The Birth of MVPFAFF+: Western Labelling and the Dismantling of Such Abusive Practices

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This essay reflects on a keynote delivered at the 2011 AsiaPacific Outgames Human Rights Conference to examine how Indigenous Pacific gender and sexuality identities are misrepresented within global queer discourse. Prompted by the conference's limited Pacific representation, the keynote foregrounded the need to name and honor MVPFAFF+ identities—Māhū, Vakasalewalewa, Palopa, Fa'afafine, Akava'ine, Fakafifine, Fakaleitī/Leitī, and related terms across Oceania.

The essay argues that these culturally-rooted identities cannot be translated through western LGBTQI+ frameworks, which originate in medicalized, colonial, and Eurocentric understandings of gender and sexuality. By tracing the political stakes of mistranslation and the erasure of Indigenous epistemologies as distinct genealogies of thought, the author highlights how western vocabularies often diminish sovereignty, spirituality, and cultural specificity. Through acknowledging the collective labor of Pacific activists who shaped the reoriented keynote, the essay advocates for centering MVPFAFF+ knowledge systems and affirms the ongoing struggle to reclaim mana, value, and Indigenous self-definition in contemporary Pacific contexts.

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Hūlili: Multidisciplinary Research on Hawaiian Well-Being Vol. 12 (2026)
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*Essay first published in *Declaration: A Pacific Feminist Agenda*, edited by Ane Tonga (Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 2022). Permission to republish the essay in its original form was granted by the essayist, editor, and publisher. Abstract produced by the co-editors of this special issue of *Hūlili*.

Tupuaga—Origin
The Conference

In 2011, I was invited to be one of nine keynote speakers at the 2nd AsiaPacific Outgames Human Rights Conference. I reflect often about this conference, its programme, events and a culmination of experiences that transpired for a collective of 50 MVPFAFF+[1] Pacific activists (I will explain more about MVPFAFF+ as this story unfolds). We hailed from 10 Pacific countries—Sāmoa, American Sāmoa, Papua New Guinea, Cook Islands, Tonga, Tokelau, Fiji, Niue, Kiribati and Hawai'i. Each of us were poised to stand before an audience in excess of 450 conference participants in Te Whanganui-a-Tara to discuss topics that mattered to us and how we could bring about change to improve our lived experiences and realities. Naïve, enthusiastic and intent, we were, many of us, first-time conference participants.

The norm with such conferences is that they are heavy-handed Western praxis with an emphasis on Western-centred politics and very little regard for Indigenous science, philosophy and practice. Only the well-versed or experts count or are heard. Entering these forums can feel like you are in a fishbowl; as the conference progresses, my dyslexia becomes more apparent, as a new language emerges: conference speak—acronyms, reciting of agenda documents, government commitments, numerous statements, lobbying, information overload, journalists fishing for a bite. Exhausting, day by day you leave fatigued. It is called brain drain for a reason.

We worked hard together to convey our experiences and challenges, to reinforce strong statements and highlight our individual experiences in the Pacific region, through workshops, side events, meetings and media interviews. What became apparent was the lack of interest in our side events and workshops. Often, the people in the room were our own; the token white person who did show up made it feel like we were important, even if it was the donor who sponsored our flights or side event. Many of us felt ignored, that people smiled and only wanted to laugh with us, avoiding the desire to genuinely know about our experiences and politics.

Stereotyping, framing and labelling can be common practice at conferences. No one has time to really see you—only to hear you for a moment in time. There is never enough time to know or connect with one another in meaningful relationship. Defaulting to English terms of convenience, such as LGBTQI+, in turn privileges Western concepts and issues that are supposedly universal. This approach can be problematic, for this moment in time is what forces this process of framing others without understanding them, normalising the English umbrella terms to be widely used. It has a flow-on effect that avoids your culture, your language and your connection to kin and ancestors. This conference was meant to be a place where many were to converge with common experiences and lived realities; instead, I felt like a salesperson selling something to anyone who wanted to buy it.

