast them as passive objects rather than writers and active practitioners of the art of poetry. Boland's discussion of her own set of specifically Irish cultural co-ordinates and the development of her career as writer is explored in terms of its difficulties and frustrations, but it also operates as a record of the achievements of a woman poet who succeeds in recording significant aspects of lives, times and social histories. The comment that the woman poet is an emblematic figure in the late twentieth century is, I think, very suggestive, since it enables the reader to make connections across cultures based on women's shared experience of female roles, yet remains open to interpretations that take into account cultural contrast and difference.

This reading of Tongan poet Konai Helu Thaman's poetry proceeds in the understanding that her writing has already been, and will continue to be interpreted in many ways. The essay has been developed in relationship to pedagogical concerns about readings of Pacific literature which raise cultural, national, linguistic, personal

and theoretical issues both in the Pacific and for those from geographical areas outside it. As the production of Pacific literature continues to grow, more and more readers and students from outside the region will develop a relationship with it. The purpose of this paper is to inquire into how this might proceed in terms of reading Konai Helu Thaman's poems, to identify some of the issues that emerge in reading the literature for outsiders and to raise questions for future reference.

Konai Helu Thaman has published four collections of poetry: *You, the Choice of My Parents* (1974), *Langakali* (1981), *Hingano* (1987), and *Kakala* (1993). Her identity as poet has been constructed from childhood, adolescence and various periods of residence in Tonga and Fiji, continued education in New Zealand, where she gained a Bachelor of Arts in Geography and the USA where she studied for her Masters Degree, as well as on-going international and inter-Pacific travel. A speaker and teacher in the Tongan language and in English language studies, she is involved in developing and strengthening Tongan language and cultural studies in the Kingdom of Tonga. At the University of the South Pacific in Fiji, where she currently works, Konai Helu Thaman holds a Chair in Pacific Education and Culture and the UNESCO Chair in Teacher Education and Culture, and is Head of the School of Humanities.

Her writing was developed during the 'first' or 'new wave' of Pacific writing in English in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Although there were significant publications before this period, the post-independence era was a period of growth and expansion in literary production. The poet herself has described it as 'the golden age of Pacific writing'.<sup>4</sup> The early poetry explores post-colonial ambivalence and postmodern irony in some detail. *You the Choice of My Parents* was immediately recognised as an important first collection. It contains short and carefully observed, sometimes satirical poems that comment on the social situation of Pacific Islanders both at home and abroad. Thaman has described the collection as 'not so much a protest collection as a lament about loss and misunderstanding. In terms of these moods, I would say that later collections weren't much different.'<sup>5</sup> The collections certainly mourn loss in a variety of forms: the loss of human potential through colonialism, sexism and undemocratic political events, failures in communication, the loss of customary ways of human life through geographical change and human

intervention, and the losses that inevitably accompany life in terms of change, decay and death. The tone can be melancholic in the sense that loss involves an understanding of the uniqueness and irreplaceability of time and place, but the psychic work of the poems can also be read as an attempt to symbolise the gains as well as the losses of cultural and historical change. In one of the volcanic images typical of the metaphorical word/landscapes of Pacific literature, the poet describes ‘. . . KAO erupting in my head’.<sup>6</sup>

Though never directly colonised, the Kingdom of Tonga has been affected by the ripples of colonial activity in the Pacific. Thaman describes her own formal secondary education as a colonial influenced one. She has spoken about the exclusion of local culture and the rote learning of selected British writing as the legacy of a colonial system. Yet she has also differentiated her own attitudes from those writers in the Pacific who grew up in cultures that had been directly colonised. There can be no easy fit between the varying, context-based status of Tongan women and the global generalisations that sometimes necessarily accompany feminist literary analysis. The history of Konai Helu Thaman’s kaainga (extended family) linked Tonga, Fiji and the Solomon Islands, where her grandparents were missionaries. Raised and influenced by a number of female relatives, she claims ‘They were very strong personalities and even though Tonga was and still is a patriarchal society it never occurred to me that there was anything the boys could do that I couldn’t do.’<sup>7</sup> A period in America, with its more informal attitude to language and literature encouraged her to develop her own poetry and her feminist beliefs have sprung from her experiences rather than from external or academic sources. It may be that the poet’s appeal across Pacific cultures can be attributed to some extent to this combination of her national heritage of Tongan independence, the Pan-Pacific emphasis on Fijian internationalism and the global confidence imparted by some identification with the United States of America. Later works, while retaining an international perspective to some degree, continue to explore a specificity and pluralism located in Pacific cultures.

### **Pacific Literature and Pacific Ways**

The diversity of Pacific literatures in English, their comparative newness and their basis in non-English language cultures means that they cannot be assumed to sit within the boundaries of contemporary

post-colonial literary theories, since so many of the latter have been developed with very little reference to the Pacific. It is my view that the continuing growth of Pacific literature, with its strong history of resistance to colonisation, emphasis on the preservation of indigenous languages and distance from colonial metropolitan centres will necessitate further shifts in theories of the post-colonial.

