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Fulfilling Roles and Forging Paths: Pacific Women in *Indigenous Literatures from Micronesia*

Pacific voices are amplified and acknowledged in the Micronesian anthology, *Indigenous Literatures from Micronesia*, a historic piece of work that was edited by Pacific writers Evelyn Flores and Emelighter Kehling. I have selected four pieces of work from this anthology that exemplify our six course-themes in action and give insightful examples of powerful Pacific women. In "Merry Ancestors" by Teweiariki Tearo, "Nei Mwanganiibuka: The Legendary Fisherwoman" by Tereao Teingiaa Ratite, "To Swim With Eels" by Emelighter Kehling, and "I Have Seen Sirena Out at Sea" by Evelyn Flores we see a thematic manifestation of origins, resistance, family, remembering, identities and voyaging in each female figure that the texts highlight. In applying those themes to the women in these texts, we will see a parallel emerge. It's a parallel between the texts' actions and modern Pacific women writers of today, as both represent the validity of cultural preservation by way of reclaiming their origins and identities, their commitment to family and remembrance, and their right to resistance on their voyage through life. These four works in *Indigenous Literatures from Micronesia* not only highlight strong female figures and typical matriarchal qualities that provide insight into the cultural structures and values of the people of Micronesia but also give examples of Pacific women who are actively resisting an oppressive narrative and engaging in cultural preservation.

Each of the six themes identified have a certain level of interconnectedness and overlap,

but each also have distinct attributes and applications that can help us better examine the experiences of Pacific women in these texts. The primary goal that each theme stems off of is cultural preservation in order to facilitate the process of decolonization, and I want to highlight the definitions of each theme in relation to their connections to Pacific women and their roles. The theme of origins is foundational in understanding the Pacific, and specifically Pacific women, asking us to consider where someone/something comes from, the heritage of a culture or person, and the history of the culture as a whole that shaped their experiences in life. Identity as a theme means we look at what specific cultural (or counter-cultural) experiences or beliefs shaped and influenced a person, how and by what measure they value themselves and their heritage that has shaped their traditions, beliefs and familial roles/structure. The theme of family is a big one, considering so much of Pacific culture centers around the family, and particularly in a matrilineal fashion. Family as a theme means that we look at the commitment to family, the familial structure, the expected roles for family members (for us, specifically female roles like motherhood, etc.), generational customs or traditions, and familial heritage -- all of which serve as major players in the overall contribution to key Pacific values and structures and are huge components of cultural preservation. Remembering as a theme can be taken literally, as in remembering past events, experiences and lineages in order to learn from those things whether they were positive or negative in nature, as this remembrance and appreciation of what can be learned from the past helps to shape the future, and resilience, of a culture and more specifically, of Pacific women. Or, remembering can be taken as the process of re-membering that which has been previously dis-membered by acts of colonization, oppression or assimilation, which also helps sustain Pacific culture and facilitate the dismantling of colonization. Resistance is another key theme that involves building culture resilience, actively working to dismantle systems of

oppression by way of reviving and reclaiming culture and defying oppressive narratives -- all of which many Pacific women activists do on a regular basis. Voyaging can be taken literally or figuratively, but both entail the same basic attributes. Voyaging requires community for support and navigation, whether through life or open waters, and voyaging is a process that takes time, allows for growth and imparts generational learning along the journey -- something which many Pacific women have experienced in various ways, as we will see in the texts. From our previous reading of the excerpt from "The Pacific Muse" by Patty O'Brien: "Through this transition of feminine ideals from natural mothers to replicas of Victoria to sexually accommodating island girls, we have tracked the shifts in ideas about women and the body politic, as well as the imperial politics related to ruling women in the Pacific" (212). This quote shows us that Pacific women are flipping the script, not letting an oppressive narrative define them or determine their value, which relates to the core goals of cultural preservation that each of our six themes address.

