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The personal as political: 1 A self-reflective essay on the act of poetry making and creating the “langrynative” persona.

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## **The personal as political:**A self-reflective essay on the act of poetry making and creating the “1angrynative” persona.

*By Cresantia Frances Koya, May 2012*

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In February 1969, Carol Hanish wrote a paper that began as a memo outlining her reflections on the idea of a women’s liberation movement. The ensuing paper “The personal is political” appeared in a 1970 publication titled “*Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation in 1970*”.<sup>1</sup> A well-known feminist critical thinker, Hanish is an editor and graphic artist who has dedicated her life to the empowerment of women and to helping break institutionalized myths that serve to discriminate women particularly in the United States of America. Her work has inspired the global women’s movement. Hanish talks about the need to differentiate between “therapy” and “politics” and asserts that to be a woman is to be misunderstood and misinterpreted. It is this idea that resonates with my creative process.

I am an activist although not in the traditional sense of the word. As an educator with an interest in education for social justice and diversity, multiculturalism and inclusion, my cause has many faces informed by the ultimate cause of the voiceless or the voices that social constructs attempt to drown out. My professional and creative work has led to various activities and initiatives of women’s groups in Fiji as well as other marginalized groups such as PLHA and the LGBT movement. But my media is not placards or protesting in the street. My media is my art. And in that sense of the word, I am an art activist. This means that I look for ways to raise awareness about certain issues through my art work both literary and visual (and more recently multi-media).

*The distance between tongue and eye*

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Discovering and embracing your artist voice or persona is not easy. There is no eureka! moment where you suddenly awake from a slumber to an Aha! This is my voice. It comes to you slowly with life experiences, with creative practice and with maturity. About ten years ago, the Pacific writing forum published an anthology of poems that had been selected from a collection of my works. That collection “*Of Schizophrenic Voices*” speaks of a young poet’s voice finding its wings and learning to fly.

I remember a well-known literary critic Paul Sharrad speaking on my poetry something along the lines of “*she is no Konai Helu Thaman*” in one of his reviews. That remark stuck in my head for some time and I came to the realization that my response to him would be “*Thank God for that!*” Why on earth would this Australian Post-Colonial scholar expect that a post-independence Fiji-born and raised multi-ethnic, catholic Samoan, Irish, Arab, Indian, Solomon Islander and Fijian daughter would have a similar voice to a Tongan daughter of the 1940s ? Surely this basic information alone would tell him that the contexts, realities and concerns of the two voices would necessarily be different. Right?

It is interesting that prior to this conversation, which admittedly took place in my head and in coffee and wine circles with my friends and fellow writers, I had simply not thought about it. I simply wrote. I wrote because I liked the freedom of expression that poetry provided and I wrote because I could. I had never thought to aspire to be like Konai nor had I attempted to write like her. I appreciated her poetry and presence (and still do) as I have other Pacific and international writers. This event got me thinking about “literary analysis” and the multiple layers of misinterpretation that goes along with it. The over-used cliché “beauty is in the eyes of the beholder” holds true in that “*we don’t see things as they are, but rather as we are*”<sup>2</sup>. I suddenly realized that while I was writing from my perspective, the reader ultimately judges me through his or her eyes without necessarily trying to see the world as I did at that particular moment in time.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html> and <http://carolhanisch.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Anais Nin – American Author (1903 – 1977).

My husband (originally from Tonga) shared with me a similar story of a classmate whose poem appeared in the literature section of a final exam paper at his school. He explained that the task was to analyze the poem and ironically, the poet was marked down for explaining what the poem was about. Basically the teacher had decided what the poem was about and the student (who had written the poem) obviously did not tell her what she wanted to hear.