Chinua Achebe's essay 'The Novelist as Teacher'<sup>8</sup> located in the newness of African fiction in English draws a contrast between the role of the writer as social critic in European tradition and the uncertain relationship between writers and readers in African communities. The status of Pacific writers varies across time and location but it is arguable that this has been a source of strength since the idea of the literary is not contained and separated off in quite the same institutionalised ways that it has been in European culture. Though her medium is poetry rather than fiction, there is some compatibility in the development of Thaman's writing with Achebe's view that the socially active writer can encourage the young to value local culture in her own approach to her work. Proceeds from her poetry collections go back to the press in order to support less marketable publications about Pacific issues. In describing her literary development the poet emphasises the extent to which her composition of poetry in English developed out of the need to make an English language curriculum more accessible and acceptable to Tongan language students. This experience of the need to explain, communicate and find a middle way could also be understood in a wider sense as the on-going practice of the University of the South Pacific, where students from a wide range of cultural and language backgrounds meet, mix and work together.

Robert Kiste has written that '... for the indigenous people themselves, the very notion of a "Pacific region" and the identity of "Pacific Islander" have only become meaningful since World War Two.'<sup>9</sup> Though the terminology is new, an understanding of the long-standing cross cultural connections between what are, at this point in time, called 'Pacific' islands must surely precede Kiste's estimate. Epli Hau'ofa has argued the case for the existence in the South Pacific of '... a single regional economy ... the privileged groups of which share a single dominant culture with increasingly marginalised local sub-cultures shared by the poorer classes.'<sup>10</sup> At once decolonising and drawn unavoidably into an economic system dominated by

multinationals and military power, the Pacific, according to Hau`ofa, is ‘a sub-group of the global unit’. He describes intellectual groups in which most established writers participate, as ‘the intellectual arm of the ruling classes’.

Increasingly, he argues, these ruling classes are culturally homogeneous and ‘they speak the same language, which is English’ with variations on local languages modified through colonial contact. Ron Crocombe describes a generalised representative of this group as ‘The Pan-Pacific Person’.<sup>11</sup> Characterised by a childhood on a home island, followed by life abroad, inter-ethnic descent and marriage and multicultural schooling, the Pan-Pacific person moves between worlds and is frequently involved in interaction with the world of international capitalism. While a description of Thaman’s career fits this profile in some ways, it would be a mistake to underestimate the importance of a continuing relation to Tongan culture and society or to assume that status is determined predominantly by international standards. In Pacific cultures, status can be context based – altering from one district or one event to another. Further, Hooper and Huntsman point out that:

The *matai* system of Western Samoa, the monarchy and nobles of Tonga and the Fijian chiefly system are all modified traditional hierarchies. They maintain a fundamental relevance for contemporary political life in the countries concerned, and the ideologies supporting them have persistence and power, as much ‘for the people’ as for ‘the chiefs’.<sup>12</sup>

Thaman describes her Tongan roots as a source of support and strength as a woman. Yet for a woman poet, some sections of the poetry seem to suggest that the path to continuing publication has not been an easy one. The speaker in the poem ‘Langakali’, for example, is described as

A commoner with no soul I journeyed  
In the grey hair of the sky,  
But I heard the song of the sea,  
Made my heart strong  
That I could still find a place.<sup>13</sup>

The search for a ‘place’ both for and in the space of the literary in the Pacific situates the implied speaker as poet between sea and sky, and therefore perhaps identified with the land, though ‘Langakali’

laments the losses that have taken place in the homeland.

Epeli Haou`fa's most recent discussion 'The Ocean in Us' takes account of the importance of the 'traditional' or custom based power structures. Through fiction, satire and critical writing he has analysed some of the problems of the 'shallow ideology'<sup>14</sup> of the Pacific Way. He also describes the influence of neo-Marxism on the 1980s as one which tended to suppress discussion of national and regional difference within the Pacific. Hau`ofa outlines a description of the 'new Oceania' for 'emerging generations' which celebrates diversity, emphasises both local and diasporic connections, yet is largely 'independent of the Pacific Islands world of diplomacy and neocolonial dependency'. This description perhaps owes something to Wendt's feminised view of Oceania, though Wendt himself seems now to work within a more neutral use of the term Pacific.

My reading of Thaman's poetry situates it between the global and the local, and this 'in-betweenness' makes it difficult to posit a gendered reading of the poetry, which represents a fusion of diverse influences in a way that foregrounds difficulties and differences rather than attempting to erase or marginalise them, at the same time as it makes cross cultural connections. By focusing on disjunctive moments in time and space Thaman's poetry can open onto what Homi Bhabha and Frederic Jameson have described as a 'third space'. Bhabha describes this as the space of the synthesis of the new:

The non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space – a third space – where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences.<sup>15</sup>

He argues that the importance of recognising contemporary societies as culturally mixed lies in the fact that it is the 'third space which enables other positions to emerge'.<sup>16</sup> Bhabha's sense of the post-colonial as a challenge to 'a consensual and collusive "liberal" sense of cultural community'<sup>17</sup> and involving 'cultural translation', split subjectivity and the metaphor of migration is relevant to a historicizing reading of Thaman's poetry.

