# Posthuman subjectivity and the spirit of the collective: Traversing Pasifika education research

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## Abstract

*As an emerging Pasifika researcher engaged in doctoral study, the potentiality of the Pacific collective spirit raises opportunities for thinking differently about the human subject. The traversing of the human subject has and continues to be made and remade in the spirit of collective as presented in Pacific indigenous knowledge constructs and in local Pasifika research frameworks. The term Pasifika is in itself a diasporic concept, one that has taken on nomadic movement that generates new and emerging relations. Due to the contentious history of Pacific research, I am aware of my position as a Pasifika researcher attempting to theorise with differing epistemologies; without conflating Western and Pacific, posthumanist and indigenous Pacific worldviews. The very nature of posthuman philosophy challenges fixed constructs of subjectivity and identity, which include cultural, gender and so forth (Braidotti, 2013). Pacific indigenous experts such as Tamasese (2005) and Thaman (1993; 2010) have argued cultural conceptions of knowledge are neither static or fixed and are neither owned by human or centred upon humanist ideals, that indigenous knowledge and conceptions of such knowledge are in constant flux. The concept of the collective evokes not only social human relations in cultural knowing, it is inclusive of the corporeal and incorporeal bodies as multiplicity in relation to places, history, genealogy, matter and cosmos.*

**Keywords:** Pasifika research, posthuman, collective, subjectivity, Pasifika education

## Introduction:

The term Pasifika has been extensively written about and is often presented as a diasporic concept, one that traverses history, identity politics, cultural discourses as well as politics of education in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Leaupepe & Sauni, 2014; Matapo, 2016). The term Pasifika was coined in the 1990s with a bureaucratic intent to aid efficiency in policy making by grouping specific Pacific peoples within one category (Wendt-Samu, 2006). The Pacific nations represented under the Pasifika term include, Tonga, Samoa, Cook Islands, Tuvalu, Tokelau, Fiji and Niue. The entangled histories of Pacific peoples in Aotearoa/New Zealand are dynamic and complex. The personal narratives I express in this paper are connected to


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the many woven histories Pacific peoples share as migrants to Aotearoa. Motivation for migration included, better opportunities for employment, healthcare, education and further opportunities to financially support aiga (family) and villages in the Pacific Island countries. The migration stories for many Pacific families now settled in New Zealand and calling New Zealand home do extend however, beyond these particular migration narratives of the mid twentieth century. The direct lineage of Pacific peoples is shared with Aotearoa Indigenous peoples and as ocean voyagers and way-finders of the Pacific there is a direct lineage. Māori and Pacific peoples share embodied understandings of the world and being in the world, one example is that of the art of navigation (Wilson, 2005). Navigation requires all senses, physical, spiritual in connection with earth (corporeal bodies) and cosmos (Lewis, 1994). I ask, how did Pacific peoples navigate the earths largest Ocean in search of new lands, using only natural materials and sacred wisdoms shared collectively?

It is evident in shared Pacific oral histories, monotheism and indigenous philosophy, that the significance of cultural meanings in cosmonogy (how human have come into being and its relation to earth and cosmos) differ to that of the human subject presented in Kantian and Descarte's philosophies of logic, sense and transcendentalism. Contested in the Pacific indigenous human subject position is the hierarchy of the human position with God, living creatures, earth and cosmos. Furthermore, the human body and its capacities are enacted as practical wisdom(s), the body and its aptitude to create, generate and express knowledge is a sacred and celebrated function of collective knowledge. The intent of this paper is to decentre the taken for granted human subject presented in Pasifika education and Pasifika research.

## A cartography of the human subject presented in Pasifika education research:

Historically, the concept of cartography presented a particular way of seeing the land and natural phenomena, in spatially delimited terms. The original purpose of cartography is that of the colonising agenda; to enable warfare and later, the mapping of lands for ownership and commodity. In more recent years, the decolonising agenda has provoked an Indigenous struggle to reclaim lands, language and knowledge (Smith, 2012). From dominant Western philosophy the conditions of the human subject perpetuate this notion of 'ownership' of lands, as if land were not living or encompassing its own agency, or mauri (life forces). What I argue in this paper, by way of opening a cartography of relations, is mapping the

intersecting lines in a dynamic assemblage of encounters delineating the presence of human over matter, or human above other-than-human. I will attempt to call into question how the human subject is challenged in collective Pacific indigenous onto-epistemology. I raise several examples here of Pacific concepts that confront western ownership or commodification of land. The genealogical and biological relation presented in the concept whenua (Māori), fanua (Samoan), fonua (Tongan), all directly suggest that land is placenta, the life-giving force before birth and the sustaining life-force after birth and death. The human subject here in relation to land and its materiality is not separate. What is contested is the hierarchy of relations, human ownership versus the life force of whenua. How do these examples, shift the position of the fixed human subject and the forces and flows of subjectivity? A question I continue to ask as I engage in thinking with Pacific indigenous philosophy and posthuman philosophy in Pasifika education research.