A second incident which stands out as a turning point in my writing occurred during a video session conducted at the USP Media Centre in which the late Professor Epeli Hau'ofa, Larry Thomas and myself were interviewed. While most of the questions posed to the panel were about writing in the Pacific, the one question that was directed at me was "As a woman, what are the issues that inform your writing?" To be truthful, I was stumped. I had never thought about it like that. Was the expectation that what concerned male writers should not concern me or that I ought to be concerned about things that were specific to women? Should I have been writing about women's rights, household chores, and childrearing? I don't remember what I said but I do remember feeling disoriented in the realization that perhaps in some way my writing or at least what I was writing about should in some way be connected to the fact that I had been born with a womb.

*The distance between my tongue  
And your eyes  
Is an ocean of words  
Painted lines on backcloth  
And inked skin  
A thin line somewhere  
Between sand stone and coral dreams  
Of desert storms  
And cannibalism  
A thin line  
Between I know and you think  
A thin line  
Between my tongue and your eyes  
Between my neurosis and your ill-informed subjectivity  
The distance between my tongue  
And your eyes  
Is a fire  
That burns  
In my mouth  
not between my legs  
best you look away  
you will get burned (2012).*

### **On Inspiration, Process and Activism**

The three most common questions posed to writers are: "Why do you write?", "What do you write about?" and "How do you write?" My honest responses are "Because I want to and I can"; "Things that are interest to me" and "I have no idea".

It always surprises me when someone asks "what inspires you" to write? Life, Love, Family, Fear, Anger and all the other emotions that are generic to the state of being human trigger a thought, an image, a word, a line, a poem. My specific reality of being a Pacific Islander grounds my thinking, my creating, my emotion and my writing in who I am, where I am and when I am.

Writing makes me feel good. I suspect that a neurologist would explain that the sensation of completion at writing a poem or completing a painting is the result of a chemical release somewhere in the deep dark recesses of the human brain. For me, I write because writing has become a second language or medium of communication: a means by which to connect with others in the sharing of a human experience. Writing

about Pacific things connects me to my sense of place and space tangible and intangible and bridges the gap between past times, present times and future times.

The subject matter that I write about finds me. I don't purposefully set out to write a poem about culture or about my family tree, or about climate change for that matter, but the poems come to me in emotions that somehow translate into words on a page.

### ***I bring with me***

*I bring my father with me to India  
And his mother – my grandmother Kaliani  
And her mother – my great grandmother Manicum  
They sit in my chest curled into a ball  
Watching and weeping inside me  
As I watch and weep (2007)*

### ***Spirit talk***

*The spirits come in shades of gray and red:  
A reminder to live well  
Shadows of feathers, shell and bones  
Coming to life in a tree  
Filled with stories and living history (2008)*

### ***I Angry Native on Climate Change***

*In the space between the bleeding sky and dawn  
voices wail in an unfamiliar tongue*

*in the space between my umbilical cord and my  
mother's bones  
An owl watches two eel-gods  
Dying  
As a dog  
Howls  
Red  
earth into black Lua- two  
and rock water  
sky lines piercing my throat  
atua – god in my belly*

*in the space between my head and my father's teeth  
There's a stone  
An ocean of tears  
In my belly*

*Blood sand  
And a chant that is a wail  
reaching inward  
then out  
gutting me  
like a fish*

*in the space between my belly and the chant that is  
the bleeding sky  
human skin is stretched across fired stones  
tempered with my grandmothers' tears  
calling to the spirits of her people  
I shout to the heavens between us  
for a sign  
because pulotu is not above us  
it is in the sea  
[...]*

*In the space between place and breath  
our gods are condemned to the wind  
the dreams of fish  
Discarded by  
strangers who do not love us  
fishhooks in my belly pull me to shore*

*In the space between I am and I will  
We measure the density of va  
In the pit of my belly  
There is a seed  
And it is sadness*

*In the space between climate justice and climate  
redemption  
stands the one-eyed Hikule'o  
Her hair an expanse of roots charred black  
In her belly live the children of sky  
brown as the earth is old  
Their tears are the ocean in us (2010).*

It is difficult to explain how writing happens or where it comes from. The technical skills of creative writing may be taught or learnt but the art of it must by definition come from within. As a writer and artist, I do not ever feel that I have fully mastered the art of poetry. I instead accept that I am forever learning and through inspiration, practice and experience my voice inevitably will change.

