

Effigies III  
An Anthology of New Indigenous  
Writing Pacific Islands, 2018

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CROMER

Tell Me a Story  
*(for uncle Talanoa)*

He vows I am planted beneath the Frangipani  
Promises I am seeded beneath the Bua.

He has his father's tongue,  
Owns his mother's languages.  
They sing honeyed songs together.  
He has even tamed the palagi one—  
It rides his tongue  
And he is fertile with story.

Deftly, he weaves tales  
Like the finest mats  
Constructs memories  
Tapa-tapestries  
Stained in soil and  
Colored with song.

We store them,  
Cultural currency for the next birth  
Death and wedding.  
We carry them  
To make us  
Real.

He is a teller of tall tales, Talanoa

But what are stories if not lies  
Though sweet as vakalolo  
Cleaved to our fingers  
Floating our souls  
In the fat of coconut?

What are memories if not construction:

The storyteller as tattooist  
Marking,  
And not marking,  
Brown skin.

And They say  
If your pito-pito is unplanted  
You will wander

They say  
If it is unplanted  
Home will elude you

Well mine is buried in story  
Planted in a tall tale  
And I wander  
Yes,  
And home is a story  
Home is a story where the Frangipani flowers.

## For Nico

how do i describe  
how my body wakes, moves  
to the heat of your words . . .  
like pele's footprints waken kilauea.  
your words so hot they're molten  
syllables slip and slide, thickly,  
stir my depths  
shift plates between our nations  
send your seas against my shores.  
your tongue, your vowels,  
so deep i ride waves against and through them  
my skin becomes your ocean  
your blood my tide . . .

i tattoo you with teeth and nails  
dreams and tongue;  
tattoo you deeply  
stories old and new  
into the skin of my heart  
in indigo, in ink,  
with shell lip and coral dust  
memory and desire . . .  
i will trace lines  
undulating  
spiraling  
reaching  
like our bodies for each other . . .  
yes, deeply  
into skin  
lips, tongue and breath, till  
my scent becomes yours  
your texture mine

your words

quicken

my blood-tissue-cells

like pele  
i am ready  
to birth new islands  
darken fresh soil  
with this love . . .

we will grow frangipani  
with creamy yellow centers  
papaya and blue taro  
sugarcane and mangoes  
. . . with this love

## Masu

“‘Tiko can’t be developed,’ Manu declared, ‘unless the ancient gods are killed.’”

—Epeli Hau’ofa, *Tales of the Tikongs*

Dua

Where do the gods we’ve forgotten go?  
To Burotu?  
Did they slip into the skin of the new god?  
Do they sleep  
in the qele ni vanua  
Awaiting our remembering  
we, na lewe ni vanua  
the flesh of the earth  
their descendants?

Where are all our bete, na dautadra  
our priests and priestesses?  
Do they slumber in the archives  
records of ritual  
and ethnographic portraiture?  
Do they live in the vuniwai  
prescribing roots and medicinal herbs  
to remove sorcery, heal hearts and other wounds?  
How do we supplicate the gods without  
their bodies, mouths, ears as mediums  
na wa vicovico between us?

Rua

Katlo once said, “the gods are in your marrow”  
and the words have settled deep  
like kava sediment  
na yalo ni vanua      the earth’s soul  
in the base of the tanoa.

Kalou gata, Kalou vu

Degei, Dakuwaqa, Daucina,  
is that you, coiled in the heart of my bones?  
Your breath what moves my blood?