Kiteaga—Discovery
Why Identity Matters

I want to take you back in time, for I feel this context is important to understand why identity (plural) matters, especially when political forums fester utterances, discourses and, eventually, policy development. Discovering identity is an important act for any individual—it is the foundation to a sense of belonging, binding you to the umbilical cord and womb of your ancestry, culture and language.

As a first-generation, New Zealand-born Niuean, I was less fortunate than my elder sisters. They were blessed with the spoils of being raised on our motherland—Niue. Both were immersed in our mother tongue as their first language, raised in a village by elders, and blessed with the rich and lush abundance of Niuean ways of knowing and being. Although I was raised in a similar way in Aotearoa, there was an absolute disconnect to my cultural roots as the English language was promoted and forced as the standard. This standard colonises you, it reshapes how others view you, sabotages and colonises your indigeneity and provides you with a false sense of belonging. My origins have been blurred as a result of colonisation. Colonisation can have you feeling like an imposter to yourself, and a foreigner to your people, if you do not fit the Adam and Eve archetype.

Auckland's central suburbs were the epicentre for Pacific families from the 1950s to the 1970s. I was born and raised in the chaos of city life during the Dawn Raids. I spent most of my time as a young person living with extended family—no one knew what to do with me. It was self-evident from a young age that I was overtly

and unapologetically feminine, the complete opposite of my masculine brothers. My mother was a single parent raising six of her eight children, as well as working two jobs, and could not manage me, let alone deal with the pressures of other family members wishing to beat the femininity out of me (Brown-Acton, 2020).

I spent most of my childhood seeking people like myself; no one seemed to understand me. At around 15 or 16 years old, I walked down Chinese Market Hill (Moger, 2019) in Grey Lynn, along the back of Grey Lynn Primary School. I heard an umpire's whistle screeching. I followed the echoes of faint laughter and yelling. As I got closer, a netball game was underway, played by athletic Polynesian women. I sat from afar and observed in awe. They were like gazelles prancing with such speed and agility. A player called me over. It was apparent I was very feminine to her; you could tell by my demeanour. She sang out "Hi, sister." It was like seeing a reflection of myself for the first time. These athletic women were Sāmoan fa'afafine; they used netball as a support system to exercise, convene club events and fundraisers, keep fit and practise their on-court skills. I lived not far from the training courts and they invited me back to train. Although I had relational connections to people in my family, my relationship with these women was affirming. I felt connected to these women—they would become my support system and my second family. I learnt the importance of Tausoga—sisterhood. This sisterhood provided me with peers who were intent on making me the prettiest woman I could be. The Fonofale model developed by prominent fa'afafine health expert Fuimaono Karl Pulotu-Endemann uses the floor of the fale to depict the foundation of a fale Sāmoa. A representation of family connection by kin, relationships and genealogy connects them to titles, land, sea and gods (Puloto-Endemann, 2001).

Walking in life without purpose can be a very lonely path. My journey until that point, of meeting my new-found sisters, was certainly that, and confusing. I had no idea what I was searching for. I did not see my fakafifine self in any family members. I was sailing aimlessly and lost at sea. I owe my fakafifine sense of belonging to my fa'afafine sisters, who provided me with courage and an understanding of my identity—an identity I had been searching to see my reflection in for so long.

I did not learn from them that I was a transgender person, a gay boy, or a Sāmoan; I learned about the importance of my identity and that I am a Tagata Niue first before anything else. They reminded me that although we can be viewed as deviants, lepers of society, no matter how hard others try, they can never strip away that we are who we are (Sāmoan or Niuean)—it is in our blood and who our ancestors were.

I tell you this story because—like me, as a young teenager finding myself, seeking others like me—this process of discovery is also about finding affirming kinship and solidarity. You would expect a Rainbow/ LGBTQI+-focused conference to be a platform that fostered an affirming environment—unfortunately, this was not the case.