Reading the literature of the Pacific can, in turn, problematise and redirect international and metropolitan-based criticism. Many of the future interpretations of Thaman's work may come from Pacific languages and they will be alert to interpretations I cannot approach.

This paper is limited by my position as an outsider in relation to Tongan language and culture. The existence of a Pacific-based critical tradition which, in a number of ways, is already engaged with the generalised insights of internationalist theory, is one possible way to approach reading the poems. For Albert Wendt, in his influential essay of 1976 'Towards a New Oceania',<sup>18</sup> Pacific cultures, both pre- and post-papalagi, had long been mobile and mixed. Vilsoni Hereniko finds a correspondence between Rotuman, other Pacific groups and post-colonial representations of historical periods in his categorisation of the contemporary as *ao fo`ou ta* – a 'new time' – in which Pacific cultural identities are 'negotiable'.<sup>19</sup>

The combinatory aspect of the 'third space' can be compared with, though not collapsed into, what Albert Wendt described in an interview as the Samoan concept of 'va' or

... the space that relates all things ... the *va* between you and me is our relationship – a space, but also our relationship as human beings, an emotional relationship. And we must cherish and nourish and nurture that *va*. The concept of *va* is also related to outer space; our name for outer space is *Va-nimo-nimo*, 'the space that appears and disappears' – and gives meaning to all of us as individuals.<sup>20</sup>

Given this 'in-between space', what readings can be produced about what the poems have to say about structures of identity, language and history?

### Tongan Language Traditions

Questions about how Konai Helu Thaman's English language work is suffused with the sounds, vocabulary and values of Tongan language culture and other Pacific cultures must surface for readers of the poetry. Futa Helu has worked through a comparison of some of the classificatory modes of Tongan and European poetry. He describes such a procedure as both convenient for the purposes of making connections and 'misleading' because 'the characteristics of Tongan poetry are essentially different from those of English poetry.'<sup>21</sup> The first important difference is that poetry in Tongan was and remains intertwined with the composition of dance and music – a combination called *faiva*. 'For the Tongan *punake* or poet', Helu argues, 'poetry is a rhymed composition which can be set to one or some of the set melodic patterns.' European poetry privileges rheto-

ric over rhythm, while Tongan poetry places equal importance on ‘rhyme, rhythm and melody’. A second crucial difference is that Tongan poetry is ‘essentially social poetry or collective lyricism’ and is closer to the tightly structured poetry of the Metaphysical or Augustan poets than the Romantics. Helu regrets the encroachment of what is described as a ‘sentimentality’ in Tongan poetry, signified in the increasing use of private imagery and symbolism, which, the essay claims, can be traced to the influence of pop music and cinematic musicals.

While Pacific Island poetry written in English may take on new forms and references, shaped by both popular and literary influences, it can retain functional and even formal links with Tongan language poetry. Futa Helu also argues that Tongan poetry can be divided into ancient and modern. Examples of ancient varieties being fakatangi, a chanted short ballad and the tangi, which is likened to an elegy or lament over the death of a loved one, while modern poetry includes the hiva kakala or love lyric. In some instances – such as the haiku-like ‘Wishful Thinking’ section in *Kakala* – the poet has deliberately imitated the short form of some Tongan language poems. In other poems, the form varies but it may share some functional similarities with Tongan language genres. Helu asserts that classical Tongan poetry has a pervading melancholic mood – expressed as ‘a brooding, depressed and dull state’ and ‘a sense of universal sadness and rejection which is in reality an assertion of power and joy’.<sup>22</sup> The dominant mood of Konai Helu Thaman’s poetry could be described in similar terms.

Thaman has described the poem ‘Langakali’ as being like a fakatangi or lament.<sup>23</sup> It is an address to a tree (or a flower) – a tree from which fragrant flowers were plucked that has now become rare in Tonga. The langakali is called upon to testify to and confirm that changes have taken place – oral traditions are being lost, plastic flowers replace live ones. ‘Hangale flowers, we’ll pick no more – /Government houses have killed them all.’<sup>24</sup> Written after a long period abroad in pursuit of higher education and during pregnancy, the poem can also be read as a subtle meditation on maternal melancholy, the loss and separation that unavoidably accompany the birth and development of a child.

Collocott describes a ‘very large class of poems’ called laumtanga, which celebrate ‘the scenic beauties and interesting localities



of Tonga'.<sup>25</sup> 'Langakali' can be connected to the function of traditions of laum-atanga and tangilaulau, in the sense that it is about place, but laments the loss of the distinctive beauty of the site. With its cataloguing of grievances, the poem could also be said to be like a healing chant, composed to express and expel unhappiness and anxiety. Tonga has a long history of herbal medicine, which the poem describes as threatened, so it is an ironic reflection on and an indictment of modern medicine that the hospital (Vaiola – also the name of a sacred lake and the site where Konai Helu Thaman attended creative writing classes) should also be the site of pollution. Perhaps this can be recognised as a metaphor for the way in which the disruption of cultural boundaries involves a disordering of the natural world.

