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Interface of gender and culture

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E muamua ona ou ta le vai afai ae ou faatalofa atu ile paia lasilasi.

I greet you in the soothing waters of the Pacific. The birth waters of Hawai'i to the North, island of the dream time, and Aotearoa, to the south. Papua New Guinea to the West and Marquesas to the East.

These islands are the gathering places of the world's largest Continent, the Pacific. We of this continent know that her birth waters are our connection. We also know that she is woman identified.

It is no surprise therefore that from Hawai'i to the north to Aotearoa in the south the positioning of women in each of these societies bears a different story to that of the women of the continent of Europe.

This reality lived out in Hawai'i means women shared with men the ultimate leadership of peoples. This location of women power is named Kuhinanui. Many remarkable women of Hawai'i occupied this position. From times of peace throughout to the first clash with imposed new culture, women of Hawai'i led, bled, struggled, defied and kept the kukui of self belief burning. Genealogically Hawai'i is connected to her other sisters throughout the Pacific. The story of Kuhinanui Liliuokalani is poignant.

The American administration with it's insistence on a capitalist culture imprisoned her. Their logic being, if Hawai'i is leaderless the people would be scattered and would be easier for takeover.

While she was under house arrest, United States took over Hawai'i. She was the last of the Hawai'ian monarchs. Her continual writing of songs and chants to her people to keep remembering the land and their umbilical cords to it, despite stringent controls on her, is a reminder to us all. Women birth generations and therefore cultures. Their imprisonment leaves generations and cultures vulnerable for takeover and therefore debasement.

Kuhinanui Liliuokalani did not give up Hawai'i, so haven't all our Pacific women of the various cultures given up. The continuous struggle for families, communities, peoples and countries waged by women is a statement of this. You well know that these struggles are waged from within a new positioning among Pacific women symbolised by Liliuokalani's house arrest. House arrests are not only physical limitations, they are also psychological and spiritual limitations. They are enforced politically, legally, clinically and socially. When did our own house arrests, within our own homelands, begin?

Our largest continent, the Pacific, and her tempting sensuality became pursued by the men of Europe. Beginning in the 16th Century and by the 20th Century, Pacific women have firmly been placed under house arrest. The story of how this

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became our reality is devastating. However, we all have survived and therefore have a story of strength to tell. It has not devastated us; therefore, bear with us as we tell it to you.

The so called explorers came beginning in the 16th Century. They arrived in the Marshalls and murdered villagers. The villagers' intestines were to be a cure to crew's scurvy. This has continued to the present day with the latest onslaught on whales of the sea to cure modern man's scurvy of profit.

The traders followed shortly. The lands were fertile and as in the Marshall Islands, land ownership is through the women line and so for all generations prior to European contact. These same lands would provide for the traders plantation and pastoral places. The indigenous populations would be a sure market for their goods. Hawai'i to the north right throughout to Aotearoa to the south, the lands were taken in exchange for guns and laws. Just so Pacific people could see their own ravaged faces, the traders also gave over some mirrors. This continues to the present day. Diets have changed, clothing has changed, Pacific women, once Kuhinanui, become the night cleaners of the trader's complex.

The missionaries came hand in hand with the traders. Their values of purity, chastity, humility and subservience ensured that Pacific women no longer shared with their brothers the leadership and guardianship of cultures. John Williams, a missionary to Samoa, stated that the missionary was a close ally to the traders, - "who ever is interested in the commercial prosperity of his country can be none other than a close ally to the missionary cause".

The traders and missionaries found the Pacific's social arrangements a block to their cause. Complicating this was the individual needs of separate governments of Europe. They brought in their men of war to fight it out amongst themselves. They also brought in their men of war to kill the local populace and therefore remove the blocks for takeover. From Hawai'i to the north right through to Aotearoa to the south this was our experience.

The administrators were the last on the scene. The ravages of war needed to be systematised and devastations needed to be made polite. Centralised administrative systems brought in laws that would legitimise the forced taking of lands, minimise life losses and ensure that Pacific women, through policies and regulations, could not share the leadership and guardianship of peoples and cultures, and so it continues today. The abuser or user pay system has never allowed or enabled the abused to have a say or define their needs and how best they can be met, and so our house arrest continues in this year of the indigenous and women's suffrage, 1993.

House arrest was thus ensured for us as Pacific women within our own homelands. Like Liliuokalani of Hawai'i we view the events sometimes with despair. The forced taking of lands, the imposition of laws, the deliberate breaking of cultures and their ownership of our psyches, all the while placing us under house arrest, limits and frustrates our capabilities to bring about settlement. No doubt you as Pacific women who are here today, witness sometimes with despair, the ensuing break up of families as a result of this history.

How many times have we seen our own non-belonging in those therapy rooms? How many times have we seen our children not knowing who and what they are? How many times have we seen them finding closeness on the cold dark streets? How many times have we seen our women beaten, raped and brutalised? The mirrors that they gave break in our hands, reflecting only fragments of our ravaged faces.

