

TEENA BROWN PULU AND RICHARD PAMATATAU

Fieldwork journals on Tonga's 2014 election: What is funny about that?

Abstract

This essay presents selected passages from the fieldwork journals of Teena Brown Pulu and Richard Pamatatau on Tonga's 2014 election. Staged on November 27th, here was the second general election under an amended constitution intended to bring about a more democratic system of parliament and government. Woven together are interrelated factors which field researchers like us – academics who craft their written studies on encounters, observations, and conversations gathered from a specific people and place – experience and live through in day-to-day work.

Highlighted in this paper are our reflections and recollections as Richard, a journalism academic, and Teena, an anthropologist, researching in the field while fielding a political climate of ordinary folks' frustration. By this, Tongan people saw the nineteenth century class-system instituted in the 1875 constitution was fixed to the modified political structure introduced in 2010. Therefore, the thread interlacing our journal excerpts to an analysis of what is taking hold in Tongan political life is satire and wit, and how humour is manoeuvred to criticise and critique power and authority.

Teena Brown Pulu is an anthropologist and Senior Lecturer in Pacific Development in the Faculty of Maori and Indigenous Development at Auckland University of Technology.

Richard Pamatatau is a journalist and programme leader of the graduate diploma in Pacific journalism in the School of Communication Studies at Auckland University of Technology.

WHAT IS FUNNY ABOUT THAT?¹

In my own little way I have always tried to open doors and to test the waters. When I returned to Tonga in the mid-1970s, I did this initially through direct public action. Others have since gone further and have demonstrated that the supposedly most monolithic society in the South Pacific is not at all as inflexible as it appears. In fact there is a flexibility in Tongan society that indicates greater freedoms in the future.

Epeli Hau'ofa

The month of November 2014 had Tongan people firmly on course to becoming highly excitable and over emotional. Preparing themselves for round two of who's who in the zoo to be nationally staged on November 27th, 2014,² the second bout of a general election first modified in 2010 to be more representative of the people was fast approaching. Unabashedly, polling day had become like a four-yearly game show to watch and wager public opinion on who was in to win, and who was on their way down and out to political Siberia.³ Anticipated was a repeat episode of voters having their hearts set on changing the government and believing the old regime would surely disappear into thin air.

Not that invisibility was physically possible in a Pacific Island state measured by a United Nations index on non-communicable diseases as a small population of obese people; an inward-looking society structured by hierarchy, patriarchy, and kinship in which even the private affairs of public figures were up for broadcasting by local media, and where all citizens claimed to be descended from one of the many dead male chiefs of monumental significance far superior to the ragtag assortment of chiefs who were, god help us, traditional rulers today (Latu 2014).

Silhouetting the playfulness and spiritedness of doing fieldwork against a backdrop of the Tonga election of 2014, this essay retells stories detailed in the journals of Teena Brown Pulu and Richard Pamatatau. An anthropologist and a journalism academic, we set out during the election week of late November to research the tone and tenor of political change as Tongan people felt it. Purposely we have framed humour as an incisive tool Tongans manoever to critique and criticise the political landscape in respect to how this small island developing state of the South Pacific region has feared four years on from becoming a democracy of sorts.

In theory, critiquing and criticising refer to two different acts of speech, or rather, a speech act that can be performed and carried out by the speaker (Barthes, 1986). Critique or critical thought signals to an analysis ordered by a systematic method of gathering evidence to weigh up assumptions and hypotheses. Whereas criticism, by comparison, is generally understood as the practice of judging the intrinsic worth or inherent worthlessness of something as in the presiding political structure, someone such as the prime minister, or some group of people like parliamentarians.

What we found is when humor is couched in context-specific surroundings of the Tonga election of 2014, the hard distinction between critique and criticism can collapse. Surfacing instead was Barthes' notion of "evaluation" in terms of the "levels of reification [and] degrees of phraseology" that popular ideas about political change were expressed by people from below (Barthes 1986, 67). By this, we are nodding to ordinary Tongan voters desiring change in politics and the political establishment, however they formulated what change entailed for them.

*If society's alienation still compels us to demystify languages (and notably that of the myths), the means of this combat is not – is no longer – a critical decipherment, it is **evaluation**. Faced with*

the world's writing systems, the tangle of various discourses (didactic, aesthetic, propagandistic, political, etc.), we must determine levels of reification, degrees of phraseological density. (Barthes 1986, 67).

The sort of democracy Tonga has become is still getting figured out by men in power who run the government and the state, and also by the people, the voters, the commoners who are not of the monarchy and nobility but live in Tonga and make up the majority of the population. How then, do people from below make collective sense of political life in everyday conversations?

Instances and settings when humour is exchanged to spell out criticism of Tongan politics, polemics, and political structure is relevant to this essay because as Epeli Hau'ofa noted, "what people laugh at or about is culturally conditioned" (Hau'ofa 1999, 42). As a field research team of a Tongan New Zealander and a Cook Islands New Zealander from different disciplines – anthropology and journalism – which intersect by prioritising the field as the site for doing research, Teena and Richard have been socialized by lived experience to know "there are all kinds of in-jokes that are exclusive" to our respective cultures and identities (Hau'ofa 1999, 42). More importantly, "a [Pacific] group may laugh at things about themselves but if an outsider laughs at the very same things, the group may not at all be amused" (Hau'ofa 1999, 42).

By no means are we claiming to be centrally positioned as insiders of Tongan citizenry and society; nor are we saying that we are immune to being classified as outsiders poking at why, in certain situations, Tongans depict a serious-minded election signifying state power, and the prospect of a changeover of power, in a light-hearted way. Concomitantly, why is it Tongans consider only their people would find their funniness amusing? On noting that, however, by ways and

means different to each other we do have connections to Tonga.