Before moving on, I also indicate here that I use the term 'Indigenous' cautiously as the practice of labelling static definitions are in fact problematic and contradict indigenous practice (Mika, 2017). In addition to these tensions, is the historical colonising label of Indigenous which have political and systemic intentions to fix definitions of specific ethnic groups. So, from here I question how education regimes continue to marginalise Pacific indigenous onto-epistemology and what this means for Pasifika peoples continuing to negotiate education and education politics. Re-imagining the human subject as generative and emergent becoming(s) rather than a universalised subject may change dominant views of success in education. I would like to return to the human subject, that of the 'majoritive' human subject, the human subject that stems historically from the 'great chain of being anchored in patriarchal structures and ideology. This particular human subject is a western view that places the human subject in a particular hierarchical order, first being God and subsequently human, sentient beings, plants and then non-living. This view of the human subject is determined by a specific duality, a transcendental separation between human and God as superior. Furthermore, this duality presupposes the separation of human and other, specifically human capacities of power over other-than-human. How has this image – this 'great chain of being' permeated our very thinking, around who we are as human? What it means to be human? What it means to live as human? The human subject in this majoritive sense prescribes a specific subjectivity, one that is ontologically located with man's capacity to think rationally, which leaves other-than-human estranged from the rational man. Many Indigenous scholars (Meyer, 2014; Smith, 2013; Thaman, 1993) have argued against this dominant position of the human subject, problematizing the racialized and gendered 'others'

who have yet to become fully human. I recognise the tensions for Indigenous scholars having to validate Indigenous knowledge and other ways of being (human), from the edges of molar or rigid lines (the line of consistency), working with and against normativity (Deleuze, 1987).

So as to juxtaposition the previous critique of the great chain of being, here is an image taken in 1973 from our family photo album taken in Siumu (my mother's village). This image shows my grandfather in his fanua – the human inseparable from land – as land is placenta (life giving). The relationship with land is reciprocal – rupturing the humanist position in the hierarchy of western conceptualisations.

Fig 1. A photograph of my grandfather and grandmother working the taro plantation in Siumu Village, Upolu, Western Samoa (1973).

**Personal narrative: Entangling of fanua and being**

*I had heard of this place, in many a story – where the green leaves are curled before opening…*

*The swift cut of the blade removing the threat of weeds, my grandfather laboured, he knew somehow that without his hand in the soil, his connection would weaken, his collective*

> *responsibility to fanua and to aiga (past/present/future) remain entangled.*
> *Would he know of his influence…this impression upon his grandchild he had not yet held, his hands in soil, grasping life…his life in mine.*

My engagement with both Indigenous and post-foundational philosophy raises questions about the position of the human subject and clearly confronts Kant's metaphysics deductive a priori and Descartes's mind body dualism. One's capacity and modes of thought engage in and with the world and is open to the unconscious as it is to the conscious, and the thresholds between. Listening to the words of Tui Atua (2016), I am reminded of such thresholds where the location of Samoan indigenous knowledge is not separated from past, present or future, rather a way of looking into the world, each other, the cosmos, and the (un)knowable. I also refer here to Deleuze's philosophy of time that draws upon Bergson, where past events co-exist and the virtual bloc of past events are more than mere memory, rather a virtual whole as conditions for actualisation of present (Deleuze, 1987). The Newtonian linear conventional image of time is thus contested in my own personal becoming when thinking, sensing, experiencing Indigenous and posthuman philosophy.

Posthuman philosophy is an onto-epistemological position influenced by the work of Nietzsche, Spinoza, Bergson and more recently Braidotti, with epistemic trajectories repositioning human and matter (new materialism) Harroway and Barad. Nietzsche challenges the Cartesian conception of subject and cogito and emphasises embodied ontology in the creation of knowledge rather than significance placed on processes or theoretical structures of conscious thought. The posthuman predicament as Braidotti contextualises; requires humans to think beyond their traditional humanist limitations and embrace the risks that becoming-other-than-human brings. Braidotti (2013) identifies the posthuman challenge as a historical movement that ends opposition between anti-humanism and humanism. Braidotti (2006) distinguishes two features from the work of Deleuze and Harroway that offer alternatives to conceptualising of the human subject and new process ontology; neofoundationalism materialism and theory of rationality (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016).