### ***The process of writing***

Writing is a solitary art. It is true that writers' circles and groups help to build confidence, skills and feedback on your writing but the actual task of writing happens in isolation. It would be remiss of me to claim that all my writing and art comes from pure inspiration alone with words flowing fluidly from pen

to paper, or key board to screen. Sometimes when a poem is ready to be born, it can happen that way but other times, an event or task means that a poem on a particular topic needs to be written within a strict time frame. When a poem flows fluidly, I often find that the self-editing which follows is a minor task perhaps because the flow progresses naturally. When I write for specific purposes such as themed events, I find that the flow can sometimes be inconsistent and it is in the reflection and self-editing that a more consistent flow is maintained.

When I write I like to be in a quiet space without sound (music included) and I read aloud the stanzas as they take shape in my reading voice. My preferred style is most often free verse, but I purposefully build in elements of rhythm and sound to create visual images in the mind of the reader or audience (for spoken word).

### *Spoken Word vs. writing for publication*

In 2007-8 SLAMS were introduced in Fiji with the first event taking place at Traps Back bar in Suva. I had intended to sit in as part of the audience but was asked to fill in to make up the numbers. The experience was horrendous. The event was dominated by Fiji-made-wanna-be-the-next-Eminem-or-Tupac- rapper-cum-poet-amateurs whose words were undecipherable for the most part with the exception of the mother-f\*ers and the f\*ing ho- phrases which were screamed into the microphone. Even more surprising was the fact that they were liked. Perhaps it was the mood combined with the atmosphere and the free flowing drinks. The old-broom poets in the room (myself) included were horrified. Was this the new face of poetry reading nights in Suva? Thankfully that was not the case and when USP SLAMS began a year later, a new form of poetry emerged.

Participating in the SLAMS led to writing for spoken word which I soon discovered was much more challenging and considerably more fun. As part of my writing process in which I try to purposefully ground my writing in the Pacific, writing for performance meant revisiting traditional forms of oratory and public speaking, chanting and the imagery of this language. A particular challenge was and continues to be finding the words and sounds to create images and emotions while using English as a medium of communication (simply because English is the only language that I am fluent in).

While I had been participating in public readings since 1997 when I first joined the Niu Waves Writers' Collective, it had taken me at least two years to pluck up the courage to read one of my own poems in a public space. Reading a poem and performing a poem I soon discovered were two very distinct activities. Writing for SLAMs necessitates developing a rapport with your audience which means writing on issues and topics that they can relate to. By some mere stroke of chance I appeared to get it right by claiming the 2008 and 2009 finalist SLAM winner prize. A poem that seems to resonate with people remains a 2009 piece written for the SLAM titled "Jesus Gun". A funny incident happened while shopping in the MH flagstaff supermarket with my daughters one Saturday months later and having a young woman yell out excitedly "Jesus got a gun!" She had evidently forgotten my name but not the poem. The second time I performed the poem was the USP 2009 Peace Concert. The reception was much the same and the following week the twins were entertained by a male classmate enthusiastically playing back parts of the poem to the class of my performance of this poem. The poem is part of an unpublished collection titled "Biting the Bullet" which explores terrorism and politics through the deliberate use of the 'gun' as metaphor.

**Jesus Gun**

[Black screen. Voice over]

Jesus got a gun.  
He's got angels on the barrel.  
Wings on the clutch.  
Jesus got a gun.  
A big Gun.

[Wide shot. Sound track playing.  
Hebrew music.  
Matisyahu crooning Jerusalem.  
Rapping, reggae Hebrew-style  
Jesus in s-l-o-w motion].