As the author of this tale, mine are through ancestry not citizenship with my parents being born in Tonga and migrating to Dunedin in 1966, a small city in the South Island of New Zealand. As the fieldworker gathering the bulk of stories for retelling in various publications, Richard's attachment is traced to his media reporting on the Tonga general election of 2010 for Radio New Zealand as the national broadcaster's Pacific correspondent. He also covered the state funeral of King Tupou IV in 2006, and the changeover of monarch from Tupou IV to his son George Tupou V marked by the 2008 coronation. In 2012 as a journalism academic, Richard observed the state funeral of George Tupou V and ascent to the throne of his youngest brother and reigning monarch Tupou VI.

Illustrating our first contention that intellectual and cultural border crossing in contemporary Tonga can be a pertinent way to gain an understanding of why boundaries and proscriptions of culture and identity exist and persist, we cite Eva Gruber, a German professor of American studies. Gruber stressed the sentiments of "Choctaw / Irish writer Louis Owens" in her book on *Humor in Contemporary Native North American Literature: Reimagining Nativeness* (Gruber 2008, 19). Contextually Owens pictured the very act of *Reimagining Nativeness* was framed by an "overarching question of cultural identity." In the sense, he believed Native authors characteristically know that "the quest for identity ... is absolutely central to all Native American writing" (Gruber 2008, 19).

The "overarching question of cultural identity" or even "the quest for identity: What does it mean to be Indian – or mixed blood – in contemporary America?" according to Choctaw / Irish writer Louis Owens is absolutely central to all Native

American writing. Obviously there cannot be any definite answer to this question; identity is, after all, never fixed but continuously negotiated in varying contexts and discourses. Still it is worthwhile to consider some of the factors and circumstances that have an impact on contemporary Native existence in order to explore some of the intricacies of Native identity formation and to come to an understanding of what may necessitate a humorous reimagining of Nativeness in the first place. (Gruber 2008, 19).

At once, we see sense in Owens' assertion that the "question of cultural identity" is fundamental to any Native writing project seeking to collectively mobilise and make visible one's people in the academy, especially if one's people have been kept outside the strictures and structures of institutional inclusion (Gruber 2008, 19). We also detect a tense query Gruber's discussion downplays is in the actual writing of another's "quest for identity" from the position of an outside observer. How did she interrogate her value judgements and assumptions about "Native American writing" in what she identified as "a humorous reimagining of Nativeness?" (Gruber 2008, 19).

In what ways might Native American writers contest her book's arguments and challenge the cultural authenticity and accuracy of what she has penned for print? By publishing her views in the public domain, views which might not have been checked and critiqued by Native American writers and thinkers before going to an academic press, has she reinforced an authoritative truth written about this group by yet another researcher not of their kinfolk, in-folk, and kind?

Our essay approach diverges from Gruber's method of identifying humor as a literary site in which Natives are actively engaged in the contemporary "reimagining of Nativeness" (Gruber 2008, 19). We explore how political life

inside Tonga is being reworked by local expectations of the 2014 election results and incoming government for the next four years when Tongans imagine the oldest South Pacific Kingdom, which is also the youngest democracy in the region, can modernise and move forward. Underlying this, how is Tongan humor – the kind of funniness that Tongans figure only their people would laugh about – meticulously threaded into conversations on political life and hopes for a better government than the last.

Contextualizing one of Richard's experiences of Tongan humor, four years ago at the 2010 Tonga election he was working the field as a Radio New Zealand journalist. He encountered a female candidate, one of the handful of Tongan women with a high public service profile standing for election to a constituency in the urban Nuku'alofa area. This parliamentary candidate was extraordinary on two counts. She was the former Tonga attorney general to government and her campaigning strategy was giving away free ice-cream to registered voters in her electorate. Jestingly she remarked to the New Zealand and Australian reporters in Tonga assigned to election coverage that the Tongan language translation of dark chocolate was *siokalati nika*, meaning chocolate nigger. The *Palangi* (European, white) journalists did not laugh or take the comment as in any way comical. Contrarily the statement hinged on being read as offensive and politically incorrect, to say the very least, especially for an attorney at law.

What exactly did this Tongan woman mean by throwing out the reference *siokalati nika* to the Western media? Here were New Zealand and Australian journalists who had swooped upon her small Pacific Island country of 105,323 people for the week. They had taken up all the hotel accommodation in Nuku'alofa, Tonga's capital, and hired out all the rental cars on the main island. They had money which they displayed by purchasing pricey restaurant meals and alcohol in bars, lifestyle choices the majority of Tongans could

not afford on humble household budgets, even if they wanted to.

The Western media desired to capture on film, convey in photographs, and communicate through English language sound-bites of what they imagined would be the triumph of Western liberal democracy over the Friendly Islands of Tonga. Their system of democracy would surely transform this backward island kingdom that had been ruled over by a one hundred and thirty five year old absolute monarchy. And it was here that they walked head-first and eyes-closed into political reality: A Native Tongan woman, a highly educated Tongan lawyer renowned in the public service, speaking in derogatory riddles about chocolate niggers while seducing people to vote for her with melting ice-cream in the hot November sun.

Discreetly, we ask how much is the humorous storytelling of Tongan political life gendered? (Gilbert 2004). Do funny accounts of who should, compared to who truly does, govern the Kingdom only get crafted and transmitted by men in all male surroundings such as *faikava* (*kava* drinking) settings, a popular haunt for men to discuss what is taken for granted as men's talk, politics being one of those subjects?

The 2010 *siokalati nika* story proves, in actuality, women are party to performing satire and wit when it boils down to showing their criticism of power and authority at village roots level. What is distinctive about the Tonga election 2014 in contrast to the 2010 vote? (Brown Pulu 2014*b*). Moreover, how is Tongan humor infused in the narratives created around who's who in the zoo? (Brown Pulu 2014*a*, p. 396). Essentially, this means in a comical twist, who *really* runs this country – the Government of Tonga or the King of Tonga?

Different again to Gruber's angle that humor stimulates a "reimagining of Nativeness" in Native American literature today, our field research in Tonga during the election week of 2014 surveyed how poking fun at absurdity provides a political commentary that is not at all considered culturally offensive or

an ill-chosen technique to exchange opinion. By this we mean, why is witticism regarded a suitable method of critical communication? (Siegel 1995; Garrett et al 2005; Iseke 2011). Furthermore, when satire is used to personify figures of power and authority, why is this not considered an affront to polite cultural communication? (Hereniko 1994; Hau'ofa 1999).