I would here suggest an ontology of (un)knowing, where there is an undoing of fixedness in meaning of human-relations to all things, I am reminded of this by the words shared by

Hawaiian scholar Manulani Aluli Meyer (2014) "A'ohe pau ka 'ike I ka hālau ho'okahi" (p 152) which refers to knowledge as infinite, effulgent, and never-ending. Tui Atua (a Samoan indigenous philosopher and cultural knowledge custodian) adds the more you think you know the less you know (Tui Atua, 2016). From a Samoan Indigenous view, there is a high regard for the unknown, which I would also suggest an openness towards what is unknown about the multiplicities of the human subject. The human subject as assemblage can be traversed in relation to all human capacities and as questioned by Spinoza "what can a body do?". We are yet to know, what a body can do – what capacities a body can produce, the human subject in many research discourses remain uncontested, taken for granted in its relation to corporeal and incorporeal bodies. As a body or assemblage, I present a cartography of the human subject that I have personally traversed through my engagement in Pasifika education research. This cartography depicts a series of both singular and collective topographies in milieu (Harris & Jones, 2016) – in the middle and edges of the human subject presented in research, research processes and paradigms.

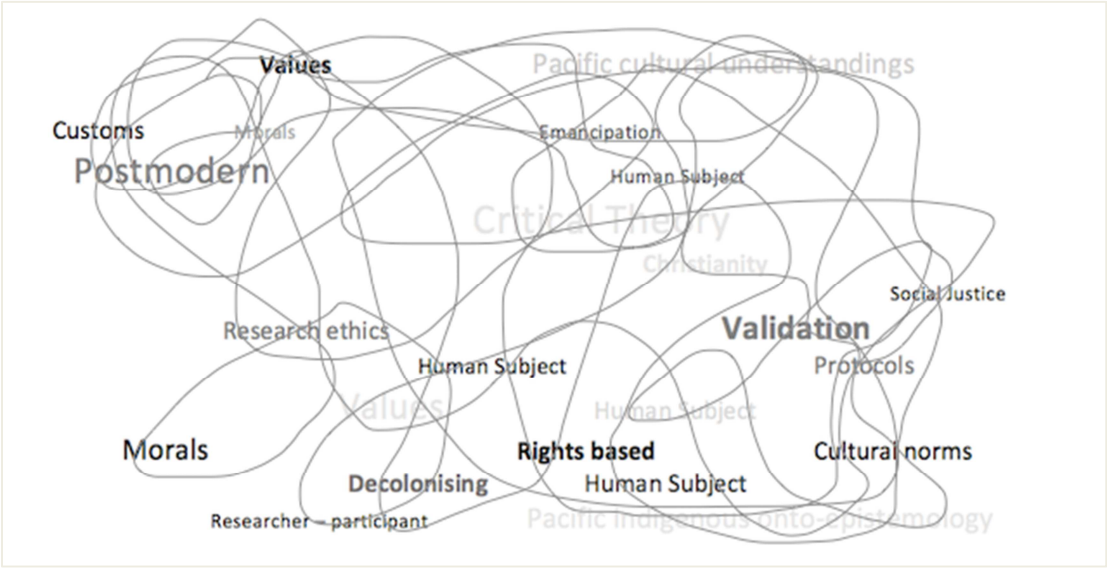


Fig 2. A dynamic cartography of the human subject presented and personally traversed while engaging in Pasifika education research.

## Values presented Pasifika education research:

Pasifika methodologies have grown in scholarship in more recent years and as the Ministry of Education draws attention to increasing the success of Pasifika learners through policy documents, values-based engagement continues to be encouraged in Pasifika education and

Pasifika education research (Airini, Anae, & Mila-Schaaf, 2010; Ministry of Education [MoE], 2012). Another Pasifika framework that encourages the coming together of Pasifika research and education policy is *teu le va*, which again encourages the unification of shared values in Pasifika research (Airini et al., 2010). Common Pasifika values presented in research frameworks are; spirituality, reciprocity, respect and belonging (MoE, 2012). While the term Pasifika is highly contested and engagement in Pasifika research as stipulated by Pasifika education research guidelines (Anae, Coxon, Mara, Wendt-Samu & Finau, 2001), encourages ethnic specific values and culturally appropriate practices, I am left to ask how values presented in Pasifika methodologies have possibly become universal truths in determining researcher engagement. It seems that values have become universalised in framing the 'how' in relation to the ethics of an encounter. Values are centred upon the idea of moral agency which is in its very nature is humanistic and teleological. If we as Pasifika researchers are limited by moral agency that is centred upon transcendental ideals – then the teleological outcomes of research close opportunities for difference, emergence and becoming. How can thinking in the spirit of the collective with human and other-than-human (materiality) offer an alternative approach to ethics (as encounter), researcher engagement and the creation of knowledge?