While the implied speaker in 'Langakali' is a traveller between worlds who still has roots in Tonga, other poems, such as those directed to young people or children, can be seen to be like love songs, educational rhymes and lullabies. A poem 'For Batiri' forsees separation between mother and child. The pain of this parting, however, is modified in the understanding that the child's name 'Batiri' is a Fijian word for 'a coastline of mangroves and ... the end of the reef' suggesting growth and an ability to flourish in a borderline, perhaps migrant existence, between sea and land.<sup>26</sup>

Konai Helu Thaman's most recent collection is entitled *Kakala*, an obvious reference to the hiva kakala or love songs. Some of the poems suggest the lyrical subject matter of romantic love songs, others have more ironic or less personal concerns. The glossary defines kakala as 'Tongan sacred or fragrant plants used in garlands and to scent coconut oil; commonly referred to in Tongan legends, dance and poetry, as a symbol of respect and love.'<sup>27</sup> Like the kakala the poems and poetry collections are a weaving together of a variety of disparate elements which partake in a celebration of life, culture and aesthetic pleasure. Futa Helu has distinguished the kakala from that archetype of European flora, the rose, arguing that kakala is more than a sweet-smelling flower or perfume: 'a kakala is a flower, leaf, twig or fruit that has the sanction of ages.'<sup>28</sup> Kakala came from Puluotu, 'the mythical abode of the dead and gods in Polynesian mythologies'. Poets too are called 'puluotu' in Tongan and their skills are highly respected. Poets who compose in all three arts – ta`anga (poetry), hiva (music) and haka (dance) – are known as 'punake' and in Ancient Tonga constituted one of the professional classes. They were considered to occupy rank inherently

by virtue of their profession. Some commentators claim that from the evidence of oral culture, Pulotu is Fiji; whatever the case it retains the sense that the poet is situated between worlds or cultures and that a Pan Pacific reading of cultural connections is supported by custom-based narratives or legends.

Kakala can be located in the myths and legends or *talanoa tupu* 'a of oral literature, some of which link the world of *maama* – man's world – to Pulotu. Futa Helu tells the tale of how *heilala* (the most sacred of Tongan plants [*Garcinia sessilis*]) was brought into the human world by a beautiful woman whom a *toutai* or royal fisherman, *Ikatafoli*, caught on his hook. He let her off the hook but she swam after him and travelled to his village Nukuleka where he received a summons from the Tu`i Tonga (King of Tonga) to weave garlands for a festival. The woman returned from Pulotu the next day carrying a branch of *heilala* from which she made a garland to present to the King. The title *Kakala*, refers, then, to the collection itself as being like a garland – a collection of words and lines tightly woven into patterns. This garland, 'the *tui-tu`u* ( to string while walking)' might also be interpreted as referring to the art of composition in the garland/poetry as one that involves mobility.

Like plants and flowers in Tongan culture, these poems have a healing as well as a celebratory and aesthetic function. They can represent the orderliness of class structure by reference to tradition-sanctioned narratives of origin and descent. They may also be read as documents that register disturbances in the order of social structures such as rank, gender and class. Aletta Biersack has argued that unlike the status conferred by blood inheritance, which is fixed, the *kakala* in Tongan culture signify titles and status conferred by a process of social selection or choice.<sup>29</sup> The garland of poetry, therefore, does not have to be inherited by blood – it may be conferred on one who, at a particular historical moment, enacts the role of poet. According to Kaeppler, in Tongan-language poetry '... sweet smelling flowers refer metaphorically to chiefs or to a beloved, and references to a mixture of sweet smelling flowers refers to a mixing of genealogical lines.'<sup>30</sup> It is possible to read Thaman's use of *kakala* as metaphor or *heliaki* for an acceptance of a democratic mixing of genealogical lines, but since mixing may be customary within ranks rather than across them, these questions need to be more fully addressed than is possible in this context.

Konai Helu Thaman's writing is influenced by the role of the poet in earlier Tongan society and the effect of Tongan poetry forms. It is also informed by the characteristic formal aesthetic features of Tongan art and culture. Adrienne Kaeppler has described a number of distinguishing concepts that are used in assessing the way aesthetic judgement operates in Tongan culture. These are *faiva*, *heliaki*, *faka`apa`apa* and a concept she finds no single Tongan word for – of the integral association of verbal and visual modes.<sup>31</sup> While Kaeppler's work has focused on dance forms, she has argued, as has Futa Helu, that dance and poetry are closely intertwined in customary Tongan culture.

*Faka`apa`apa* refers to respect or humility and artistic creation is intended to evoke *māfana* or joy that derives from an appreciation and understanding of the skill of the performer. 'Letter To the Colonel', from the *Kakala* collection, for example, maintains the formal language of respect while questioning the role and the actions of a leading political figure in the South Pacific. Another letter poem in *Kakala* (letters signifying a written form moving between the public and the private) 'Letter To Feifafa' refers to the narrative about the sacrifice of Kava`onau, from whose body kava and sugar cane grew. Based on *talanoa tupu`a*, or originary myth which informs the construction of Tongan social order and gendering, the poem is sympathetically addressed to a picture of the mother of Kava`onau, Feifafa, describing the pain of losing her daughter.

tear-stained tapa  
soaked in blood  
continue to flow  
from the over-filled kava bowl  
of our rulers  
their quick acceptance  
of your sacrifice  
still bleeds  
at the cutting edge  
of time<sup>32</sup>

The poem can be interpreted as a tribute to maternal devotion, the generosity of the people and the sacrifices of the ancestors. However, poised as it is on the 'cutting edge', it can also be read as a critique of the excessive demands placed on some sections of society

in order to support others. The conclusion insists:

i have been thinking  
 over what you did  
 that dark day long ago  
 i still don't believe  
 that a king was worth it!