Field research of this kind is not without a tripwire set up to snare the Native researcher in an age-old dilemma of being a tenuously positioned insider who might be swiftly called out by the real insiders living in Tonga as an imposter. By researching a politically volatile field, how exposed are we to being named and blamed as outsiders visiting the country to mine informants' stories and our experiences in the field for data that benefits us and our academic careers not them, the locals who actually tell, perform, represent, and own their tales? If a knotty scenario transpired how do narrators talk and write themselves out of difficulty with locals irked by their questioning of political life in Tonga, or their foreign presence in spaces that are, in theory, exclusively set aside for Tongans?

As collaborators from different academic fields, anthropology and journalism, we have an institutionalized understanding of how our disciplines make sense of fieldwork situations where the researcher is slighted for manufacturing what the locals believe to be spurious accounts of what is happening on the ground. For Richard Pamatatau's field of journalism, which in New Zealand universities is taught as a specialist programme in the area studies of communication and media, it was Danny Schechter's opinion piece on *Helicopter Journalism: What's Missing in the Tsunami Coverage (2005)* that spelled out the polemical and unethical dilemma of doing helicopter journalism. In this sense, the foreign reporter parachutes into "a conflict zone" and gets out quick smart after getting "most of his [or her] information from a taxi driver" (Schechter 2005).

Interrogating the authenticity of a *Washington Post* feature article about the January 2005 tsunami that hit Banda Aceh in Indonesia, Schechter observed that its greatest disservice to frontline journalism in “a conflict zone” was the fact the reporter failed to find out and disseminate “what is happening on the ground” (Schechter 2005).

It is colourful writing and graphic but also totally inadequate to the task of helping us understand what is happening on the ground in the catastrophe that has struck the region with a force of biblical proportions. This is an example of helicopter journalism and distanced “outside-in” reporting that accesses few if any sources in the country itself, does not speak the language, and does not explain much about what is going on. It’s like the foreign correspondent who flies into a conflict zone for an afternoon and gets most of his information from a taxi driver. (Schechter 2005).

For the discipline of anthropology which is Teena Brown Pulu’s academic field, Epeli Hau’ofa went some way to disentangling the complicated pickle a Native researcher, particularly the Natives like him who practice ethnography as their fieldwork forte, find themselves in by writing “the kinds of things that Tongans laugh about” (Hau’ofa 1999, 42).

In discussion about his book of short stories, *Tales of the Tikongs* (1994), he mentioned that to publicly reveal “what we laugh at about ourselves,” to let foreigners know when we know “outsiders don’t understand” us and will read Tongan comedy as strange and silly Native frolics and pranks, is more than discomfoting (Hau’ofa 1999, 42). At its worst, it is shameful and humiliating to “admit our absurdity” to the world (Hau’ofa 1999, 42). By showing the way we laugh at the ridiculousness of how political life and development dilemmas run amok in a small island kingdom, we have uncovered too

many intimate details about ourselves, our thinking, and in some circumstances, our zany behaviour.

Tongans have a fantastic sense of humour, very similar to Fijians and other groups in Melanesia that I know of. Now the sorts of things that I laugh at or about in Tales of the Tikongs are the kinds of things that Tongans laugh about. They love playing with words. Yet many Tongans are not very enamored with Tales, which is considered by many to be about Tonga. This is only a tiny part of the truth. Those of my compatriots who are indignant about my work are so because they feel that I have made out what we laugh at about ourselves known to others. We know and admit our absurdity, but we should not let others know. Outsiders don't understand. (Hau'ofa 1999, 42).

Three decades have passed since Epeli Hau'ofa first published *Tales of the Tikongs* in 1983. Our essay probes whether Natives writing Native humor by exposing the insider psychology of poking fun at nonsensical episodes when Western development collides and conflicts with reality in Pacific Island states are targeting white academic readership, or their own Native kind, as the audience considering and consuming their work? (Said 1984). Tongan political life in the present day, similar to neighbouring independent states of the South Pacific, navigates through a more complex environment than what Hau'ofa recalled in his late 20th century memoirs.

Hau'ofa's 1970s skits and sketches of what Tongans found laughable about their Western-modelled efforts to flirt with, and chase after, development are bawdily comical. A South Pacific parody of an over-the-top vaudeville show, the *Tales of the Tikongs* depict outrageously loud and large as life characters.

But what about the unobtrusive, unassuming, understated, low-profile people of everyday Tongan life who constitute the field? (Brown Pulu 2014a). What about mocking the establishment with sarcastic remarks laced in views about the not so Friendly Islands from people who are hanging for dear life onto the hierarchy's bottom rung? (Garrett et al 2005).

We are signalling to the commoners who do not make the front page news and television sound-bites of media interviews on the Tonga election 2014; the ordinary people, who, if they do appear in an academic study, are anonymised in a survey or de-identified in an interview excerpt; the majority of the voter population who matter tentatively while the vote is on for seven hours of one day every four years, but do not figure highly once the ballot papers are counted, the parliamentarians are confirmed, and the state bureaucracy rolls on (Gilbert 2004).

Undoubtedly regional polity in the South Pacific region is changing. A new identity of the Pacific Islands for Pacific Islanders has emerged, which contests New Zealand and Australia's domination over the region's affairs as developed countries and aid donors. Additionally, criticism of New Zealand, Australia, and America's 20th century mind-set that the Pacific region is naturally and permanently a Western sphere of geopolitical influence has been uprooted by Tonga and other Pacific Island states pivoting to China and South East Asia (Brown Pulu 20014b). If this is to be the Asian century, then no region in the world plays out the tensions, stresses, and dramas of repositioning economies, trade, military alliances, and diplomatic and donor relationships to the East like the Pacific Island states (UNDP and Australian Aid 2014).

