

UNLEARNING A GRECO-ROMAN ALPHABET

Léuli Eshrāghi

I'm a multilingual fa'afafine, non-binary and queer Indigenous person belonging to the Sāmoan villages of Āpia and Si'umu (itūmālō o Tuamāsāga, Motu o 'Upolu), Leulumoega (itūmālō o Ā'ana, Motu o 'Upolu) and Sālelologa (itūmālō o Fa'asāleleāga, Motu o Savai'i). I grew up between Āpia, Luganville, and Port Vila in Vanuatu, and many towns in eastern Australia, particularly Brisbane and Melbourne. I live and work in Montréal, in another crossroads archipelago where many First Nations have long lived and exchanged. In my practice as an artist, writer, and curator, I prioritize Indigenous, Black, and Asian art, design, sensual and spoken languages, and ceremonial-political practices. I am motivated by the possibilities that tropical futurisms enable in imagining queer Indigenous restoration, healing, pleasure, critique, and balance for human, animal, and plant beings belonging to the Great Ocean.

In 2021, trawlwoolway writer and friend Neika Lehman and I were awarded the inaugural Creative Research Residencies by Caine Chennatt, director of Curatorial and Cultural Collections at the University of Tasmania. At the time I was living and working in nipaluna/Hobart in muwinina territory, researching the lack of Indigenous critical writing in major universities in Australia, particularly in the intense genocidal colonial context of lutruwita/Tasmania. This research led me to realize that no mentorship pathways to academic opportunity had ever been created by monolithic anthro-

pologist Margaret Mead for Sāmoans and other Indigenous peoples of the Great Ocean through whom she gained her status. Many awards exist for master’s students in the US and UK who are already privileged enough to study there, but none are for our kin.

It was in this context that I wrote “Unlearning A Greco-Roman Alphabet” (2024) to voice an upending of Gregorian shame-time and linearity as the ordering principle of Sāmoan and other Indigenous societies in the Great Ocean—since Euro-American evangelists in the past hundreds of years succeeded in marginalizing kinship structures and spiritual practices that thrived through constant trade and exchange for thousands of years. The poem follows the contemporary Sāmoan-European alphabet taught in schools across both sides of the colonial (German-British/American) and temporal (tomorrow/today) divide that crisscrosses the Sāmoan archipelago and our wider Great Ocean homespace. I continue to learn so much through the rigorous orature and literature created by past and present Kānaka ‘Ōiwi. I hope to see my own people—in the islands as in the diaspora—free ourselves from all the embodied shames and imported binaries that we have seemingly allowed for too long. We were never in the image of European missionaries and plantation settlers, nor are our queer Indigenous tropical futures similar to those of our queer Euro-American kin.

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A is for afu, waterfalls, rushing down
 'Upolu, Tutuila, Savai'i islands' ranges and
 'afa, sennit, dipped in coconut oil for the
 next session of tying, releasing, holding

E is for eseesege, the extraordinary, the strange, the
 different especially from abroad such as the rose blond-dyed
 babes who meet in my monstera and fern garden to revel
 in inner-city summer nudity and the cooling hosing down

I is for ipu popo, hand-smoothed coconut
 half-shell, for sharing 'ava, vai, then fa'i and
 sago juice to make our own intimate ceremony
 to heighten spectrality and intermingling

O is for 'oloa, treasured riches and wealth, material
 but not solely, as in how gafa fa'auro, golden
 genealogies, visualise all our cumlines that teach
 invigorating existences and link warm knowledges

U is for uliuli, revered blackness, sparking
 the universe's complexity, whose knowledges
 are realised each time our adorned bodies
 shimmer in the soft waters basked in sunset

Fa is for feanu, spit, and faua, saliva, that I drip-feed
 the small of your neck, gliding across your face and chest
 until I reach your mouth, coursing electricity through the
 exchanges between our tongues, fingers, that will come

Ga is for ghormeh sabzi and ash-e reshteh
that I'll cook to mark Nō Rouz, to find my
next year while you find yours, slurps, grins
and all, amidst sips of pre-1950 queer poets

La is for lama, candlenut, whose nutty taste mixed
with coconut oil marks our bodies as we massage, slowly
pulling fingers, toes, thick thighs, chest and legs naked
to the air before being bound in barkcloth rope length

Mo is for mo, for which you say to me, mo 'oe as you
offer me your lightly hairy, thick buttocks in the languid
air of the highlands open-air fale o'o, moaning as I spread
you further with each wet push and pull of the gourd butt plug

Nu is for nofo, to sit or stay, like when I ask you to stay
a while, savouring the enveloping of me in you, soft and
tight movements of warm knowing all at once, nutting after I push
into you from beside the bed and after nofo on your face

Pi is for pāolo, shade, which our naked bodies sense
from parasols and sunscreen licks keep us from ozone
eyes yet open to experiencing this bare bay shore together,
slices of watermelon and pineapple trickling sweetness

Sa is for siva, swaying so hard as you actualise in
the dark club booths, sweaty dance floor and stolen
glimmers in club crevices, grinning, kissing, grinding
in this floating and coasting time, glee to extremities

Ti is for taeao, the morrow-to-come, the morning of
this time, when I will wait for you to smoke-roast
cacao prepared and sent to me from the village, still in
styrofoam cups, I know, for old-school caffeine boosts

Vi is for vāipou, the space-of-relation-between-posts,
a way to position our heads and mouths expectant
between lovers standing above our heads as we are
whacked playfully on the cheek and lips drip excitement

He is for homo and for hetero, these bounded
and buckled bifurcations of spirit, binaries of
cishet yt men who preferred to contain in manifest
corners what is deeply webbed, linear desire

Ka is for kalapu, club, like that time we went to experience
Solange command the thousands at the opera house, seated
mere metres from her Black brilliance, capped off by a gin and
rack-filled night at a Marrickville distillery with gorgeous people

Ro is for return, like that Return to Paradise beach east of
Āpia whose glistening rock spas would make for a hot fuck
for none and all to see, the lagoon's gentle waves lapping as
we hold our bodies close, rubbing, our lips juggling worlds

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.

