

TAGATA A NU‘U PO‘O TAGATA A FAGU‘U

Léuli Eshrāghi

The performance poem “tagata a nu‘u po‘o tagata a fagu‘u” (2023), literally meaning “people of the villages or people of bottled oil” in Sāmoan, is a contemporary fa‘amalama (offering to ancestors, spirits, and guardian spirits). Through a performance score in Sāmoan, French, and English—and a few terms in ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i for performances in the Aupuni—I move through an alofisā (ceremonial circle) of coconut-water bottles, echoing the form around which all customary architecture in the Sāmoan islands is expressed. Commercially available coconut water tetra-packs are here to actively consider vā (spatial, multidirectional relationships) with human and more-than-human kin. Each coconut water tetra-pack represents a year of cumulative Gregorian shame-time imposed on all kinds of bodies, sexualities, and kinships since 1830 when John Williams brought the civilizing mission to the Sāmoan archipelago of multiple animist chiefdoms. Blue fluoro lights haunt the present with faiga fa‘akolonē (colonial structure), the unfinished business of German, American, and British empires.

The golden sheen present on my hips references the healing properties of electrolyte-rich coconut water, which effectively hide the nefarious effects of monocrop plantations across the tropics, in a system of abstraction of responsibility that I name *hydrodecadence*. The performance poem, first

developed in a much longer cacophony of multilingual accounts of visiting with kin Indigenous artists between 2017 and 2023, foregrounds sensuality in the context of sacred relationships between the coconut tree (understood through the figure of Tuna) with humans sustained by lands and waters enjoying balance (understood through the figure of Sina). Immersed in a sonic composition created on ‘Upolu Island by my non-binary sibling artist Nadeem Tiafau Eshrāghi, I endeavor to move beyond intersecting forms of domination of body, land, mind, air, and water, to ecocritical states of softness, plurality, and pleasure.

Across iterations of this performance poem and installation, the critical sonic, poetic, and gestural contributions of this kin constellation have been life-changing:

Afitu Soné Eshrāghi	Donnie Cervantes	Rosanna Raymond
Nadeem Tiafau Eshrāghi	Aaron Wong	Louis-Karl Sioui-Picard
Misal Adnan Yıldız	Gary Varro	Michelle Jacques
Jane Devery	Tomas Jonsson	Doug Jarvis
Drew Kahu‘āina Broderick	Arlette-Louise Ndakoze	France Trépanier
Josh Tengan	Lynhan Balatbat-Helbock	Tyson Campbell
Reise Kochi	Kelly Krugman	Yara El-Ghabdan
Hercules Goss-Kuehn	Zoe Butt	Lee Sum Yi
Kaliko Aiu	Peter Morin	Madi
Marika Emi	Ricky Tagaban	Julia Packard
Bryan Kamaoli Kuwada	Angela Tiatia	Qu Chang
	Tania Willard	

The performance poem and installation *tagata a nu'u po'o tagata a fagu'u* has been supported by the following:

Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden

Museum of Contemporary Art Australia

SAVVY Contemporary

Institut français

French Embassy in Australia

Bleach Festival

Performatorium Festival of Queer Performance / Queer City Cinema

Aupuni Space

TRADES A.i.R.

Laila Twigg Smith Art Fund

Sharjah Art Foundation

Watch This Space

Para Site

Open Space

Paradise Cove Collective

Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center

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Hālili: Multidisciplinary Research on Hawaiian Well-Being Vol. 12 (2026)

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MUAMUA: EA

Tulouna
Noho i lalo

I call on the lupe of the skies:

Ua numi le fau
When the lupe are entangled to lures
Leoleo-tuāo'i, boundary keepers
And long-awaited changes will arrive

From canopies to forest floors
For miles seeds of lineages are
Garnered, carried, cured

From sunken volcanoes
Rivers delight in meandering valleys
Millions of years young

Ā momona le vao, ua tapisa le gataifale
 When the lupe are joyous and fat
 in the highlands, the harvest
 is ready for the plucking makai

From tiki-kitsch dishonoring of
 once-cherished sites, deities, Ancestors:
 International airports, cruises, hotel shows
 Make believe the mirage of mare nullius

From paintings, films, novels expounding
 The dangerous beauty of peoples of
 Many genders, sizes, hues, sexualities:
 An ocean of natives exclusive to foreign desire

Simply splendid isles in the sun?
 As if // As if
 As if // As if

I call on the ti'otala of the skies:

Pa'ia, pa'ia lava
 Ti'o ai le ti'otala
 Lelei, lelei lava

Pa'ia, pa'ia lava
 Ti'o ai le ti'otala
 Lelei, lelei lava

Pa'ia, pa'ia lava
 Ti'o ai le ti'otala
 Lelei, lelei lava

LONA LUA: TOTO

I walk the ancestral trails from the ridges
Slow my approach at every waterfall
Pronounce an offering and smile: so
Many branches bear Pele's hair

I continue across the misty plateaus
Tilt my head and heart back to the
Many mālumālu and malae that
Once lined these verdant clearings

I drink from a stream, success here
Despite, not because, of the imposed dream
So many suffered and sacrificed, for
These trails to again be tread with prayer

Not nearly ruins of prior residence:
Space never runs out when in the company
Of Ancestors: more likely this is an embrace
Of the passage of moons and stars

Ae 'o fea e ala mai ai so tātou fa'alumaina?
Where does our shame come from?
'O ai ea na te ta'ufa'atauva'aina i tātou?
Who has so diminished us, crushed us?

The sun taps on our skin
Slide your fingers down my forehead
Don't pull my nose, just like Mum, to make sure
I didn't turn out like all our people

Suzanne Kite calls return of stolen Ancestors
and Belongings the klepto-curatorial kiss
of the Empire's death-drive
Coursing through our bodies

Gleaning instead of stealing from my homelands
Which we'll still inhabit beyond the lives and afterlives
Of lagoons, baby ferns, and decay at the equator
Hold this short breath a little longer

E mamana 'o tātou motu
 All our islands are sacred
 E soifua pea 'o tātou augatama i aso uma
 Our Ancestors are always living

I see the expanse of coconut and vanilla
 Plantations that make land invisible
 We are not the same estates, e leai se ta'amū ma talo
 We are not

Ia manatua
 Commit to memory
 'O 'o tātou tofi fo'i laufanua ma 'ele'ele
 Our lands are our bodies

I see the villages made roadside stops
 Benzine pumps and kerosene lamps
 We are not oceangoing va'a alia, no longer ambitious
 We are not

Sirine Fattouh recounts the proverb: Cairo writes
 Beirut publishes, Baghdad reads
 I respond: Tāmaki Makaurau and Honolulu write
 Minneapolis and Papeete publish, no one reads

LONA TOLU: TAI

I arrive at the shore, à la marée haute
The planets are archipelagos
The oceans are indivisible
Skins touch favorite assets

I sprinkle vai niu ma vai fau on this watery meeting place
I remove the sanctity of the newly arrived
‘olena and tamanu offered to the deities of this place
I value the vā that relates, all

Not the beer but the anchor of spirits
Taulā aitu, and other fa’aliliuga:
Joy and travel translated as danger
I feel more searing missionary angst

I open my mouth
Swallow pelāneta, berries, rim the earth
I open my body to
Tā‘ele i auro i aso uma, sau e ‘ai o mea sā

I take a long hit // ‘Ou ke alu ka’a ‘i’i
Lines of poppers and cum // Ka’a ‘i’ō, ‘ae ka’a sa’o

I soften every muscle
Saltwater currents pound my hips
Sea grasses and horses tickle my toes
I weave an ula lei of mangrove roots, coconut fibers

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Léuli Eshrāghi belongs to the Sāmoan clans Seumanutafa and Tautua, and the Persian diaspora, and lives and works in Montréal, Québec, Canada. Through their work, they prioritize Indigenous, Black, and Asian sensual and spoken languages as well as artistic, ceremonial, and political practices.



They have presented major works at Tate Modern, Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, Frac des Pays de la Loire, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Galerie de l'Université de Montréal, and Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.

Eshrāghi is the author of *Indigenous Aesthetics and Knowledges for Great Ocean Renaissances* (Common Room Editions, 2023). Their writing published in French, English, Sāmoan, and Bislama has been translated into Portuguese, Korean, and Slovak, and was featured in *Estuaire*, *Falling In: Movement and Becoming in Curatorial Research*, *Gropius Bau Journal*, *Daniel Boyd: Treasure Island*, *Cigale*, *L'Internationale Online*, *C Magazine*, and *Stella Magazine*.

As curator of Indigenous practices at the Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal, they curated *Kent Monkman: History is Painted by the Victors* (2025) with John Lukavic, and *Rising Suns: Art from the Confederacies of the Great Lakes and Rivers* (2025) assisted by Katsitsanoron Dumoulin Bush.

Eshrāghi holds a PhD in curatorial practice from Monash University and a graduate certificate in Indigenous arts management from the University of Melbourne.