With the shuffling and schisms going off, the crux of our questioning pokes at one tender detail subject to inflammation. Is Tongan satire that ridicules and parodies the political power and authority of the King of Tonga and his

class peers of male nobles, seen as edgy and treading on dangerous ground with ordinary Tongans in their everyday interactions? (Hau'ofa 2008).

Does the grassroots humor of the commoners from below, specifically when prodding at the upper class, signify the Native Tongan public are forbidden from speaking any kind of truth which is “opposed by his Excellency and the Great Chiefs” (Hau'ofa 1994, 44). Hau'ofa penned the punchline in *Tales of the Tikongs*: For daring to do so, Tonga “will grind you small” (Hau'ofa 1994, 44).

If you stand with the Truth, opposed by his Excellency and the Great Chiefs, Tiko will grind you small. That's the truth about our land, my son. Forget the Law and forget the Constitution. It's the will of His Excellency and the Great Chiefs that make things not move in Tiko. Never forget that. (Hau'ofa 1994, 44).

Certain characters Epeli Hau'ofa personified with masterful precision, mainly because he was alluding to himself and others of his kind; that is, the deluded anthropologists and university educated Natives with liberal arts and social sciences degrees returning to homeland states, assuming they will save their small islands, but instead, ending up disillusioned with local life and acting out as *hoha'a* (annoyances). Is the political climate facing Western educated Natives when re-entering the homeland state and wanting to modernize Tonga with “foreign thinking” only mitigated by Hau'ofa's advice of thirty years ago? (Hau'ofa 1994, 44).

Go forth then and work for the Government, serve God, and forget about the truth. Truth is foreign thinking, and this is Tiko. Truth and Tiko don't relate, and you of all people should know that. (Hau'ofa 1994, 44).

CAPTIVES OF CULTURE

We have asked too much. Ruled by a word limit, our essay has not the scope and space to systematically respond to all the penetrating questions we have purposely put down to undress the complexity of framing humor as a means to practice critique and vent criticism. Instead, Richard and I have elected to *return the gaze* (Fordham 1996).⁴ Rather than staring at, and making notes about, the Natives during the Tonga election week of 2014 (as we did), we have put *us* under the fieldwork microscope and are watching ourselves.

Concisely then, our essay speaks about *we* in the field. In hindsight, how did we write ourselves in characterization as an anthropologist and a journalism academic into the field we cohabited while the Tonga election 2014 was going off around us? Appreciably, we are conscious in Tonga that although we might be watching others in political life, those very others are watching us back by mentally noting who we are, what we are doing in their country, who are speaking with, and what we are saying. Who is watching who, and for what reason? Bluntly, who is *really* in the zoo when the watchers are caged up in the social hierarchy and watched too?

The field research in this paper are entries written in the personal diaries we kept about ourselves, and how we were handling political change as it uncoiled through our fieldwork encounters, observations, and conversations. Etched out on the page are reflections and recollections of a journalism academic and an anthropologist working the field, fielding the work, and experiencing the political climate of ordinary Tongan people's frustration and resentment at an old, worn-out class system instituted in an 1875 constitution to divide, rule, and remain permanently in control, despite being seen as obsolete in today's democratised state and society.

But do our musings illustrate a context-specific Tongan funniness produced by election anxieties and tensions that

had transitorily infiltrated people's lives for the month of November 2014? Yes and no is the correct answer.

To explain, some lines in the journal passages can be read as comical, witty, and satirical, but not so much as the writers are clowning it up in the field, or trying hard to come off funny in their penmanship. The notes are expressly our accounts of leading up to election day on Thursday November 27th, 2014, the palace office scene at the nobles' election, and the following evening of Friday 28th, 2014, when weighing up who had been elected to parliament and a new government's formation was all people could speak of.

A month later Democratic Party leader 'Akilisi Pohiva won the prime minister's ballot in Tonga's Legislative Assembly on Monday December 29th, 2014. King Tupou VI sanctioned Pohiva's cabinet ministers on Wednesday December 31st, 2014, as the Government of Tonga comprising of six Democratic Party parliamentarians, five independent people's representatives, and one noble's representative (Brown Pulu and Pamatatau 2015). Pohiva's instatement as head of government for the 2014 to 2018 term was historical by the mere fact he became the first people's representative to be elected prime minister by the majority of the legislature at fifteen votes to eleven.

On the November week of public polling in 2014, Richard and I did not know what we know today. Our written snapshots therefore put in the picture the post-election unease of anticipating, but not knowing for certain, whether Tonga would witness a change of government leadership by the election of a commoner prime minister.

Central to our recorded memoirs is one inquiry: When everyday interactions poke fun at the authority of the monarch and his all male nobility, is this read as dangerously edgy by ordinary Tongan people? No, to be ruefully blunt; commonplace talk is layered and laden with value judgements about power, especially the public perception that

constitutionally the reigning monarch can exercise greater executive power than the government.

In closing the sections on framing humor as an incisively sharp method of critiquing and criticising the top-heavy structure in which political power operates in Tonga, there are two interrelated points we contend. First, culture is an agent of power in the way that power is exerted through culture, an argument which Edward Said mapped out in his book, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Said 1984, 9).

...there is a more interesting dimension to this idea of culture possessing possession. And that is the power of culture by virtue of its elevated or superior position to authorize, to dominate, to legitimate, demote, interdict, and validate: in short, the power of culture to be an agent of, and perhaps the main agency for, powerful differentiation within its domain and beyond it too. (Said 1984, 9).

Class differentiation in Tonga – the monarch, the royal household, the nobility, and the commoners – is sweepingly read by Tongans as a euphemism for traditional culture. Consequently, culture dictates possession in the 1875 constitution and amendments. Put plainly, the reigning monarch possesses supreme power as the “Sovereign of all the Chiefs and all the people” (Act of Constitution of Tonga 2010, 8).

The King is Sovereign of all the Chiefs and all the people. The person of the King is sacred. He reigns the country but ministers are responsible. All Acts that have passed the Legislative Assembly must bear the King's signature before they become law. (Act of Constitution of Tonga 2010, 8).