The poem seems open to a feminist interpretation through the interest in the inter-generational perpetuation of gender-specific roles as well as the direct questioning of the value of female sacrifice. Elizabeth Bott's psychoanalytic interpretation of the kava ceremony, for example, in which she links the 'Aho'eitu myth with the Kava'onau narrative and suggests that the chewing and pounding of the roots can be read as a controlled expression of rivalry, envy and its alleviation, may apply to gendered relations.<sup>33</sup>

Despite, or perhaps because of, the seriousness of the questions they pose and the weight of tradition, Konai Helu Thaman's poems are often respectfully dedicated and some are read on ceremonial occasions such as '*Heilala*', thus retaining a performative dimension. This poem, as the poet has explained, was written for the launching of a project on adult literacy and its delivery, as well as its reference to this bright red and most sacred of flowers, might be said to have inspired māfana. It emerged as a response to William Wordsworth's poem about daffodils, a text often read as an example of the imposition of colonial education yet ambiguously evoking the metaphor of migrancy: 'I wandered lonely as a cloud.'

Heliaki, which Kaeppler calls 'the most important aesthetic principle' that 'pervades Tongan life', has been variously translated as 'indirectness', 'hidden meaning', 'allusiveness', 'round aboutness'.<sup>34</sup> Konai Helu Thaman has confirmed that 'subtlety or heliaki is also a very important feature of Tonga poetry and I try to utilise that too in my writing.'<sup>35</sup> The reference to the iron wood tree or toa in 'You, the Choice of My Parents', is an example of heliaki.

I love as a mere act of duty  
 My soul is far away  
 Clinging to that familiar ironwood tree  
 That heralds strangers  
 To the land of my ancestors.

I will bear you a son  
To prolong your family tree  
And fill the gaps in your genealogy.  
But when my duties are fulfilled  
My spirit will return to the land of my birth  
Where you will find me no more  
Except for the weeping willows along the shore.<sup>36</sup>

The toa appears in the variously repeated ordinary narrative or *tala tupu`a* about the first Tu`i Tonga `Aho`eitu, (Son of Tongaloa and Va`epopua, the first king of Tonga) positioned as an intermediary symbol between heaven and earth. Tangaloa, the father, climbs down the tree to conduct his affair with an earthly woman and his son scales the tree in the reverse direction in order to discover his divine heritage. The tree is generally held to represent strength and bravery – a combination of the human and the supernatural – and the reference to it in the poem can be understood to signify the strength of the speaker’s attachment to customary Tongan culture and values. It may also be read as a signifier of the courage it requires for the poet to speak out in a public role. The totemic significance of trees enables Thaman to refer to the weeping willow as a signifier of European or imported femininity, frailty and perhaps death, which functions as counterpoint to the toa – a strong, indigenous tree, symbolizing a connection to eternal life.

#### **Sitting on a Rotten Branch of the Breadfruit Tree**

Taking a long range historical view of Anglo/American poetry, Cora Kaplan’s 1976 essay ‘Language and Gender’ argued that ‘Poetry is a privileged metalanguage in western patriarchal culture’ and that ‘Oddly we still seem to expect poetry to produce universal meanings.’<sup>37</sup> She concludes that women’s poetry oscillates between two poles – one, the field of language to which women as speakers, writers and readers have access and two, a cultural context which erects barriers against women’s entry into a ‘high’ symbolic language regarded in patriarchal terms as a public male sphere. Women’s poetry, then, has often been articulate about a struggle to enter a field of high culture which, in terms of Western patriarchal culture such as, for example, Wordsworth’s Romanticism, has been predicated precisely on the exclusion of the majority of women. Kaplan argues that adolescence, in patriarchal Western culture, has been the crucial

moment when women experience particular taboos about their ability to enter public life. Considered in this way, it is possible to understand why the interpretation of 'coming of age' has been such disputed interdisciplinary and cross-cultural ground in the representation of the Pacific and why some of Konai Helu Thaman's poems are so specifically aimed at urging young women to resist the sexism in educational institutions ('School For Boys', 'Teen Letter'<sup>38</sup>).

'You the Choice of My Parents' was published in *Mana* in 1973. It was the title poem of her first collection (1970), and was subsequently anthologised in *Lali* (1980), then included in *Hingano*, the collected poems of 1987. The speaker in 'You the Choice of My Parents' is not autobiographical, but might be described, rather, as a set of signifiers constructed to give voice to an imagined woman of the Pacific in the process of questioning the roles that marriage and consumerism play in her life.