If our dead are woven into our flesh  
like the music of bone flutes  
perhaps it is we who lie dormant;  
flesh of the vanua  
asleep to the divine  
Rocked to unconsciousness  
by the seductions and threats of new gods

Tolu

Capell's *New Fijian dictionary*  
defines Kalou gata  
as "blessed, happy; happiness  
and *formerly* a mode of worship rendered to Degei."  
Kalou gata literally translates to  
snake god.  
"Kalou," the new god inhabits you now  
but Degei is as old as the land  
the root of his body is vatu  
stone

Va

Degei  
you who live in the sweet juice of our bones,  
you who birthed our people  
from Turukawa's eggs  
kept warm under your watch,  
you who made a home for the first people

in the arms of the Vesi tree,  
you who taught us how to grow and cook  
the kakana dina  
the true food of the land

Kalou gata, Kalou vu  
we your children  
face futures without fish  
and shores that creep steadily inland.  
You, god of the mountains  
cave-dweller,  
we open our eyes  
we bring dalo, ika, puaka, vonu  
and yaqona  
remember us

## Suka

"More than 26,000 fish and other marine species in Honolulu Harbor suffocated and died as the molasses spread and sank to the ocean floor about 5 miles west of Waikiki's hotels and beaches. The spill happened in an industrial area of Honolulu Harbor west of downtown, where Matson loads molasses and other goods for shipping." —AP

Dua

May your fossil fuel blood-  
lines shrivel in  
the heat of Maui's  
noonday sun.

May the he'e that is your war-  
machine be lured by  
the cowrie bait  
of Oceania's fishermen  
and women  
for meat  
on our children's tables.

May your dollar-  
bill idols leap with  
you to Burotu.

May you choke  
on your high-fructose  
corn syrup  
molasses  
and GMOs  
over breakfast  
lunch  
and afternoon teas  
till you know  
the pain of Papa.

May Tangaloa  
dream you  
a million deaths

and Hinenuitepō  
refuse you  
the dark and cool embrace  
of earth's  
children.

Rua

How do we  
survive stolen

children?

gunned down  
indigenous men?

molasses  
spills that drown

our fish?

How do we  
love sugar

as it strangles  
the breath of

Moana Nui?

Tolu

My bubu lived for sugar;  
every day she ladled  
four tablespoons  
into her ceylon tea  
over her quaker oats  
and coconut rice.

Sugar made her smile  
wide and toothless  
for tea and porridge  
may be eaten  
without dentures.

Sugar brought war  
between the matriarchs  
of my family;  
my bubu and my mother  
raging at each other  
over the dining table  
as we cut  
her sugar intake in half  
then whole  
in concern  
for her failing health.

Sugar made her scheme  
borrow small containers  
of crude brown  
from the neighbors  
much poorer  
than we.

[ 96 ]

Sugar makes my mother and I  
weep  
as we continue to  
miss her  
and remember how we denied  
her pleasures

but my bubu also loved fish  
cawaki, nama, yaga . . .

I imagine her response  
to bloated and floating  
salt-water corpses:  
"Weh . . . sa maumau!"

Va

I spent my adolescence  
in a town grown up  
around sugar.

Walked the hour-less kilometers  
to school through the dust  
of cane

tall stalks of sweet grass  
bands upon bands of  
green, red, gold and green again  
mapped our boundaries

hot days ballooned  
with the smoke of cane burned  
down to the soil  
black and brittle

[ 97 ]

the scent of milled sugar  
leaked into our dreams  
on nights cool and cloying

school breaks  
when the heat ripened mangos  
and flash-dried the wash on the lines  
my cousins and i sat on doorsteps

sweetness the stem of refrigerated dovu  
in our hands

sweetness the tearing of coarse stalk  
methodically with our teeth

sweetness the mouthfuls chewed dry  
and spat into the communal pile before us

Lima

sugar is british colonial rule sugar is native lands stolen  
by white settlers for plantations sugar is girmityas fed  
lies who survived the long journey over oceans from  
native to alien lands and enslavement sugar is the blood  
of girmityas, itaukei and blackbirding slaves from vanuatu  
and the solomons to fatten the pockets of settlers and  
the native elite sugar is sacred dovu made toxic through  
refinement and poisoning the vanua

Ono

Suka is to return

Degei Dakuwaqa Daucina  
remember your lost children  
forgive us our sins  
deliver us

Suka is to return



## Meke Vula

Galu (shhh . . .)

In the time of darkness  
(they say) we worshipped  
the moon in the dark  
days the moon  
bukete, her belly a basket  
a sail in full wind  
(they say) we danced  
alone for her

Galu (shhh . . .)