Second, it is inevitable that a recurring collision plays out between culture as power ordering class differentiation in Tonga, and democratizing state and society to give participatory power to the people from below, the commoners. Shedding light on this line of reasoning Douglas Raybeck's book, *Mad Dogs, Englishmen and the Errant Anthropologist*, made a relevant argument applicable to Tonga's case. If "we take our cultural patterns for granted, we are captives of them," he wrote (Raybeck 1996, 1-2).

...people unfamiliar with other patterns of belief and behaviour can never realize the particular nature of their own patterns or customs, nor can they surmount to them. To the extent that we take our cultural patterns for granted, we are captives of them. Intellectual and personal freedom begins with an awareness that alternatives are possible. (Raybeck 1996, 1-2).

The case Richard and I make in writing our stories from the field, and recalling our memories of the Tonga election 2014 is that ordinary Tongan people express an acute "awareness that alternatives are possible" (Raybeck 1996, 1-2). They are critical of culture as power. They have lived experience of a 19th century class structure worsening 21st century inequalities. They are weary of, and fed up with the country's majority living in the borderlands of poverty, while a privileged few are spared the adversity of an ordinary Tongan life.

But Tonga is also a contrasting and contradictory landscape where the odd nobleman like Ma'afu, Tonga's Minister for Land and Natural Resources, and His Majesty's Armed Forces, is popular with the Tongan public for a straightforward reason. Ma'afu recognizes for Tongan citizens, as for citizens of any country in the world, there is "intellectual and personal freedom" though people's civil freedoms when

political leaders envisage “that alternatives are possible,” and should be acted on in a democratized state and society (Raybeck 1996, 1-2).

The real grilling for any government that comes to power in Tonga ought to be presented by this mode of questioning. How will social disconnection between classes, compounded by a political disjuncture in “The King is Sovereign” versus the state is democratic, come up with “alternatives [that] are possible” for the country, and beneficial and believable for the people? (Act of Constitution of Tonga 2010, 8; Raybeck 1996, 1-2). Worded another way, how is Tonga’s sovereignty signified in the monarch, and democratizing state and society, reconcilable?

The following sections which complete our essay are citations from Richard and Teena’s journals recorded in Tonga during their field trip on election week from Monday November 24th, 2014 to Monday December 1st, 2014. It should not be read as an authoritative canon by any means, but rather, as a small opening for scanning what the authors of this work felt, saw, were party to, and experienced first-hand in an intricate field of Tonga in political change.

RICHARD’S JOURNAL: A FUNERAL ENCOUNTER

One afternoon at Seaview Lodge during my stay in Tonga for election week I could hear a brass band and canons sounding. I asked the Tongan women who were cleaning the rooms what was going on.

“The King must be back. That is why they are letting off the canons. What a terrible noise disturbing the peace. Maybe he is important enough for the canons,” explained one of the guesthouse cleaners in a satirical tone.

Of greater interest to the women was the brass band playing at the burial on the Vuna Road cemetery next door to the Seaview Lodge.⁵ It signalled the burial was for ‘someone important.’ “It must be someone important who has died

because there is a brass band; maybe a family member of the nobility,” added another of the cleaners.

I stood with these women upstairs in the corridor of the guesthouse rooms peering out the window by the stairwell. They instructed me, “Go and find out who it is and come back and tell us. We want to know.” I said, “I can’t go. I’m not dressed in formal or tidy clothes, and I can’t just go to the burial.” “Yes you can,” they urged.

One informed me that, “You are not a *Dongan* [Tongan] so you can go. We cannot go there because we are *Dongan* [Tongan]. You *chust ko* [just go] and come back and tell us what is going on.” Walking down the stairs to go find out, as they had instructed, a cleaner called after me, “Welcome to Tonga.” Her comment rang out Tongan tongue-in-cheek humour. With a bucket and mop in hand she strode off to continue cleaning rooms.

Coyly I walked along the sea wall and stopped opposite the cemetery where some Tongan women attached to the funeral party wearing mourning mats had gathered under the shade of a tree. I said “Hello,” and sat on the sea wall waiting for the funeral procession to pass down the middle of the road. They told me, “You can keep walking. It’s ok.” I responded, “No, I can’t walk past when someone is being buried at the cemetery. It is not respectful, even if I am not a Tongan.”

The women replied, “Ok, sit with us then. We tell you when you can go.” The brass band was playing a piece that I’ve heard at Tongan funerals before. From memory, it was the same arrangement played at the burial of King Taufa’ahau Tupou IV at the royal tombs in 2006, the first state funeral in Tonga I covered during my former career as the Pacific correspondent for Radio New Zealand.

While listening to the brass composition, the women asked where I was from and what I was doing in Tonga. “I’m up in Tonga with Dr Teena Brown Pulu from AUT University. We’re here to think about the election.” That was all they wanted to talk about. They were all going to vote. Hopefully, the new

government would help Tonga get a better economy and do something about the young people, was the consensus among them.

“Dr Teena?” said one, “We saw her driving in town the other day. She is a clever Tongan.” One Tongan man who was standing under a nearby tree overheard our conversation and approached me. “I’ve seen you in Tonga before. Are you from the media?” “I was from the media, but not now,” I answered. “Yes,” he said. “You normally have a bag and a microphone with you.”

It struck me that although I am an outsider in Tonga associated with the New Zealand media, I do occupy a highly visible space in public settings as an overseas observer of Tongan political life. “Is Barbara Dreaver up here too?” the man inquired. Barbara, a journalist for Television New Zealand’s ONE News had reported from Tonga for various current events since the state funeral of King Taufa’ahau Tupou IV in 2006. She had become known to local Tongans as the New Zealand TV reporter seen filming around Nuku’alofa town with camera operators and sound crew.

At that moment a van pulled up to where I was seated on the seawall and out got Seini Taumoepeau, a former student of mine in the graduate diploma of Pacific journalism at Auckland University of Technology. Seini also has a Bachelor of Communication Studies from the faculty where I taught as academic staff in journalism school, and now, she has gained a theological qualification from a theology institute in Tonga.