I wrote the poem while in the U.S. and although it was originally inspired by the breakdown of a cousin's marriage, the search for and glorification of freedom in that country inspired me to explore the concept further. The persona of You the Choice may be from any social class though arranged marriages more typify the upper classes in Tonga. It's interesting that the poem has a special appeal to many Indian students in Fiji, particularly girls.<sup>39</sup>

Arranged marriage in Tongan culture, according to some interpretations – such as Biersack and Kaeppler's<sup>40</sup> – carried an element of choice for the girl; the subject matter of the poem becomes an exploration of the question of how much power a girl has to make a choice within structures that define and confine her. Marriage as an exchange of women has been posited – and refuted – as a significantly unifying feature of many human societies. To the extent that what Adrienne Rich called 'compulsory heterosexuality'<sup>41</sup> exists in all cultures, the overt subject matter of the poem can appeal across cultural, religious, class and ethnic groupings. It situates the persona of the speaker at a crossroad of debates over the question of how colonial structures and trade interlock with gender and power relations.

Thaman's original chosen title 'Wife's Lament' was altered in the editorial process, opening out the address and appeal of the poem in gender terms. It isn't until the eighth line and its reference to 'my

prince' that the speaker's gender becomes significant and by this time, readers of both genders may have been caught up by the rhetoric of the poem. In the speaker's slowness to assign gender, there may be some reflection of the fact here that the word 'ia' from the Tongan language, is translated as 'he, she, him, her, it'. Unlike the English language, the Tongan does not distinguish gender in the third person pronoun.

The title 'You the Choice of My Parents' can be read as representing a subject split by the desire of its parents for an other or more complete image of herself – or perhaps by an internalisation of what she imagines to be the desire of her parents. Parents here are representatives of an earlier order than the subject and they desire the material benefits of Western culture. Their desire is both the same as and different from the speaker's own; this complex of desires of, for and to be separate from the parents, like her own desire, alienates the implied speaker in a cross-generational drama of family romance, from a coherent fantasy of self.

The reference to the young man – or the 'you' as 'my prince' – situates the poem in terms of a discourse of fantasy and romantic love, cut across by class structures. The movement of desire that takes place across this close circuit of familial ties and obligations is signified in the way the title foregrounds the pronoun structures of the poem and emphasises the interdependence of first and second person pronouns in the construction of the 'other', and third person. The poem represents a speaker in the process of fantasizing an other, the grounds on which a discourse about the self have become possible. Questions remain about how engendered power relations enter the equation, since the poem eventually distinguishes that the signified of the 'I' is a woman, and the signified of the 'you' a man. How is it possible to unpack the assumption that linguistic terms such as 'my prince' carry with them the structures of an already established power difference? The 'I' here attempts to measure the extent of its subordination to a self, alienated, through the 'choice of the parents' – or exercise of power and structures that pre-exist the speaker – personified in the 'you'.

How, then, does this gendering map out across the racialised histories of colonialism? The subject of the poem may be read as one that is operating in a field of language where the customary structures of rank and gender of Tongan culture have been disrupted by

the terms of European culture, and none of the previously established orders – the abandoned altar where the priest no longer officiates, the prince driving his second-hand car – offer a virgin or original identity. The terms referring to religion are Europeanised ones, though they could be interpreted as referring to a Europeanised view of religions ‘other’ than the Christian faith. Religious discourse too, in this model, has multiple origins

The choice of the implied speaker in ‘You the Choice of My Parents’ may be read as ironic, as not really being a choice at all – equated with the choice of the consumer in a world of monopolies and global capitalism. On the other hand, parenting, as against capitalism and its spurious choices, has an arbitrariness about it. The parents – and it is important they are plural – though they are not differentiated, cannot offer a singular model of identity. In recognising the fragmentary structuring of identity, Thaman’s poems allow multiple and even contradictory voices to speak about conditions of existence in the Pacific.

In the 1970s this was asserted in the context of a post-colonial cultural legacy passed on to Pacific writers in English, which is the site of many ambivalences. Colonial ideologies and histories in the poetic heritage offered Pacific people both inclusion and exclusion. European tropes and concepts such as the depiction of the Pacific as a blank expanse or the compliancy and availability of Pacific Island women ranged from denigration to idealisation. Some of the many tasks for Pacific writers in English have been focused on deconstructing such stereotypes while inserting more acceptable and varied representations of Pacific life and culture into English-language traditions. The relationship of people to the natural world continues to be crucial in the poetry of Pacific writers, intervening and rewriting as it does, reductively Eurocentric concepts that indigenous peoples were objects rather than subjects in scientific experimentation and observation. Pacific writers represent Pacific peoples as both defenders, utilisers and sometimes despoilers of their natural environment.

Helen Carr, publishing over a decade later than Kaplan, could challenge the idea that poetry is still a genre dominated by men. She argues that although a sense of exclusion from the high literary culture undoubtably remains for women, it is only part of an equation in which ‘Ever since the Romantics’, poetry has been connected to a femininity linked with ‘the contemplative, the personal, the dreamer,



the emotions'.<sup>42</sup> Thaman's writing mobilises a language about emotion – the 'Wishful Thinking' section in *Kakala*, for example – both directly ('like rain pounding on the roof/of my mother's house/sadness in suva') and through figures of speech ('this won't help the hurt i know/but i'll try weaving/the basket a bit more finely'). Although it has been argued that language privileges the masculine, which is equated with the sphere of the public, Carr argues that the association of poetry with a private world has been a contributing factor in encouraging women to write it.