Vagahau—Language Words Can Harm

Seeing my reflection in others—my fa'afafine sisters—provided validation that people like me existed. It reinforced that my experiences were similar to others' and that my journey wouldn't be one I traversed alone. What was more confusing before meeting my fa'afafine sisters and brothers was the constant stereotyping, labelling and framing by others. As a young person, this created the burden of internal turmoil in my head. My body would ache in pain at the words used to label me. My eyes sunk to great depths every time someone misgendered or inappropriately named me as a queer, gay boy, homosexual, faggot, poofter, sinner, molester—just a few of the many foul words used to minimise me and force labels onto me that I did not agree to or welcome. I wonder how the first-time conference participants from the Pacific felt being in a space where words echoed pain and confusion, because framing and labelling was common practice in that space. I often ask myself: Why do I feel like an imposter within the framework of LGBTQI+ or the Rainbow community? I am welcome at times in specific queer spaces, but mostly I feel like I am not. This homogenous Rainbow flag was created by Gilbert Baker (Blotcher, 2019). Harvey Milk challenged him to develop a symbol that would be a universal symbol for the gay community. Baker probably did not know where Niue was geographically situated nor what a fakafifine was. I'd even contend that neither Milk nor Baker ever thought about what the symbol of the rainbow represented in Indigenous communities. My Indigenous ways of being and doing matter, my locality and positionality matters, the mother tongue I know matters and the identity terms I use matter. The rainbow, where I come from, means Tagaloa, our most ancient and revered God, which matters more to me than a symbol or statement.

Fono—Meeting Being Misinterpreted

Back to the conference. In 2011, I was the International Development Coordinator at the New Zealand AIDS Foundation (NZAF). My role was primarily to support key partners in the Pacific with building capacity, providing technical advice and advancing their strategic priorities. My keynote for the AsiaPacific Outgames Human Rights Conference was initially focused on the relationships and work NZAF were doing in the Pacific to support movement building.

The organisers of the Outgames did an outstanding job, and the programme was rich with content; it catered to all people, with so many great presentations and events. Organisers, however, had no control over the dominant egos, agendas and politicking that evolved in the space. As I stated earlier, feeling ignored and like no one was interested in our workshops or side events, our group was ripe with tension and becoming frustrated that we weren't being respected enough to be visible and heard.

At our Pacific caucus Thursday lunchtime meeting, we discussed the potential of making a statement to the entire conference, the stance we wanted to present to the forum on the final day. A gay white man, a journalist for a gay media outlet, pushed his way into the meeting circle and sat. He wasn't invited and, after listening for a while, he began to query and question everything we were discussing. Being Pacific people, we felt obliged to be hospitable towards foreigners. This man collected intel (without permission) for a story he later published about how overly demanding the Pacific caucus was. He wrote, "Using all of our Indigenous identity terms would spoil or make LGBTQI+ more akin to the alphabet soup."[2] We were being blamed for inconveniencing the history of the LGBTQI+ movement, a revolution fought hard by gay rights activists from the Global North, and which supposedly afforded MVPFAFF+ people their rights across the Pacific. The last time I checked, British punitive laws still existed in the Pacific, where same-sex relations or cross-dressing were still punishable offences. The hypocrisy of his article was ignorant and unhelpful.

Fefakaakoaki—To Teach One Another Being More Mindful

It was a long Thursday for me, working through the night, cross-checking notes from the Pacific caucus meeting earlier in the day, communicating with mentors and rewriting my keynote to consolidate our experiences throughout the week. When you are made to feel silent, avoided or misrepresented you have no other alternative but to disrupt—protest! Then came Friday morning, the final day of the Outgames conference. With an hour's sleep, I was one of three keynote speakers, alongside one from India and another from Nepal, in the session moderated by Member of Parliament Hon Maryan Street. I presented my keynote, delivering key messages to the audience about rethinking their use of language, labelling, and framing people as a homogeneous group. I explained why it was detrimental to us as Pacific people and offered the mnemonic MVPFAFF+ to help make it simpler to use Indigenous Pacific identity terms.