Working at the Tonga tourism office in Nuku’alofa, she tells me she loves being back home in Tonga. “I am not worried about money,” Seini assures me. What she meant was in spite of the lack of jobs and money in Tonga, she gets to help her family financially with her humble salary, even if it’s small compared to the income she could make if she migrated to work in New Zealand, Australia, or America.

This was the funeral of her grandmother’s sister, Seini explained, who was married to a close relative to one of the

nobles in Tonga. The deceased woman's son was a policeman, which is why the Tonga police band were playing during the funeral march and at the burial site inside the cemetery.

Returning to Seaview Lodge I relayed the information I had gathered about the funeral from onlookers and attendants to the Tongan women who clean the rooms. Immediately they knew who it was being laid to rest at the nearby graveyard. They were delighted to know what was going on as if having this little bit of information in their hands meant they were privileged to know details that other Tongans might not.

RICHARD'S JOURNAL: THE NOBLES' ELECTION

Arriving early for the nobles' 2014 election held at the palace office in Nuku'alofa on Thursday November 27th, I first had to gain entry to be seated outside the office in the area assigned for media through the guard on the gate. He asked me my business in Tonga and why I was at the palace office.

"I'm from Auckland University of Technology." "What are you researching?" he probed. Through the iron railings of the palace gate, the guard on the inside and me standing on the outside I responded, "The election."

The guard was working a twelve hour shift at the Royal Palace and did not expect to finish until six o'clock that night. He wanted to know all about my family and kept asking personal questions about who my family were; questions which I wouldn't expect to be put to me in New Zealand but in Tonga, it happens. He decided to let me in the gate and said that I had to notify the staff at the palace office I was there to observe the election, so I did as he requested.

Inside the gate at the palace office I asked the official on the desk what time the election would be. "When they turn up," he uttered. About thirty minutes later, Peter Vuki, the director of the Tonga electoral commission arrived, followed by the nobles in their various four wheel drive vehicles, each with

a driver who opens and closes the front passenger's door for them to get in and out.

Certainly there is an air of ceremony to their arrival at the four yearly election with some nobles acknowledging the waiting media poised and ready to click photographs, while other nobles choosing to ignore the media by refusing to make eye contact with journalists and cameras. As the nobles descended upon the palace office so did the catering – trays of club sandwiches, chilled drinks, and little savouries – as an election for Tonga's nobility cannot take place, it seems, without Western finger food items to eat and imported bottles of refreshments to drink while doing the business of voting.

One of the funniest sights I've witnessed in Tonga was the Scotsman Ramsay Dalgety who was appointed a life peer by the late King George Tupou V. He occupies a role as of one of His Majesty's Law Lords. He arrived at the nobles' election in his beaten up little car. There is something strangely laughable about watching a white European male dressed in Tongan garb get out of his rundown vehicle with a walking cane in hand, acting up in such a way to give off a public impression of grandeur and importance.

I noticed that some of the nobles ignored Dalgety as they left the election. Their body language towards him was negative, and if anything, exhibited disapproval. The following day I was at the Tonga electoral commission as the results confirming which candidates had won constituency seats were being released to the public. Dalgety was there.

Brashly he proclaimed he would talk to King Tupou VI about his ideas as he thought Tonga needed a new political party to run in the 2018 election. His ideas were out of kilter with fieldwork conversations I had engaged in with Tongan voters around Nuku'alofa. He appeared to be pompous and haughtily unaware of political change as ordinary Tongans experienced and understood it.

TEENA'S JOURNAL: AT FRIENDS CAFÉ

"Hello darling, take a menu and have a seat." "I'm looking for my colleague Richard from AUT University. Is he here?" "He's eating outside with that Fiji man." "Ok, thanks." What Fiji man? I thought, walking to look for Richard's table.

It was Friday evening, the day after Tonga's election. The polls had closed at four in the afternoon on Thursday, and talking about election results had taken over Nuku'alofa. A young Tongan woman in her twenties serving behind the counter of Friends Café in central Nuku'alofa called me "darling." It grated me. I wanted to retort, "My name is Teena not darling." If I was at an Auckland eatery, any server person who dared call me "darling" would get a dirty look forcefully overstating, don't patronise me.

Her heavy Tongan pronunciation of clumsily spoken English meant it came out, "*taa ling*." It sounded wrong to my English speaking ears, but she persisted in belting out English in an overdone Tongan brogue because I am a half-cast, and that's what you do with these people if you're a good-mannered Native.⁶ You speak English to them as a signifier of their otherness, their part European and part Native Tongan status.

Richard is put in the half-cast box too, but is a tad different to me because he's a man and Tonga is a patriarchal society. His Native half is Cook Islander from Mauke in the southern Cooks. This makes him a bit out of the Native Tongan GIS [Geographic Information System] range in terms of locating his Nativeness in anything or anyone the locals know living around these parts. In many ways he gets treated like a white European man of financial means with a professional career, but a nice man, not a self-important chump getting cut down to size by slighted locals used to putting white people acting out of turn in their place. Tongans who know Richard see him as a good person, respectful of their country and people.

In Friends Café, our regular haunt for dining in town, Richard gets called Richard by the Tongan women waiting on tables. I get singled out as “*taa ling*.” Here is the gender-specific distinction applied to us as university colleagues visiting Tonga to look at the election and publish what we saw, heard, observed, and experienced for one week in the field. That is, Richard gets to wear his name. I don’t have a name. I am a thing, a *Miss Thing*.

I drive around town in a rental car, and Native Tongans I do not know smile and wave as if they know this “*taa ling*” thing from *Nu’u Sila*. I am absurd. The granddaughter of a British administrator in Tonga who married a Native woman and had my half European and half Native mother who speaks English with a colonial British brogue, I am absurdly *Palangi* by childhood upbringing and adult behaviour. My Tongan looks do not conceal who and what I am. The Native Tongans know me. They know my hybrid roots in their coral reef and coconut tree islands.

Sometimes, not all the time, and definitely not most of the time, I feel Tongatapu is my island too even if I am the half cast “*taa ling*.” This evening while the final count at the ballot boxes is the talk of the town, I make good on my claim. Seated next to Richard at a café table is Fijian political scientist Steve Ratuva.

