

# An Artiture of Formerly Incarcerated Tongan Students in Community College

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## Article abstract

This article is taken from my dissertation study that explored the lived experiences of three Tongan Americans, each of whom were incarcerated in juvenile hall and are now attending college as a part of a transition program into local community colleges. The study introduced a Tongan version of the school-prison nexus by highlighting the ways in which the education and the justice systems work to ignore the dual culture realities of Tongans living in the United States. Adopting and fusing Fa'avae's (2016) talanoa and Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis' (1997) portraiture methodologies, I co-created a new approach Artiture—in collaboration with Taniela Petelo, my cousin, a Tongan-based international artist—to explore the following question: What are the challenges Tongan students face when they attend college after being incarcerated in the juvenile justice system? Findings from this Artiture highlighted intersections of family, history, cultural obligations and expectations, and the impact on Tongan Americans who deal with what Vakalahi (2009) calls “dual culture” (pg. 1259).

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## AN ARTITURE OF FORMERLY INCARCERATED TONGAN STUDENTS IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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**Abstract:** This article is taken from my dissertation study that explored the lived experiences of three Tongan Americans, each of whom were incarcerated in juvenile hall and are now attending college as a part of a transition program into local community colleges. The study introduced a Tongan version of the school-prison nexus by highlighting the ways in which the education and the justice systems work to ignore the dual culture realities of Tongans living in the United States. Adopting and fusing Fa'avae's (2016) talanoa and Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis' (1997) portraiture methodologies, I co-created a new approach Artiture—in collaboration with Taniela Petelo, my cousin, a Tongan-based international artist—to explore the following question: What are the challenges Tongan students face when they attend college after being incarcerated in the juvenile justice system? Findings from this Artiture highlighted intersections of family, history, cultural obligations and expectations, and the impact on Tongan Americans who deal with what Vakalahi (2009) calls “dual culture” (pg. 1259).

**Keywords:** formerly incarcerated; community college; Pacific Islander; juvenile hall; portraiture; talanoa

For over 15 years, I worked in a myriad of roles in the criminal justice system. I saw kids from the neighborhood, where I grew up and currently live, go through the revolving door of the justice system. Some of these kids were from families that have suffered from generations of incarceration and have just accepted this as the norm. Rather than celebrating their kids' achievements and graduations from schools, these parents were celebrating their kids being released from jail. Experience after experience, I eventually became numb to it, and it was not until the culmination of things I witnessed "behind the walls" of the juvenile justice system that I realized I needed to be part of the prescriptive solution rather than the punitive.

To start breaking down the problem of practice, I began with a concept to describe Tongan student experiences as a community within, yet separate from, the education and justice systems, *double invisibility*. First, Pacific Islanders (PI) are being aggregated and misclassified with Asian American (AA) students. The needs, challenges, and experiences of PI students are inadequately represented because of how PIs and AAs are incorrectly classified together. Second, formerly incarcerated students are not recognized as a population in community colleges. This means that colleges do not have to account for this subclass during the distribution of program funding and additional resources, which leaves these students severely disadvantaged.

As a result of my problem statement, I came up with the following research question: What are the challenges Tongan students face when they attend college after being incarcerated in the juvenile justice system? Findings from this Artiture highlighted intersections of family history, cultural obligations and expectations, and the impact on Tongan Americans who deal with what Vakalahi (2009) calls "dual culture" (pg. 1259).

## **Widening Methodologies' Reach Through Kāinga**

### **Artiture**

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis' (1997) description of portraiture is a qualitative research approach that acknowledges the expression of art as a form of research to recognize that each person's life is unique, influenced by various factors and perspectives. *Artiture* is a unique and innovative approach to research and artistic expression that combines and expands upon both Western and Pasifika methodologies. This practice consists of two primary elements.

## **Element 1**

Artiture first involves the blending of *talanoa* and *portraiture*, each a method from a different cultural background. Talanoa is a qualitative approach to data collection deeply rooted in Pasifika cultures (Fa'avae et al., 2016). It involves storytelling, informal conversation, and the sharing of ideas and experiences in a communal context. This is done in an open, honest, and empathetic manner, and is often used to explore social issues, community dynamics, and personal experiences. The talanoa approach offers a valuable alternative to traditional research methods, particularly in exploring the sociocultural realities of Pacific Islander communities.

*Portraiture* on the other hand, is a Western approach that blends art and science. It involves capturing a person or group in visual form, often with an aim to represent their character, personality, or status. In research, portraiture has been extended to refer to the practice of detailed, interpretive descriptions of phenomena, often focused on individuals or specific groups (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). It is a unique approach to social science inquiry that straddles the boundaries between observational science and art theory, between the illustrative and the creative.

In combining these two methods, Artiture creates a hybrid form of artistic research. This approach promotes a dialogic process of co-creation that incorporates the depth and detail of portraiture with the collective and communal spirit of talanoa. Through this synthesis, Artiture enables a rich exploration of individual and collective experiences and identities.

## **Element 2**

The second element of Artiture involves further expanding this blend by presenting artistic expression as a form of talanoa in research and integrating non-Western research methodologies based on Indigenous values, morals, and protocols.