## In the spirit of the collective:

Pacific studies (Thaman, 2016) and critical theory presented in both Pasifika (Aoteara) and Pacific indigenous research - by way of decolonizing power-structures, regimes of colonization and truth - tends to emphasise marginalisation and social justice from within a human-centred position. What I call into question here, is the position of the human subject in Pasifika research and I ask how thinking collectively with corporeal and incorporeal bodies may shift our being and becoming in and with research. As Tui Atua (2008) has explained in his Samoan reference, Pacific peoples are not individuals; there is a shared divinity with ancestors – including the waters, land and skies, all integral parts of the cosmos. For me the challenge of Pasifika research lies in traversing 'values' presented as 'truths' and the fixing of ethics in research engagement. If we are to think collectively in our relation to being then we may regard the knowing subject as affective, open to inter-relationality, including forces, flows and locations (Braidotti, 2006). Affect in a Deleuzian context is about trying to understand and comprehend configurations of things and bodies that are temporally mediated, yet are continuous events. Referring back to the art of Pacific navigation mentioned earlier, we may consider the fluctuations of the winds, the vast

expansion of the cosmos and the subtle movement of other bodies, rhythms – incorporeal, corporeal bodies transitioning, and constantly reconfiguring virtual and actual. Meyer (2014) in her chapter Indigenous epistemology-spirit revealed conceptualises indigenous knowledge as an ancient capacity linked to land, water, people, language beyond cognitive accumulation textualised in perfect form.

The spirit of the collective has been conceptualised by Samoan scholar Tuafuti (2010) with a focus on the intentional and political act of silence as a collective expression in education. The concept of silence alone may seem contradictory and an unusual position to take when conceptualising agency, but as Tuafuti (2010) writes in her study of the enactment of silence in education, silence is a living component of Pasifika culture. Silence of the Pacific individual has been interpreted in many ways in the history of Pacific colonial texts. It has been observed by Europeans that Samoan peoples were not competent in Western politics (Keown, 2009). What was actioned or embodied was perceived as incompetence. What is not understood is the ontological position of agency, that ones' actions are not in isolation to ones' own individual actions, rather agency as a collective expression in action is embodied, in the spirit of the collective. How does engagement in Pasifika research Bowden (2015) analyses the concept of agency as theorised by Hegel, Nietzshe and Deleuze. What each of these philosophers call into question is the action of agency as an expressive conception, where intentions of actions (by the agent) are ontological and are not separate from the actions that express them. When thinking of expressive agency of the Pasifika human subject, that of a collective position, challenges the notion of the autonomous individual and engage in thinking of the collective: engaging with a network of relations (between human and non-human worlds). What can be expressed by silence, how do we open ourselves to be affected and to affect as collective bodies generating new subjectivities? This alternative reconceptualising of agency may encourage Pasifika researchers to question how agency in the spirit of the collective is lived, expressed, made and re-made.

## Fa'alavelave – *a change of heart*

(Matapo, J. 2017).
Four years old, the phone rings…

This is a collect call from Samoa, is your mum there?

Um, yes – I'll go get her...

Mum…I call,

I watch her as she speaks, grief in her eyes

Tupe – money to be sent, someone has died.

Ten years old, the phone rings

This is a collect call from Samoa…?

Um, faatali, wait – I'll get my mum.

Another call to send money I assume, we hardly have money to buy food…

Why is my mum always sending money?

Fa'alavelave this and fa'alavelave that!

Mum telefone – the phones for you.

Twenty years old, the phone rings

This is a collect call from Samoa, do you accept the charges?

Not again, mum's gonna ask me for money now and I've got my own bills to pay.

Mum – telefone, the phones for you.

Covering the receiver, I whisper to her (I don't have money to spare so please don't ask me).

Fa'alavelave, I hear in the phone

I watch her as she speaks, grief in her eyes

Tupe – money to be sent, uncle has died.

Thirty years old, the phone rings

My son answers and calls out, mum people are coming over.

Sitting in the lounge with my father's body, my mother by my side

We talk of his many stories and whisper to him our love

I worry about funeral costs and how we will feed our visitors

Hurrying to the kitchen my aunt and I prepare

The flood of visitors at our door

I watch my mother as she speaks, grief in her eyes

Tupe has arrived, more than enough and food to last us months

*Fa'alavelave* – opening to collective affect(s), shared becoming, and this is my change of heart.

## Conclusion:

The posthuman challenge entails affirmative engagement in different discursive frameworks that produce new alternatives in the conceptualising of the human subject. The context of my doctoral research engaging with Pacific indigenous and posthuman philosophy, I believe aligns with efforts of Pasifika researchers and scholars to decolonise indigenous knowledge, as it calls into question the universalised human subject. In deterritoiralising and reterritorialising the human subject by way of thinking with Pacific indigenous and posthuman theory, my attention is drawn to the art of navigation and the fluid capacities of Moana (Pacific Ocean) – the life force of Moana, the cosmos, the tumultuous waters, the tides – movement and rest. I have storied and expressed my research journey from the middle in an attempt to argue for a reconceptualising of the human subject that is open to new and emerging relations, forces and flows like Moana and in navigating a future for Pasifika education and research.

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