In the time of darkness  
(they say), nights black  
skinned as the lips  
of women tattooed  
by dauveiqia  
(they say) we danced  
naked before her  
the moon

Galu (shhh . . .)

Some days (they say)  
we  
still  
do

vaka tevoru (we call it)  
devil ry

our kin  
ancestors

[ 100 ]

spirits

vu

black magic (they call it)  
witchcraft

to spill kava for the vanua  
to dance naked for the moon  
to serve as medium  
for ancestors

galu  
silent  
my tongue  
broken in English

galu  
mute  
my knowledge  
schooled in English

galu  
dumb  
my genealogy  
mutilated in English

Galu (shhh . . .)

in the days dark  
with ancestors  
we kept time with the moon  
by harvests waxing, waning  
of yam, land crabs, nuqa  
and the flowering

[ 101 ]

of doi trees . . .

Galu (shhh . . .)

some dark nights  
in the light of the moon  
I dream of merevesi  
my bubu's mother  
healer, herb-gatherer,  
bone-setter  
medicine maker  
gifter of fertility

Galu (shhh . . .)

Some nights she wakes me  
the moon  
the light of her belly  
pooling over the round of mine  
dance, she laughs  
au bolei iko

Some days  
I do

## Ai Domoniwai

all rivers begin  
where lomālagi and qele  
meet  
mount tomanivei  
the land's crest  
nai ulu-ni-vanua  
cleaving the heavens  
for rain

all of us mudlings

ro etuate navakamocea mataitini  
my great-grandfather  
a river delta man  
the vunivalu, warrior-chief  
of lomanikoro  
like his fathers before him  
mangrove men  
growing heart and silt roots  
a mudwater fortress  
anchoring the vanua  
nursing its lifeblood  
with mana  
moci, kai and bonu

here the people are via  
giant mud taro  
salt and fresh water  
fattened

my bloodline weaves  
through the rewa river veitiritini  
mudflats

like the bonu

slippery       mangrove  
eel

for eel

to whet  
your appetite  
hunt with your hands  
make eyes of your fingertips  
in the kava slick mud  
between tiri and dogo  
reticulated water trees

for eel

to sate  
your hunger  
yield skin and blood  
to this mouth  
for i       am no duna  
i will not  
give up life  
to bear you fruit  
without your  
offering

ai gusuniwai

all flesh and fluid mouths  
feed  
where lomālagi and qele  
mate

all rivers       snake  
rivulets in earth's flesh  
to the ocean's arms.

Letter to my people (for Palestine)

to those of us  
i-taukei  
for whom 3 decades  
of fijian  
UN "peacckeping"  
in the middle east  
has bought for israel  
our eyes and mouths

once the world told florid tales  
of our warriors' courage  
war clubs carved from vesi

ivei na neimami yaloqaqa?  
where is our spirit  
now?

show me  
the bravery  
in speaking for  
the powerful

show me  
the courage  
in looking away  
from the tearing of people  
from their vanua  
children from mothers  
farmers from orchards  
fishermen from the deep sea

have we forgotten our own  
removals  
lost land, birthright

[ 106 ]

to british & native elite allegiances?  
i-taukei                      sold, exiled  
indentured laborers  
on our own lands  
the vanua turned  
sugar teat to suckle settlers

where has our spirit fled?  
in pieces  
with remittances  
western unioned from Sinai  
Lepanoni  
the Golan heights  
to morris hedstrom  
shopping centers  
in suva, nadi,  
navua, ba . . .

where has our spirit fled?  
sacrificial burial  
beneath the yavu  
of homes                      a nation  
bought with Israeli shekel  
and gaudy romances of lost tribes

defiling the vanua  
disrupting our mana

to those of us  
i-taukei  
for whom over 2000 palestinians dead  
over 500 of these                      children  
in just  
one

[ 107 ]

summer  
is justified

once, newly independent  
of british colonialism,  
our people rose  
a forest of besi  
warriors for a nuclear-free pacific  
against the combined forces of french,  
american and british imperial powers.