I stated that we demanded better recognition for Pacific peoples of diverse SOGIE, or sexual orientations, gender identities and gender expressions. We demanded to be heard, uplifted and not diluted under the Western priorities and experiences that seemed to dominate the conference; after all, this conference was meant to provide everyone equal opportunity to amplify voice and visibility, and to bring those to the forefront.

It's useful to lay out the ethnic origins of the MVPFAFF+ term: Māhu (Hawai'i), Vakasalewalewa (Fiji), Palopa (Papua New Guinea), Fa'afafine (American Sāmoa and Sāmoa), Akava'ine (Cook Islands), Fakafifine (Niue), Fakaleitī/Leitī (Tonga), and the plus symbol acknowledges that there are other Melanesian, Micronesian and Polynesian countries in the South Pacific. The plus also acknowledges that these countries have terms that describe or reference the traits and mannerisms of an individual that can encompass, embody or reference a person's identity related to gender identity, gender expression, same-sex attraction, affection and sexuality.

It is inappropriate to translate these terms as literal in comparison to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or intersex persons—these are derived from Western constructs and experiences and do not encompass cultural or Indigenous underpinnings. The term transgender originates from the medical field to explain cross-sexes. The term gay originally derived from an emotion and was applied to a group of same-sex-attracted men. An MVPFAFF+-identifying person may use

Indigenous and Western identity words in duality, depending on context, locality or how they wish to self-identify. Most terms used in the Pacific refer to natal male or feminine identifying individuals. There are very few words in the Pacific for same-sex attracted women, non-binary or intersex people.

MVPFAFF+ is not an attempt to create yet another umbrella acronym for queer or Rainbow-identifying Pacific peoples. It is a reminder in dialogue or thinking that there are Indigenous identities beyond what we know as the acronym LGBTQI+, an umbrella acronym overtly used without understanding or centring of Pacific Rainbow or queer people's identity terms and experiences.

I continued my keynote and stated that the conference was named the AsiaPacific Outgames Human Rights Conference—if we were going to use the word "Pacific" we needed to be more transparent about who was really being represented in this forum as the majority. The Pacific represented 8–10 per cent of conference participants; had we not been successful in sourcing our own funding from a supportive donor, the conference, held in a Pacific country, would have had a 2–3 per cent representation of Pacific peoples.

I humbly pay tribute to all 50 Pacific activists who entrusted me to change my keynote—to stand on their behalf and deliver a message that spoke to our realities and our Indigenous identities in the Pacific.

My keynote acknowledged the importance of Rainbow, queer and LGBTQI+ referencing and experiences; it also pointed out how terms derived from Western experiences do not represent Indigenous terms and references for MVPFAFF+ people of the Pacific. I highlighted the confusion of translating terms to literal meaning, as this often minimises sovereignty, spirituality, and ethnic-specific cultural underpinnings. Most importantly, I reinforced that Western ways of being, knowing and doing ignore that we are tagata or people of our lands first, before we are defined by foreign labels or othered in the Western world.

We continue to disrupt, fight and protest the importance of reclaiming our value and mana as Indigenous peoples in the modernising world.

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About the Author



Phylesha Brown-Acton, MNZM, is the first Pacific trans woman to be awarded the Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to Pasifika and MVPFAFF+/LGBTQI+ communities in Aotearoa (New Zealand). She is the executive director for F'INE Pasifika Aotearoa.

Phylesha hails from the village of Fineone Hakupu Atua, Niue Island. She holds both a master's degree in applied Indigenous knowledge and a title as Netball World Champion, has extensive governance and advisory experience, and has served Pasifika Rainbow communities for almost thirty years.

Phylesha uses arts and culture as a catalyst to remind Pasifika peoples—especially those living in diasporic communities—of their innate talent to create, live, and thrive. She is a mother to fur baby Mylo, and her mother and grandmother are her inspirations in life.

Notes

1 Māhu, Vakasalewalewa, Palopa, Fa'afafine, Akava'ine, Fakafifine and Fakaleitī/Leitī.

2 This quote originally appeared in a diary entry, published on www.gaynz.com, which is now defunct. Refer to: Phylesha Brown-Acton, personal diary entry, 2011.