The *Kakala* poems offer the reader an exploration of the connections between that concept of a 'masculine' public role and a 'feminine' other to that public space and events within it – and in the process, undermine such distinctions between 'masculine' and 'feminine', public and private. The critique of those who do work in public life in earlier poems such as 'Uncivil Servants' and 'My Blood' is made by a speaker who understands the multiple ironies of complicity – 'Many of my friends/Are civil servants.... Yet if I tell them what I think/I may go to hell or even lose my scholarship!'<sup>43</sup> It is another twist in the interpretive chain that the poetic form enables the speaker to make private thoughts public, and that the development of skills in this art of poetic public speaking in turn promotes access for a woman poet, however difficult or limited, to the male-dominated public world.

Carr, in contrast with Futa Helu, argues that the lyrics of pop songs, in which there is so little critical interest, form 'a part of the complex of representations in which young women come to understand themselves'.<sup>44</sup> She argues that in the eighties many women were writing and reading lyric poetry for a wide variety of reasons. In Konai Helu Thaman's poetry the loss of natural resources – strongly felt – is weighed up against the gains of global technological development. The poem 'The Cinema',<sup>45</sup> for example, which opens with a Polynesian term for Hollywood – '*Holiutu*' – gestures towards the way film and language culture is transformed in the process of reception. In Tongan language holi has been translated as 'demanding, to desire' and utu as 'reap' – so it may be that the act of translation also becomes a gloss or commentary on the way cinematic language evokes difference and desire. The poem draws attention to the role of film as a communal event and a discourse in which the watching children will insert themselves by dreaming under their 'soft tattered tapa'. While the opening lines open up an image of 'half-naked' but

'innocent' children who will be exposed to screen violence, the poem can be read as an assertion of the way in which children from the Pacific are able to absorb and re-imagine images from a cinematic field dominated by images of Anglo-American ways of life. Their tapa may be tattered but they function as a protective cover, shielding the young from direct exposure to the damaging images of 'Western' cinema, signified by the Western genre with its narratives about colonisation and the imposition of European laws on indigenous people.

Thaman's poem also remarks on the degree of audience participation and response among the Pacific Island viewers, literally looked down on by the European audience who 'sit upstairs/Drinking cokes, frowning at/The ignorant natives ...'. The poem suggests that it is the cinematic images that most impress the Pacific Island audience, although the on-screen representations of sexuality, in contrast to stereotypical European notions of a 'natural' sexuality amongst Pacific people, embarrass them. 'Words ...' the poem asks – '... what do they mean?' – suggesting perhaps both language barriers for people whose first language is not English and the ability of the audience to interpret images separately from the dialogue and sound track, i.e. to bring to the images their own interpretations and meanings. Konai Helu Thaman's poem, in contrast to Futa Helu's rejection of internationally distributed popular cultural forms such as cinema, represents an acknowledgement that they are already an on-going part of Pacific cultural life.

Carr refuses the concept of a singular monolithic tradition of women's poetry because there is so much variety in women's writing. However, in her discussion of the groundswell of poetry written and performed by women in the context of feminism, she draws on readings of Native American poetry to indicate similarities in the function of poetry that cross, in some form, cultural and historical boundaries. On the grounds of anthropological work, which she concedes is problematic in the extent to which it is invested with Euro-American interpretations, Carr discusses the way poetry in a variety of Native American cultures was produced and performed. Poetry, she argues, according to the testimony available in the field of Native American culture, functioned in four fundamental ways, all of which I think are pertinent to a reading of Thaman's poetry.

Firstly, Carr's suggestion that a 'complex imbrication of individual desire with a very specific traditional discourse'<sup>46</sup> applies to

Thaman's poetry since it works with the mixed economy of Tongan language forms and symbols and a Euro-American literary heritage. I have not spent a lot of time exploring the personal context of Thaman's poetry, but it would seem, for a reader of the poems that they are invested with personal desire. The dedications suggest a context of close and intimate relationships, though it is not necessary for the reader to decode them as references in order to enjoy or produce an interpretation of the poems. Secondly, liminal or threshold states such as illness or grief, or moving between adolescence, adulthood and maturity are frequently invoked by the poems. Thirdly, the forms of the poetry transform a relationship between a linguistic pattern and emotion; so, for example, the short three-lined form of the 'Wishful Thinking' section of *Kakala* contains and controls powerful, sometimes contradictory emotions. Fourth, there is something of the role of the shaman, 'the voyager and cartographer of the descent into the depths and re-emergence, whose map provides a cure' in Konai Helu Thaman's persona as poet. Thaman's poetry performs, though with many differences because of the contemporary context, some of the functions of shamanic poetry, such as a healing mode of expressivity which can be linked to psychoanalysis, and the recitation of genealogy and historical narratives.

### Conclusion

The title of this paper is intended to echo a statement made by Konai Helu Thaman in her opening remarks to a Pacific Writers Workshop in 1984. Her comments emphasise the uncertainties that accompany the production and performance of poetry, and I wanted to extend them to the acts of reading and interpreting.