once, we sang songs in solidarity  
around kava bowls all night  
with black south africa  
against an apartheid regime

ivei na neimami yaloqaqa?  
where is our spirit  
now?

when israel kills  
little boys gone to the beach to play  
bombs hospitals bursting with wounded  
shells schoolrooms sheltering the lands' orphans  
erects apartheid walls between kin  
forbids gaza's fishermen rights to their qoliqoli  
uproots centuries-old Palestinian olive trees  
by the thousands

ivei na neimami yaloqaqa?  
where is our spirit  
now?

once ratu sukuna dreamt of sovereignty

restored through battle  
the people's spirit triumphant in a national military

but  
before we were soldiers  
we were fishermen  
before we were soldiers  
we were farmers  
before we were soldiers  
we were warriors of the vanua

ivei na neimami yaloqaqa?  
where is our spirit  
now?

## No-Name Poem

Perhaps new words will form  
New words will form, if I can shift—  
The soil  
Sand  
Dirt  
Beneath the current  
Beneath my feet  
At the root of my own tongue.  
Perhaps, if I wiggle my toes, just so . . .

Perhaps I can imagine new letters  
New letters  
Like DNA strands  
If my body churns out memories  
Stories  
Songs  
To heat this ripple, these waves, this pool.  
Perhaps, if I stir the water with the twisting of my torso, just so .

Perhaps if my rage were to fuel the strength of this undertow  
Or my love calm this eddy  
Like a lullaby  
Old words will change their meanings.  
Perhaps, if I swallow then spit out salt water,  
Sweetened by my breath  
Quickened by my heartbeat  
Swirled over my tongue  
Just so . . .

ae . . . oiaue . . .

Perhaps I will recover lost words

ae . . . oiaue . . .

## Native Poem I

### The Other Woman

all this Talk  
of Colonizers and Colonized  
Centers and Margins  
Self and Other  
does her no good

on the Margins  
of the village  
stand two churches  
where men and women  
are set apart

home-coming,  
she is made dumb finally  
by all this naming  
of Oppressor and Oppressed  
it mangles her tongue

in the village center  
women dance and sing  
in native  
tongues.

on the periphery  
she sits  
mouthing  
silent words.

Native Poem II

native  
     tongues  
     woman  
 home  
  
 native  
     tongues  
     home  
 woman  
  
 native  
     woman  
     tongues  
 home  
  
 woman  
     tongues  
     home  
 native  
  
 tongues  
     woman  
     native  
 home  
  
 tongues  
     native  
     woman  
 home  
  
 home  
     tongues  
     woman  
 native

Native Poem III

Yameyalewavanua (tongue woman land);

yameyalewavanuayalewayamevanuayame	
yal'ewayamevanuayamevanuayalewa	yame
vanuayamevanuayalewayame	yal'ewa
yal'ewayamevanuayalewa	vanuayame
vanuayameyalewa	vanuayalewa
vanuayameyalewa	vanuayameyalewa
vanuayameyalewa	vanuayamevanuayalewa
yal'ewa	yal'ewayamevanuayamevanuayalewa
yame	yameyalewavanuayalewayamevanuayame

  

yameyalewavanuayalewayamevanuayame	yame
yal'ewayamevanuayamevanuayalewa	yal'ewa
vanuayamevanuayalewayame	vanuayame
yal'ewayamevanuayalewa	vanuayalewa
vanuayameyalewa	vanuayameyalewa
vanuayalewa	yal'ewayamevanuayalewa
vanuayame	vanuayamevanuayalewayame
yal'ewa	yal'ewayamevanuayamevanuayalewa
yame	yameyalewavanuayalewayamevanuayame

lolomaloha: fruit for aiko

this pomelo is a poem            a canoe  
fleshed of poetree            for distances  
for sisting and brothing  
i mean            kin-ship  
for travel across this  
our blue skin

this pomelo is  
a setting off            star-shipping  
with dried seeds, smoked fish  
and fresh coconut            genealogies  
to story ourselves    a/niu

this jabong is a            camakau  
sunset pink            translated  
your citrused  
tongue to mine            friend-ship

steered by talanoa  
wayfinding with            lolomaloha  
na 'āina momona

Kokoda (for Tere)