[Zoom in.  
Head shot.  
Hair ruffled.  
Ragged beard]

[Zoom in. Focus on eyes. Stern gaze ]  
[Zoom out.  
Hard lines.  
Gown billowing in the wind.  
Leather sandals slapping against the pavement ]

“Rebuild the temple and the crown of glory  
Years gone by, about sixty  
Burn in the oven in this century  
And the gas tried to choke, but it couldn't choke me  
I will not lie down, I will not fall asleep  
They come overseas, yes they're trying to be free  
Erase the demons out of our memory  
Change your name and your identity  
Afraid of the truth and our dark history  
Why is everybody always chasing we  
Cut off the roots of your family tree  
Don't you know that's not the way to be”<sup>3</sup>

[Zoom in.  
Stimata on hands as he  
S-l-o-w-l-y pulls  
the M16  
into focus.]

[Jesus in leather.  
Tight Desperado- Banderas leather.  
English with an accent]

Would they stop him at the Sydney Airport?  
Heathrow? LA Perhaps?

“Terrorist threat identified!

Jesus Ben-Joseph.”

Middle eastern with an attitude.

[Voice Over]

Jesus got a gun.  
A big gun.  
No lone ranger revolver for the son of man.  
A mother of a gun.  
A bazooka to level the playing field.  
No more floods for this generation.

Jesus with a gun.  
Terminator style.  
Keep it simple.  
Keep it clean.  
You better go to church now.  
'Cos Jesus got a gun. (2009)

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<sup>3</sup> Matisyahu, Jerusalem

The stage name of langrynative found me at a point where I realized that preparing for a performance required putting on a persona face. On one particular reading night I was dared to read erotic poetry at the Defense club and to prepare myself for the role, donned a leather skirt, a cheeky t-shirt, knee-length boots, had a few wines and with cigarette in hand performed my piece. This frightening but liberating experience opened my eyes to the importance of pre-performance planning and getting into character. The angry native came when I began to see that a lot of my writing carried anger as the predominant or underlying emotion and I felt that my performance needed to demonstrate that. It seems a very little thing of seemingly no consequence but in fact, my poetry that bears the langrynative tagline is by definition angry poetry. Funnily enough, finding my angry voice also opened the door to other threshold emotions of sadness and grief which I now find comes more easily in my writing and performance. In short, embracing the angry voice has in fact allowed my voice to grow and change.

***langry native untitled\*(on purpose).***

*I realize quite suddenly that  
You want me to write a pretty poem  
Dressed in folds of Masi  
That sits in a museum  
You want a bare-breasted poem  
Clad only in a sulu  
A long-haired exotic flower Behind her ear poem  
That you can deconstruct  
In a post-colonial box*

*you want a poem that smiles coyly  
And folds her legs to the side  
As she rests on a plinth at the local craft market  
A good PI poem that knows its place*

*You want a poem with wings  
in a shoe box  
neatly labeled and catalogued*

*A poem that will make love  
Not fuck with your head*

*I want to write the shout it to the heavens poem  
The Tangaloa swallowing the sky poem  
The maui in your veins and Hina in your moko poem  
The sisters chanting in your Malu poem  
The take that post-colonial box and – bleep – bleep –  
bleep it poem*

*I want to write the nafanua binding her breasts to go  
to war poem  
The rock spinning in the void poem  
The diamond studded serpent in the cave poem*

*I want to write the Jewish-Carpenter-lover poem  
The Jesus revolution poem  
The new age colonialism disguised as progress poem*

*The blackman dressed up as white – Halloween every  
day poem*

*I want to write the bronze skin inked black is sexy as-  
poem  
The I own my box poem  
The take your box with you when you leave poem  
The you're so full of shit poem*

*I want to write the sexy mama poem  
The whose-your-sugar-mummy poem  
The laughing samoans poem  
The billfish band, Honiara market and Lanae club  
poem  
The navigating with your testicles poem*

*I want to write the poem  
That sings  
And dances  
To the wind*

*I want to write the poem  
That refuses to get into your box poem  
The messes with your head poem  
The you couldn't handle the curves of this poem  
The is she talking about me  
Or is she just confused poem*