As I was listening to Albert read his poetry, he happened to be reading to you a poem I think called 'Breadfruit'. Well, we have a Tongan proverb that translates – it's like sitting on a rotten breadfruit branch – and when Marjorie was talking I felt like sitting on a rotten breadfruit branch ... which means someone who feels very apprehensive about things to come ... because talking about my writing as Pio Manoa once put it, it's like exposing yourself and that's not a very enjoyable thing to do, certainly not for me.<sup>47</sup>

Thaman's reference to the Tongan proverb describes the task of the poet as transmitter and translator of cultures. On the occasion of

this speech, she went on to discuss the importance of her role as teacher, the question of the relationship between public and private selves, the need to encourage young writers, and the issue of coercion/choice in connection with writing in English.

Public performance frequently involves nervous tension, but what is at stake in this tension goes well beyond the significance of the moment of one speech or reading. I want to finish by referring back to Konai Helu Thaman's brave admission of the anxiety she experienced (then) in talking about her poetry. The proverb is cited in the title because I think the act of reading and interpretation, to use an organic metaphor, must flower, bear fruit and give way to new readings. The robustness of the poems will, I believe, sustain many more interpretations.

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#### NOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> Albert Wendt, *Nuanua: Pacific Writing in English since 1980* (Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1995) p. 3.
- <sup>3</sup> Konai Helu Thaman, 'Of Daffodils and Heilala: Understanding (Cultural) Contexts in Pacific Literature' Invited address, MELUS Conference, Honolulu, April 18–20, (1997).
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- <sup>5</sup> Briar Wood, 'An Ongoing Attempt at Synthesis: An Interview with Konai Thaman', *Span*, 40, April (University of Waikato, Hamilton, 1995) pp. 1–2.
- <sup>6</sup> Konai Helu Thaman, *Hingano* (Mana Publications, Suva, Fiji, 1987) p. 31.
- <sup>7</sup> 'Tui Tu'u Heilala': Konai Helu Thaman talks to Briar Wood' *Wasafiri*, 25, Spring (1997) p. 6.
- <sup>8</sup> Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965–1987* (Heinemann, 1988).

- <sup>9</sup> Robert C. Kiste, 'Pre-colonial Times', in K.R. Howe, Robert C. Kiste and Brij. V. Lal (eds), *Tides of History* (Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1994) p. 6.
- <sup>10</sup> Epli Hau`ofa, 'The New South Pacific Society: Integration and Independence', in A. Hooper, S. Britton, R. Crocombe, J. Huntsman, C. Macpherson (eds), *Class and Culture in the South Pacific* (University of the South Pacific, Suva, 1987).
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- <sup>12</sup> Anthony Hooper and Judith Huntsman, 'History and the Representation of Polynesian Societies', in Jukka Siika, *Culture and History in the Pacific* ed (The Finnish Anthropological Society, Helsinki, 1990) p. 11.
- <sup>13</sup> 'Langakali', from *Langakali* (Mana Publications, Suva, 1981) p. 14.
- <sup>14</sup> Epli Hau`ofa, 'The Ocean in Us', *Dreadlocks in Oceania*, Vol. 1. (Department of Literature and Language, University of the South Pacific, Suva, 1997).
- <sup>15</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, London, 1994) p. 218.
- <sup>16</sup> 'The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha', in Jonathan Rutherford (ed), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1990) p. 211.
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- <sup>19</sup> Vilsoni Hereniko, 'Representations of Cultural Identities', *Tides of History*, p. 407.
- <sup>20</sup> Albert Wendt: Interviewed by Michael Neill, *In the Same Room* (Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1992) p. 109.
- <sup>21</sup> Futa Helu, *Faikava*, No.1 (Nuku`alofa, 1978) pp. 21-25.
- <sup>22</sup> Helu (1978) p. 24.
- <sup>23</sup> Konai Helu Thaman, 'Of Daffodils and Heilala' (1997) p. 13.
- <sup>24</sup> Konai Helu Thaman, *Langakali*, p. 13.
- <sup>25</sup> E.E.V. Collocott, *Tales and Poems of Tonga*, Bulletin 46 (Bernice P. Bishop Museum, Honolulu, 1928) p. 103.
- <sup>26</sup> Konai Helu Thaman and Briar Wood, 'Tui Tu`u Heilala', p. 6.
- <sup>27</sup> Konai Helu Thaman, *Kakala* (Mana Publications, Suva, 1993) p. 91.
- <sup>28</sup> Futa Helu, *Mana* (1973) pp. 10-11.
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- <sup>30</sup> Adrienne Kaeppler, 'Art, Aesthetics and Social Structure', in *Tongan Culture and History* (1966) p. 66.
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- <sup>38</sup> Konai Helu Thaman, 'School For Boys' (1993) p. 32. 'Teen Letter' (1993) p. 30.
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- <sup>43</sup> Konai Helu Thaman, 'Uncivil Servants' (1974) p. 8.
- <sup>44</sup> Carr, p. 139.
- <sup>45</sup> Konai Helu Thaman, 'The Cinema' (1974) p. 12.
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