Though the dual forces of racism and sexism force us only to witness this pain, our continual endeavour to treat these problems in context of history, of racism and sexism makes the difference. We know that these families come from stories of devastation and debasement, to treat them in the absence of these stories is to make

them responsible for their own rape. We know that to treat this as only a familial or individual problem continues self blame of peoples and cultures.

In the same therapy rooms we see many of our women present under various psychological referral categories as depression, schizophrenia, paranoia and suicidal feelings. Any peoples living in a situation of house arrest would of course display these symptoms. To treat them in the absence of history would be to incriminate them, and exacerbate their self-blame.

Moreover, the essence of psychology and mainly in these cases clinical psychology, is social construction. This is the definition of normality or abnormality that for so long was taken as universal, however, we have always known that these are culturally bound definitions and there are no universal norms. Behaviours are expressed in ways that are culturally defined. Each culture has its own sense of normality and abnormality. The domination of western science and thought throughout the Pacific ushered in western norms to which people are forced to adjust. We as workers all know the many families whose behaviours and values had been judged on these norms.

The institutionalised new social location for Pacific women denies the matrilineal, matriarchal nature of this continent. The covenant relationships between men and women and the land of this continent have been made subservient to the gender arrangements of Europe. It is not new, that we have the vote. In fact it is quite patronising that we are told to celebrate a lesser position. We not only had our votes, we were the guardians and leaders of our peoples.

These models of our gender arrangements, be they from Hawai'i, Aotearoa, Marshalls or Samoa provide us with a foundation of women power and women truths. These gender arrangements bear a different story to the positions of our men. They give light to a different manhood out of which we can build new social relations.

These social relations begin at the familial level. We as therapists are pertinent in this rebuilding. It is not enough that we participate in the continual house arrest of women and their families, through ignorance of history or limiting our clinical focus. Psyches are what people remember, our conversations in therapy rooms should open up remembering for women and for their families. This remembering is about their history of strength.

More recently at the Family Centre in Lower Hutt, families have sought help from us because their women, their mothers, wives, and sisters, have been under police house arrest. These women, according to immigration, have over-stayed their permits and therefore are under forcible removal to their homelands. One such woman is close to us. She has been married for two years. She has a three year old child. Immigration came and took her away. All the time her child clawed at the officials to stop them taking her mother away. She was kept in the cells and released for the courts to decide her fate. She was sent home. Her family awaiting her had no support. Her husband became suicidal. Her daughter ended up in the hospital. Doctors could not diagnose what was wrong with her. Physical symptoms were lethargy and she would not eat. Her paediatrician report stated that she had depression. At three years old this woman child had already started her house arrest. Her mother has rejoined the family under Special Direction from the Minister of Immigration. The husband has had a second experience of suicidal feelings. The onset of this was the break up of the family by officialdom.

Just last week an eight month pregnant woman was arrested by immigration and the police. She left at home a child and a husband. The child, while visiting her mother at the cells, kept clawing at the glass to be with her. She at 18 months is learning a symptom of house arrest. The desperate clawing.

At the time of seeing this family, this woman and her husband had lived in intense fears for over a period of two years. They were afraid that the police would come and take her away. There were times when they both considered suicide. This

woman and her family's experience is a culmination of house arrests that began a long time ago. One only wonders at the level of terror these women live through. All in the year of women's suffrage.

House arrests for these families mean continual opening of curtains to check out on people coming to the house. It means hiding in bedrooms and not trusting anyone. For women and their children and their husbands, the experience of intense loneliness and isolation become a norm.

In our conversations with these families, their courage and defiance is noted and voiced. Their survival through these harsh conditions needs to be underlined and respected.

After all, we are all family therapists in this conference. We create or block spaces of conversation. We create normality in families. All the more reason for us to name abnormalities in the society in which these families live. We are the guardians of family therapy models and we can create models that make a difference to house arrests.

Pacific women's vulnerability to house arrests gives no excuses for people to rationalise, personalise, and diminish our sacredness and our places of belonging. Categorisations and normalisations increase the experience of house arrest, if these categorisations and norms are not defined by Pacific women themselves.

Gender and culture are not two opposing polarities. These two intersect in the lives of Pacific women. They so far have defined the experience of house arrest beginning in the period of colonisation. Gender arrangements too are culture specific and the common mistake has been the regard of all these gender arrangements as similar.

The differing cultural arrangements of the Pacific bear a different truth. The patriarchy is not universal. Colonisation universalised aspects of this patriarchy. Family therapy models for the future that are both gender-just and culturally-just can only be based from an experience other than the western scientific rationality.

Remember their times of resistance, make note of the time and their actions of defiance. Give voice to their histories of resistance, note their continuation of their history of defiance. Know that a scream, be it silent or loud, is an act of refusal to collude with house arrest.