“What are doing in Tonga, Steven?” “I’ve come to look at the election.” “Why aren’t you in Fiji covering your own country’s election? There’s too many Fiji citizens in Tonga.” “I know. Some of them are over-stayers.” I laugh at his wisecrack (Siegel 1995). My thunderous laughter is the one characteristic I possess that people, even white people, tell me is conspicuously Tongan.

TEENA’S JOURNAL: ROAD BLOCK

Finishing my fruit salad dessert, I left Friends Café before Richard and headed to our accommodation at Seaview Lodge

on Nuku'alofa's waterfront. Driving past the back entrance to the palace which leads onto Vuna Road, I met with a road block. Flicking my car lights on full beam, I made it out to be a steel frame painted red and white propped up against orange plastic cones. It was definitely a road block of a Tongan *DIY* [do-it-yourself] model.

Darkness fell after eight in the evening. Street lighting was dim. No visible road signs marked "Detour Ahead" pointed me to an alternative route to Vuna Road. Driving alone in a rental car, I am a single, middle-aged woman with children visiting Tonga carrying cash in fifty dollar notes. No way would I risk getting lost on my own at night in a part of town I did not know. Escalating rates of rape, theft, violence against women, and violent death were real to me now.

I thought of travelling back to my maternal homestead in Haveluloto village, a few kilometres southbound from Nuku'alofa on the main road. Simpler to stay at home for the night with my first cousin Carstein, and our family dog Kelly who guards the property and is always heartened to see me because I ensure he's properly fed.

Instead I drove around the cones for the familiar guesthouse route. Safety was paramount. I must protect myself. What could the palace office do: Issue me a traffic fine for driving on a public road? Is that a driving offence in Tonga? Damn the palace bureaucrats and the protocol regime force fed the masses when the King is in town. Why the road block? Do the commoners have ebola? What a ridiculous little island parodying a petty version of 19th century Victorian England.

A palace guard stepped out of shadowy light at the back gate, his hand up to stop me. Putting the car in reverse, I high tailed out of there. Where was I going? Around the block. Had to be a side road to the waterfront. Richard pulled in after me at Seaview Lodge. I met him at the guests' entrance leading upstairs to our rooms. "I tried to drive around the

cones and got snapped by a palace guard!” We laughed. In hindsight it was a comical scene.

“What’s going on?” asked Richard. “The King must be at the palace.” “But what’s happening there?” “Could be the nobles’ meeting for choosing their prime minister candidate.” “I thought that wasn’t until Monday,” Richard uttered. “The King may have called it now,” I mused.

“I’m going to ask him what’s happening,” Richard replied. One of the Tongan male workers who does security at the guesthouse was watching us chinwag about what’s going down at the palace. He was eavesdropping and not trying to hide his interest, a Tongan mannerism that for some circumstances is not seen as boorish. “What’s happening at the palace for the road to be blocked off?” inquired Richard. “I think the King is at the palace.” “Do you know what he’s doing there?” Richard urged. “No, I don’t know.”

“I’ll call Ma’afu. Nuku said the nobles’ meeting was for Monday. If Ma’afu’s phone is switched off, he’s down there and it’s a formal meeting with the King,” I murmured to Richard hurrying past me up the stairwell.⁷ “Get on the phone and find out. We need to know what’s going on. Text me when you know.”

Richard momentarily metamorphosed into a Native *Dongan* [Tongan]. “Find out. We need to know. Text me when you know,” mimicked how Tongans work the field by working one another for information. By an insider-outsider logic, he grafted communication tactics he found useful to working in Tonga with established journalism methods. By professional practice, Richard’s self-styled fieldwork matched his personality and character – original, innovative, experimental, and open to change.

Which is why, in a coconut shell, there was correlation between me as an anthropologist and Richard as a journalism academic, coupled with the half-cast identity label we were branded with in Tonga. An intersection emerged. We were bricoleur; fieldworkers who imitated the art of bricolage;

tinkerers who worked the field and wrote our work from a diverse collection of what was available to us; conversations, experiences, interactions, chance happenings, social exchanges, photographs depicting detail our eyes may have missed which trigger memory, thoughts, rethinking those very thoughts, reworking that very scene, that very sentence on the page until it spoke our truth, their truth – Tongan people in the field – and, in the tangled process of unravelling complexity, spoke back, wrote back, snapped back to power.

For the work we do inside academia, perched on its outer limits as field researchers and writers of difference – the Native Pacific Islander in us demarcating our dissimilarity from white people who are the customary norm – there is no point in exacerbating, intensifying, and worsening the predicament of poor people living in Pacific Island states. What is the logic of researching there *if* the end result is aggravating the day-to-day condition of borderline lives that *only* matter to the American-driven West when there's a risk of losing them to China, Russia, and South East Asia?

Upstairs in the safety of my guestroom with security on guard below, I got to work. I am texting Ma'afu, 6, 7, 8 long-winded messages of hell hath no fury like a half-cast woman road blocked, panicked, and forced to drive alone at night in an unfamiliar part of town, in another country, all because high-ranking men are power talking inside the palace walls. I am texting Ma'afu from down the road, beyond the orange cones blocking the road, the very road which leads to the palace, the palace that confines and defines him and fellow noblemen under the monarchy. What is the point of having rank so high and mighty it obstructs human beings cohabiting the same country, breathing air of the same planet, from using a public thoroughfare to *safely* go about their daily lives? I am incensed. I will *never* be a commoner with ebola.

At dawn the next morning, I sit on the veranda watching a Tongan man collect fish from handmade traps of wire set in the coral foreshore. A beaten up, sea rusted truck from the

Sopu end, the poor people's end of Vuna Road, drives around the road block of orange cones straight past the palace and on to town. I stand up and cheer. Clapping and laughing, "Go the commoners!" I call out. This Saturday morning I can breathe in and exhale the open ocean air of relief, *knowing* that other people, ordinary people *not* of royalty and rank, navigate around barriers embedded in the landscape to keep the public out. I am not alone. I feel set-free.