Art as a form of talanoa gives life to dialogue, stories, and shared experiences in a tangible and sensory way. By treating artistic expression as a form of talanoa, Artiture brings forth a deeper, more nuanced understanding of experiences, emotions, and perspectives. It also opens up new ways of communicating and interpreting research findings, which can enhance the resonance and impact of these insights.

Furthermore, Artiture recognizes the importance of culturally competent research methodologies, especially in the context of working with Indigenous communities. By incorporating Indigenous values, morals, and protocols, Artiture respects and upholds the unique cultural contexts of the Tongan community. It integrates these principles into

the processes of capturing and interpreting data. This can mean privileging Indigenous ways of knowing, honoring local protocols in the presentation and dissemination of findings, and ensuring that the research process is meaningful and beneficial for the community involved.

Through these two components, Artiture creates a holistic and culturally competent approach to research and artistic expression. It offers a powerful way to engage communities, explore diverse experiences and perspectives, and share insights in a way that is respectful, meaningful, and impactful.

## **Collaborating with Another Tongan Artist**

Although some researchers have great insight into art expression, personally, I do not. I do, however, know that art is part of my blood, because my first cousin, Taniela Petelo, a Tongan-based international artist, has demonstrated that he has a relationship with the art he creates. As a result, Artiture allowed me as a researcher, to modify portraiture, by bringing an Indigenous art expert to teach me how to see talanoa through the lenses of his eyes and his art.

The reasons for choosing to collaborate with Taniela Petelo were unlimited. The obvious purpose was to disrupt the traditional models of conducting research in marginalized populations. Taniela was once asked in an interview, (Pacific Legal Network, 2021) what advice he would give to up-and-coming artists in the Pacific, and he replied:

There's always a way to earn a living. Art is a life surrounded by struggles, although the passion for the craft surpasses life's difficulties. From experience, when the resources are limited, the more creative our minds can be. We don't need to rely on manufactured materials only in order to create an artwork, we can use our own natural materials.

Taniela brought his experience and authenticity to this research which made this collaboration truly unique. As I reflect back on collaborating with Taniela, I realized that I never really went in-depth on how critical his work was to my research. He brought a nuance to the portraiture methodology (which I later dubbed Artiture) that I hope future researchers will utilize. I recalled one of our meetings, when I asked him if there was anything unique that he may have used or thought about beforehand in order to create the portraits. In response, he began to talk about how music has been his biggest inspiration, and how most of the songs are about the violence and trauma that youth experience. He went on to describe the particular materials and colors that he specifically chose to use because they highlighted how each participant's story was told through his lens.

## Who is Taniela?

Taniela is a native of Haveluloto, Tongatapu, Tonga. He is a multi-talented individual who is involved in visual arts and music. He received his formal training in fine arts from Tevita Latu, a former art teacher at 'Atenisi Institute and Tonga International Academy, in 2009. Together with Tevita, Taniela proudly co-founded Seleka, an artist-run center supporting young Tongan artists. In 2014, Taniela was awarded a scholarship to study at the Australia Pacific Technical College (APTC) in Suva, Fiji, where he completed a Certificate III in Painting and Decorating. This educational opportunity, combined with his active participation in exhibitions and residencies, contributed to the further refinement of his artistic skills. Taniela's artwork has gained international recognition, with collectors from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, and the United States regularly commissioning his pieces. Additionally, Taniela extends his artistic endeavors to illustration, and his work can be found in various children's picture books.

In this article, I wanted to first highlight portraiture as this was not really talked about in my initial work because that is not what my study was about. But I feel that the portraits Taniela created made a big difference to my research when compared to non-art-based qualitative research, as it entices other senses of our body. In the Pasifika way, we say that there are multiple ways of doing things. My research and collaboration with Taniela was a living example that there are multiple mediums for bringing stories to life.

## Procedures and Participants

### Procedures for Talanoa Sessions (One-on-One Style)

For the talanoa sessions, each participant was notified that the study would involve at least three sessions. Two out of the three participants completed all of the talanoa sessions. Although one participant did not complete the final session, their two completed sessions provided sufficient data to analyze. I also conducted an impromptu talanoa six months after the final talanoa to obtain an update on the participants' academic and probation status.

### Participants

My study included three formerly incarcerated Tongan students I taught and/or worked with in the past, while they were enrolled in the Project Change Program at College of the Bay Area or in juvenile hall. For confidential purposes, I utilized

pseudonyms. Poliana Mafileo, a Tongan female and Project Change student, had two kids and, at the time of the research, was pregnant and due to give birth within weeks. Susana Onionififisi, a Tongan female and Project Change student, was in and out of juvenile hall. Finally, Pita Malohi, a Tongan male, was an intern for a non-profit organization who was working with system-impacted families in his neighborhood.