Kokoda-making is a homecoming  
to Sunday feasts on sweltering Fijian afternoons  
miti-soaked bele  
ika and dalo  
with lemon, salt, and chili

Kokoda making is a homecoming  
calls to mum and aunties across datelines  
searching for names of fish  
in mother tongue

In San Francisco  
Una and I  
lacking a machete or even a butcher knife  
slam Safeway coconuts against concrete stair edges,  
rush to capture the juice  
before it runs into the street below  
our laughter an equatorial sun

Kokoda making is an act of love;  
cubing fish into mouthfuls  
juicing fistfuls of lemon  
coconut scraper straddled,  
cupping white fruit to metal teeth  
scenting the air  
of earth  
the lean of trees towards ocean  
skin clothed in coconut oil

Kokoda making is resilience  
In Waikiki where the niu is stripped of fruit  
I use cans of Thai lolo  
I have lost my scraper en route to Hawai'i,  
and the one at Na Mea—decorated with shell inlay—is \$90



not for everyday use.

Across from the Ala Moana  
my family sits down to eat at one  
and finishes near midnight  
a feast of kokoda, sushi, mussels with lolo  
curried pork and Nikola's fish soufflé.  
We nourish ourselves with talanoa  
between meal tides  
stories of home  
and savory gossip.

I promise myself  
the next time I stop at the Fiji Market  
in Kahuku for dal and roti  
I will buy a new scraper.  
One of these days  
my kokoda will be as good as my mother's

Cawaki / sea urchin

careful hands  
undress  
    bare  
your fleshed  
heart  
    splayed  
in spine—  
hollow  
    star-fished

i take  
your tongue  
    oranged  
on mine  
sea  
butter sweet  
brine

stories she sung me/for katalaine

o o baua  
lai vei iko tinamu  
lai qoli keidaru

daru na mai tatavu  
kemu na saku  
qau na damu  
o o baua  
    traditional lullaby

some women are made  
for mothering  
not you

you would let the sky  
cradle me  
baptized  
in the choice of my  
own gods

you would let the sun  
clothe me  
oiled down in bubu's  
reliable brown hands  
mokosoi and coconut  
fragrant

you would let the earth  
feed me  
mouthfuls of ripened pawpaw  
softened dalo  
and fish you'd chewed

later you taught me

[ 118 ]

to love curried crab

so hot our skin sweat  
tiny licks of flame

you would let the men  
name me  
my father choosing carefully  
with his year-old fujian tongue  
    tagi

while you called me  
pumpkin-pie  
your guji girl

you would let the rain  
teach me lullabies  
of the land  
the humid air fill my lungs  
and song  
with loloma

o o baua  
lai vei iko tinamu  
lai qoli keidaru

daru mai tatavu  
kemu na saku  
qau na damu  
o o baua

[ 119 ]

secrets

i release  
relinquish  
these secrets  
this one  
and this one  
about my mothers  
about myself  
i will peel the skin off this secret  
spoon out its soft  
insides  
feed them  
to you  
this one i will crack open  
like a coconut  
under the blunt edge of a machete  
i will pour out its juice  
and bathe you in it  
so you awaken  
and I heal  
i will re-seed  
my center  
fill my  
insides  
anew  
with sweetness  
grow new skin  
soft and brown  
i will retrieve  
my soul from  
sunlit  
stained glass  
temples  
of childhood  
and peace will leak

[ 120 ]

through my pores  
like sweat  
the scent of guava

[ 121 ]