*I want to write the poem  
That no one else will speak  
That tells a story that is mine alone*

*And you can't have it (2011)*

## *Postscript – A word to the budding poet*

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As someone wise once said. Write. Write. Write. And Read. Read. Read. Share your work but don't expect everyone to like it. Do expect at least one good friend to lie about liking it and don't make a fuss. Do ask for genuine opinions but don't change everything for one person's opinion. A poem, like a novel, or a painting and even a movie is analyzed subjectively. Read your poem out loud. Try to appreciate the texture of the poem on your tongue, the way it sounds in your ear, and the way you move your body (inside and out) when you feel the poem. Learn to feel poetry. Remember to write what you know and not what you think you know. A lot of the worst poems I have read and heard are by adolescent poets trying to capture the intensity of love whilst confusing it with lust. The greatest love poems are written by those who have "felt" love and who have experienced a broken heart. Know your audience and purpose.

If you are writing to be read, think about style and structure. How does the poem look on the page? How does it read? And how does it sound when you read it out loud following the written structure? If you are writing for SLAMS, learn to use your body and for goodness sake project your voice and practice with a microphone. There is nothing worse than a poet who whispers or one who appears to be shouting into the microphone. Vary your intonation to express changes in emotion so that the audience makes the transition with you. A monotone reader makes for a very boring reader. Think about the readers or performers you like to watch and listen to - try to learn from their techniques. There is nothing wrong with performing with a print version of your poem – but the trick is to perform it rather than simply 'reading' it from the page. And finally, practice reading/performing your piece. It is embarrassing to lose your place on the written page and to stumble on stage trying to find the correct line. Adlibbing is one way of handling this and from personal experience sometimes new words find their way into the poem which are then added in a second edit after a first performance. And finally, swearing or the use of cuss words in spoken word performances is quite acceptable and in many ways, expected in many SLAMs. A word of caution, when and if you chose to use a particular swear word learn to use it for emphatic intentions as opposed to randomly throwing them around. A well placed swear word has more of an effect than twenty which serve no real purpose other than to show the audience the extent of your own profanity.

### **Wordplay**

*'Is This Word play?'*

You say.

Semantics.

Context is everything.

Syntax appropriated.

You mean, am I

Fucking with your head? (2008)

### **Running rain**

Cresantia Frances Koya

Lovers lick etcetera

In dreams of hope etcetera

Democracy a wooden flower

More what ifs and no no

But lovers gift etcetera and yes yes

More more

And running rain

No but and then  
There was love  
And death  
And the whole other load of etceteras

Of women birthing  
More dreaming souls  
That spins in  
Cocoons  
Spilling red seed  
And green yellows  
Somewhere  
Light is dark

If money talks etcetera  
What does it say?  
Yes yes

Sunset sunrise  
Tomorrow  
Would be a good place to start

You will seek  
The oracle of etcetera  
And say what the fuck?  
This is...  
(2008)

And finally a word on literary analysis, try to find out about the poet's socio-cultural and historical context in order to try to see the poem through that lens.

## POEMS

### **Flagging the gun**

Paint my gun  
with the Fiji flag  
so it matches my thermal mug  
a rugby ball and a coconut tree  
take a sip  
then one, two, three  
shoot to kill  
and look at me  
dressed up in the Fiji flag

paint my gun  
with red and green  
siapo print on the barrel  
cross on the clutch  
a peace sign  
and a splash of ocean blue

paint my gun  
with ringtones  
no bang bang for me  
when I fire a shot  
you'll know you've been got  
by the tune on my M16  
(you know what I'm saying)

Paint my gun  
with spirals  
Paint my gun  
with sequence  
diamantes on the back  
glitter on the front

Paint my gun  
with the Fiji flag  
blue and red and white  
bananas and warriors  
and the faithful Union jack

Paint my gun  
with the Fiji flag  
So it matches my thermal mug  
a rugby ball and a coconut tree  
take a sip  
then one, two, three  
shoot to kill  
and look at me  
dressed in up the Fiji flag

Paint my gun  
Please paint my gun  
'Cos black is not my color.