These talanoas allowed me to co-construct the portraiture you will see below. They each illustrate the student's lived experiences. From these portraits, distinct conflicts emerged, but the main themes that evolved from the students' talanoas were the interconnected stages they experienced in cycles between the education and justice system (the stages are described below in "Reflections on Themes"). Each stage was critical in highlighting how they sought to navigate through community college. Although the stages are listed in chronological order, there was a non-linear movement between these themes and they were all interconnected.

## Portraits

The following three images (Figures 1,2,3) present these co-constructed portraiture:

**Figure 1**

*Poliana M. by Taniela Petelo*



*Note: Mixed Media; March 16, 2022*



Poliana M. says:

Once you're in the juvenile justice system, it's pretty much you're in, so it's like really hard. Well, I think it's kind of hard to get out. It's like any little thing you do, you can go back in, even if you just like miss a class, you can go in. I didn't understand that, so I was just continuing to be bad and just thinking that I could do whatever I wanted, and so that is why I was in and out of juvenile hall.

## Figure 2

*Susana O. by Taniela Petelo*



*Note: Mixed Media; March 23, 2022*



Susana O. says:

When it happens, it's my priority before school, and I just don't know why. Well, I do know why in like funerals, of course, I'm going to go to a funeral instead of school, because it's a funeral. My grandma passed away and I didn't go to school for so long because the whole funeral kept extending. I just didn't know when it was going to stop so I just didn't go to school. . . I wouldn't go to school in some cases when we have to do all those other things. . . So that's why if it's going to help the church or if it's going to help our family, we'll go to that instead of school. . . It definitely affected my schooling because I would fall behind in work and teachers didn't wanna hear that.

**Figure 3**

*Pita M. by Taniela Petelo*



*Mixed Media; March 16, 2022*

Pita M says:

School is what I told myself was my way out of my circumstances. Although I'm not down with school, I feel like school was my outlet to figuring out what I want to do. You know, I don't know exactly what I want to do, but I know that going to school will open that door, will open different doors of opportunity.

## Reflection on Themes

The powerful quotes underneath each portrait are the voices of Susana, Poliana, and Pita. I placed them underneath their portraits because reading just their words alone does not do them justice; they are more meaningful when I show them alongside their Artiture.

Meek Mill, a prominent hip-hop artist, released a song called *Levels* (Williams & La Tour, 2013), that created a popular term, *levels to this*, which is generally used in black, urban culture to symbolize the intricacies of a situation or concept. There are four interconnected stages that these formerly incarcerated Tongan students navigated through, each involving such levels. These are:

1. Adjusting to the education system
2. Mutual reinforcement of dehumanizing processes in the school-prison nexus
3. Systems failure in adjusting and responding to the students
4. At the crossroads of *all gas no breaks* and *end of the road* <sup>1</sup>

All four stages are complex, with nuances born from marginalized cultures where inequity is more prevalent and consequential. With that being said, the themes of the first three stages talk about the educational and justice system failures and inadequacies. The final stage is the culmination of these experiences that formerly incarcerated Tongan students have already navigated, a stage in which they are now forced into high stake pathway decisions that will shape their entire future.

The fact that there are *levels* to this means that there are levels of inequity in each of the stages. It also means that there are levels of awareness and action, as well as levels of opportunity for equity. Susana, Poliana, and Pita continuously remained resilient through all the ups and downs. They continued to confront these levels of systems and found ways to overcome them. Their stories are important for future formerly incarcerated Tongan students, as they can guide the students' knowledge production process into effective solutions.

## Concluding Thoughts

Drawing from the perspectives expressed in the talanoa's, and through my own experiences as a researcher, teacher, and probation officer, it is evident that formerly incarcerated Tongan students understand the difference between, and importance of, "schooling" compared to "education." Susana, Poliana, and Pita view education as a route to liberation, and recognize that there are support systems in place to help them during times of vulnerability and uncertainty. By promoting their reflection on the conflicts between their cultural identity and the school environment, and how they navigated these systems amidst the echoes of colonial education, we underscore the essential function of education as a mechanism for liberation.

Only when we are able to sit with these uncomfortable truths can we go back to have conversations about Pacific Islander students, specifically Tongans, who are being ignored and marginalized in systems that were built to educate and rehabilitate, yet continue to dehumanize them. By leveraging narratives such as these, my goal is to conduct further research that continues to illuminate and unearth the experiences of formerly incarcerated Tongan students within the educational sphere—their struggles, their triumphs, and their solutions. Through this endeavor, I aspire for everyone to start recognizing this distinct group of students as individuals, as I do, and collectively strive to establish higher education institutions that adequately cater to their specific needs.

## Acknowledgements

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I am profoundly grateful to Susana, Poliana, and Pita for entrusting me with the privilege of sharing their narratives. Taniela, your invaluable contribution brought their stories to life through art. To my fellow scholars and parents, your support and guidance were indispensable. To my wife, Janet, and our son, Steven Jr., your unwavering support and sacrifices were the foundation of this journey.

Ofa atu!

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## ENDNOTES

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1. Students will either continue down a path of constant failure, negligence, and incarceration (i.e., All Gas No Breaks) or find the path that will disrupt the cycle of the school–prison nexus and bring themselves happiness and success (i.e., End of the Road).