Reguregu for JL

the day after  
i learn  
about you  
on facebook

sweet boy  
brilliant boy

the day after  
i learn  
about you  
i am two years late  
to your wake

this reguregu  
a thin ipe woven  
of memory  
time worn  
a poor farewell

where i would keen  
the day after  
i learn  
about you  
i feed the hollow an american  
burua, death feast  
egg McMuffin  
hashbrowns  
mozzarella sticks  
coffee

in lieu of communal  
mourning, in this place of plastic  
toys and happy

meals i sit alone  
with macbook and wifi  
connection  
the distance between us  
4024 miles  
sixteen years  
so many canoes's breaths  
between the lands  
of the living and the dead  
privilege  
the distance between us

my screen weeps  
stories of your death alone  
i only a 27-year old indian kid  
in be alone  
in his own home lands  
in jan in january  
in alaska winter

in years too late  
in the land  
in  
in your body  
in bed blanket  
in us too late  
in saying you umo<sup>h</sup>ho<sup>h</sup>

in you and late  
in wife  
in the time in nights  
in crossing  
in with death

in the shape of another  
poor man's  
blade  
death  
the shape  
of another  
black man's  
rage  
you who survived  
death  
the shape  
of settler colonialism  
you who survived  
death  
the shape  
of anti-indian and  
anti-black racism  
you who survived  
death  
the shape  
of educational apartheid  
and police violence  
it is a marvel you lived  
at all  
  
two days after  
i learn about you  
i weave my own stories  
remembering  
  
the nonprofit [industrial complex]  
  
that paid me  
indigenous pacific kid

CAN Americorps stipends  
to "help" kids like you  
black and indigenous  
to these stolen plains  
umo<sup>o</sup>ho<sup>o</sup>

your 6th-grade classroom

tracked  
special education  
learning  
your place  
with patrick, and angel  
josiah, and ashley  
rick and shane and shelly  
and hope, the indian  
girl mrs brown  
said was fine  
i did not  
register  
hope

after-school programs

ending you expired  
smallbank snacks  
your eyes as you read  
your use-by date  
your food and knowing  
your tools gone  
your fresh fruit and  
your toy books  
your  
your traditions

that afternoon

i drove you home  
last, just us in the dead  
of winter  
your face the sun  
flickering  
you        eleven  
twice the age of my exile  
for school so far from ocean

i struggle  
to tell you  
sun child  
sweet child  
your heart a pow-wow drum  
in your little man chest  
i struggle to weave you nets  
the shape of safety  
with the weight of my words  
the flimsy of my wish  
you are special  
i say  
through education you could  
    escape  
    [jump federal poverty thresholds]  
    [trespass educational apartheid zones]  
    [evade this police state]

it  
gets  
better

the day after

i learn  
about you

núzhi<sup>n</sup>ga qtáthewáthe  
núzhin<sup>n</sup>ga wéuda<sup>n</sup>

i am two years late  
to awaken  
to your death  
in peter pan park  
where you'd played  
native land  
enmeshed, disciplined in  
lincoln city grids  
A to Z and numbered

i am two years late  
to waken  
to your passing  
in peter pan park  
halfway between  
university of nebraska  
campuses, the distances  
between which i walked  
hike boarding

the day after  
i am  
about you

núzhi<sup>n</sup>ga qtáthewáthe  
núzhin<sup>n</sup>ga wéuda<sup>n</sup>

the day after

i learn  
about you  
on facebook  
two years late  
to your wake  
my search filter  
resurrects you  
victim

two years after  
your death  
so violent  
the state sentences  
your murderer 18 to 20  
three quarters of your  
life time  
for manslaughter

two years  
after your death  
so violent  
the state  
in nebraska vs parker  
argues the diminishment  
of umo<sup>o</sup>ho<sup>o</sup> lands and  
sovereignty

núzhi<sup>o</sup>ga qtáthewáthe  
núzhi<sup>o</sup>ga wéuda<sup>o</sup>

just hours after they learn  
of your death  
your family and friends  
held vigil sung songs

a fire for your  
winter night's flight

a few hours to  
launch a petition  
to light the park  
a week to  
organize a march  
demanding justice  
in your footsteps  
#j4jl

núzhi<sup>o</sup>ga qtáthewáthe  
núzhi<sup>o</sup>ga wéuda<sup>o</sup>

two years too late  
to pray the land  
to be  
to your body  
to quilted blanket  
two years too late  
to pray it sang you umo<sup>o</sup>ho<sup>o</sup>  
to blues