*March 24, 2011*

**The line and the cord**  
**A reponse to Blood in the Kava Bowl**

Dear Epele,  
The Blood in the Kava Bowl runs thick these days  
And we no longer sit in the twilight to drink kava between us.  
We pass instead the metaphorical cup of over-used metaphors  
to describe how it would, could, should be from various standpoint theories that we have imported  
and we pretend that this exchange is the equivalent of sharing Kava  
In a wooden bowl on a mat.  
Some of us know who we are, and need not say our links to Vaihi.  
Across the empty space that once was a kava bowl  
We don our scholarly mask of connectedness  
And pretend to understand the line  
That is our cord brought from Tangaloa.  
The professor does not know.  
He sees where the line was/should/might be  
And has a scholarly understanding of what the cord is and what non-Pacific anthropologists  
and so called 'leading thinkers' tell him about the line and the cord.  
He does not drink the Kava for his cup is full and he is intoxicated  
by delusions of what it means to be and belong.  
And the Kava has risen, old friend, kava kuo heka – ready to be served –  
Drink of this metaphor and smile the grace of our fathers  
At him who says we are oppressed by our own ignorance, by you and by me.  
Smile at him who says we need to be saved from the outside.  
Buts it's always twilight in Vaihi  
And his vision is clouded.

The kava has risen again dear old friend,  
Take this cup...  
Ah, yes that matter of oppression –  
From Vaihi it begot in us unspoken knowledge  
Of our soul and our bondage –  
You and I – the love of that inner mountain  
The mist and sprouting ashes.  
And ye,s the kava trees of Tonga still grow well.

The professor still talks  
Of oppression that we both know.  
Yet he tastes not the blood in the kava – in our words –  
The pain of va in the cord and the line.  
He is only listening to the sound of his own voice in the stillness.  
Smiling at his own reflection in the space where there once was a wooden bowl.  
He has read about the dry waters that rose to Tangaloa

Who gave us the cup from which we drink  
The soul and tears of our land – our sea.  
He has read critical essays of the brothers who slayed Takalaua  
and fled to Niue, Manono and Ftuna  
only to be caught in Uvea and brought home to the priests of Maui.  
He has read widely, old friend,  
but he has not felt the blood in the words  
And Hikule’o is just another deity of a primitive civilization that he can draw from to his advantage  
But will not respect or believe that there is blood in the text.  
And the mountain also crushes our people.  
Their blood – our blood – flowing into red waters from the warm springs of Pulotu –  
Only you and I can taste and live  
In ancient understanding begat by Mauhi in Vaihi...  
Aue...

The Kava has risen old friend, and we drink this bitter cup that is passed to us  
Because the blood is thick and it is the cup of the soul and the sweat of our people.  
And we contemplate those three mushrooms which once grew in Mururoa;  
And the rising sea-level and the shrinking/growing island of Tuvalu.  
The professor has read on that too.

We think of you as we think about our sea of islands that may or may not survive  
the capitalist economy of educational agendas in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.  
We listen to reports that we are sinking or growing or something  
And the bottom line always is that the outside knows what is best for us.  
And the professor who is now so inebriated  
He cannot see the line for the cord, for the trees for the faces of the people  
Who stand in rows guarding the secrets of Pulotu. His cup is too full.

The shit of the cows that Captain Cook brought from the Kings of England and France is now piled with a  
landfill from America too!

We no longer sit in the twilight to drink kava between us  
We pass instead the metaphorical cup of over-used metaphors  
To describe how it would, could, should, be from various standpoint theories that we have imported;  
And we pretend that this exchange is the equivalent of sharing Kava  
In a wooden bowl on a mat.  
The Blood in the Kava Bowl runs thick these days, Epele.

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