Downstairs I see the guesthouse security worker. I am going to look for coffee and brunch at Friends Café. Walking to my rental car, he makes eye contact. He wants to talk. "You find out what is happening at the palace?" "Nobles meeting," I responded. "They were sorting out their candidate for prime minister. It'll be Vaea. He got the most votes for the Tongatapu nobles."⁸

"But the people want a change," he exclaimed, clearly unimpressed with the Friday night *powwow* blocking the road.⁹ "You're right," I affirmed. "You'd think after four years of the Tu'ivakano government, the nobles would have learned not to go there. Don't block the people from having a go at running the government."

"Ma'afu say on the radio he don't want a noble to be the prime minister. He say the people will run the government." "Do you think Ma'afu's words will come true?" I asked him. "I hope it come true. That is what the *Donga* [Tonga] people want." I hope so too was the burdensome thought I carried to the car, and off down the road to confront the orange cones.

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NOTES

- ¹ The subtitle for this paper, *What is funny about that?* is adapted from a book chapter by anthropologist Richard Feinberg published in 1990 called, *What's so funny about that? Fieldwork and Laughter in Polynesia*.
Feinberg, Richard
1990 What's so funny about that? Fieldwork and laughter in Polynesia. *The Humbled Anthropologist: Tales from the Pacific*, edited by Philip De Vita. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- ² Teena Brown Pulu has referenced the origin of the wordplay, *Who's Who in the Zoo*, in a published article.
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Who's Who in the Zoo
This is the Master of Philosophy thesis title by Richard Pamatatau, journalism lecturer in the School of Communications at Auckland University of Technology. Pamatatau's thesis investigates the journalism methods by which New Zealand's elite are framed, reported, and disseminated in the social and weekend pages of prominent newspapers such as *The New Zealand Herald*. Pamatatau is of Mauke, Cook Islands descent, and was the former Pacific correspondent for Radio New Zealand who reported from Tonga on the 2010 general election (Brown Pulu 2014b, 396).
- ³ Richard Pamatatau noted that *Political Siberia* is a term used by political journalists to refer to certain politicians erased to political nothingness.
- ⁴ In her book, *Blacked Out: Dilemmas of Race, Identity and Success at Capital High*, anthropologist Signithia Fordham described how writing about watching other people, when the writer is not of the other people they publish about, constructs "America's social order and its gaze" (Fordham 1996, 7). Her critique of writing from watching others interrogates how "imaging" and imitating "social reality" through words on the page can entrench systems and structures of "social order" – race and class – positioning people of colour and culture at the lowest end of America's "social order" (Fordham 1996, 7).

Indeed, cultural representations of the Other verify the dramatic ways in which writing – based on watching – is used to construct and appropriate normal and abnormal models for "imaging" social reality. Writing thus becomes the central instrument through which America's social order and its gaze can be apprehended. (Fordham 1996, 7).

Fordham, Signithia

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5 The cemetery Richard Pamatatau's refers to in his journal entry is *Mala'e 'Aloua* on Vuna Road in close proximity to the Royal Palace in Nuku'alofa. Teena Brown Pulu's maternal grandmother, 'Ana Kaho, is buried in this cemetery along with her mother, Lupe Ha'amoa, and two of her daughters, Tina and Deanne Brown, who are older sisters to Teena Brown Pulu's mother, Patricia Brown. Teena Brown Pulu was named after her one of her mother's older sisters, Tina Brown, buried at *Mala'e 'Aloua* next to the Seaview Lodge where Richard and Teena stayed during the week of Tonga's election in late November of 2014.

6 Mike Goldsmith who was Teena Brown Pulu's PhD thesis supervisor in the anthropology programme when she was a student at the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand, suggested we explain our unconventional use of *half-cast* rather than *half-caste*, the usual way the reference is spelt in English. By *half-cast* we are alluding to Judith Butler's notion from her book *Gender Trouble* that identity categories are performative (Butler 1990). Contextually, Richard and I are political actors wearing and performing the identity content associated with being part European and part Native like a *cast* of actors on stage, written in a well-known script about identity categories of the South Pacific Islands, namely Tonga. In the public domain we act the part attributed to the *cast* of *half* something, a half-and-half mixture of European and Native ancestries whether the Native portion is traced to the Tonga Islands as in my case, or the Cook Islands like Richard.

Butler, Judith

1990 *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London and New York: Routledge.

7 Ma'afu is a high-ranking noble of Vaini and Tokomololo, and the head of Tonga's oldest clan, *Ha'a Havea Lahi*. For the Pohiva government, he holds the ministerial portfolios for Land and Natural Resources, and His Majesty's Armed Forces. He has served in three consecutive governments as a cabinet minister for the Sevele administration from 2009 to 2010, the Tu'ivakano regime from 2011 to 2014, and now, for the Tongan government headed by Prime Minister 'Akilisi Pohiva.

Nuku is the noble for Kolonga and the nobles' representative for 'Eua in the Tonga Legislative Assembly from 2014 to 2018.

8 Vaea is the noble for Houma and a nobles' representative for Tongatapu who won the majority of votes at the nobles' election on November 27th, 2015. There were three nobles from Tongatapu, the main island in the Kingdom of Tonga, elected to parliament for the 2014 to 2018 term; Vaea, noble for Houma;

Ma'afu, noble for Vaini and Tokomololo; and Tu'ivakano, noble for Nukunuku, Matafonua, Fatai, Matahau, and Vaotu'u.

- ⁹ Teena Brown Pulu's use of the term *powwow* does not mean to offend Algonquian Native Americans of Rhode Island to whom *powwow* is historically traced in the indigenous Narragansett language. The reference to *powwow* in Teena's journal entry was a satirical elbowing of Tonga's traditional male hierarchy. The monarch and the nobility gathered on Friday evening, the day after the 2014 election to talk politics and politick among themselves about who would stand as the prime minister candidate for their class group. Would this political discussion represent a high level of national significance to the commoners it warranted the public road outside the palace to be blocked off? The writer seriously doubts that.