In the poem "Merry Ancestors" by Teweiariki Tearo, who comes from the island of Kiribati (Kiri-bas), we read about a woman who is explaining to her natiu, her children, not to be afraid of the thunder and lightning because she explains, it is only their ancestors dancing and being merry in the heavens. The use of native I-Kiribati language scattered throughout the poem with no translation allows the reader to use context to understand the words, rather than requiring a translation and shows a rootedness in the authors origins. This text is an example of origins because the explanation for the storm is an origin story being passed on to a new generation, one that was probably passed down to the mother at a young age too; it explains the origins of thunder and lightning as well, which is culturally significant: "Hear thunder/They pound the bwaoki/....Feel rain/They are sweating/....Feel the gale/Grass skirts swing in the buki" (Tearo 24). The poem also exemplifies resistance because a large part of active resistance is cultural

preservation through passing on those origin stories, not letting traditions and folktales or cultural roots die. This active resistance is most explicitly seen when the mother tells her children: “The ancestors are partying/That is all they do” (Tearo 24). We see a clear commitment to family through nurturing (which is a typically matriarchal quality) & fulfilling roles; “And so the Natiu ran to me/For they were scared/On that dark night/I held their hands.../I whispered now/Low, slow words” (Tearo 23). She has a responsibility to her family to share about their cultural origins and their heritages which helps them to better understand their homeland and themselves. Speaking of identity, a big part of identities in Pacific cultures is tied to matriarchal familial structures and the fulfillment of roles, whether that is by way of motherhood, commitment to family, or as teachers of the next generation. In this poem, we see a mother, or motherly figure, who takes care of her children, nurtures them, protects them, and points them towards their heritage to teach them the importance of the origins of their culture which helps to anchor them to their cultural identity. The woman, in fulfilling those cultural roles, is choosing to reinforce her cultural values and was also accepting this as an important, fulfilling identity that she is empowered through and benefitting her culture through as well.

I saw the storm in Tearo’s poem as a metaphor for what the island had been through, whether that be in reference to oppression and occupation, war and bombings, or just general hardships: “In the blackness/Our tiny atoll was all shaken” (Tearo 23). I think the remembrance of what the island has been through is a great example of the theme of remembering. The process of remembering includes remembering the heritage and history of your culture and people, but that doesn’t always mean that what is being remembered is pleasant. Pacific islanders went through years of oppression, feeling displaced, dismembered from their culture, and devalued. We see the metaphorical remembrance of the harm that was done being combated by the positive

remembrance of a cultural origin story that highlights ancestral connections and beliefs, matriarchal qualities, and Pacific structure. Another theme that can be applied is the theme of voyaging. The mother in this poem is passing on a story, one that begins with the generations of old, her ancestors. She is acknowledging her ancestors, but the “voyage” occurred when the origin story of lightning and thunder originated. The voyage is the generational passing of this origin story, from mothers to their daughters and so on. Voyaging is an intergenerational tradition, one that is passed down. This is an example of a voyage that journeyed intergenerationally in the form of an origin story.

“Nei Mwanganiabuka: The Legendary Fisherwoman” was written by Tereao Teingiaa Ratite, an author from the island of Kiribati. The story of Nei Mwanganiabuka is told to us in story form and we learn that Nei was a great fisherwoman who overcame her oppressors, restoring harmony to the islands. The poem that follows is about a woman who wants to be like Nei, and she relates Nei’s fishing prowess and success to her own desires to benefit and revive her home island and people. There is a story portion and a poetic portion to this piece and both serve an aesthetic purpose, one being that the story portion illustrates the tradition of oral story-telling that is passed from generation to generation. We can apply the theme of origins to the story of Nei herself as the legend is a window into the origins of the culture of Kiribati, showing us some of their important values in regards to women as powerful beings, their role models, and cultural practices. This is a popular Kiribati origin story, known by many natives: “Through Nei Mwanganiabuka’s fishing expertise, her sons defeated their uncles. This brought them fame throughout the seas of Kiribati” (Teingiaa Ratite 25). Nei is also a poignant example of the theme of resistance, as she was once oppressed and rose above the obstacles of oppression. Her acts of reclamation and resistance are especially significant given that she is a strong female

figure who did not let anyone else's narrative define her. The woman in the poem uses Nei as a model for cultural resistance and reclaiming her culture's identity: "I've always wanted to be like Nei Mwangani buka/With all her wisdom," and she wants to "Cheer the elderly fishes to continue to be valuable/maintaining kinship" (Teingiaa Ratite 25). We see the theme of family in that this woman wants to help her family and her culture, which fulfills both her role as a woman in Pacific culture and as a female path-forging in cultural reclamation. Like the poem so aptly says: "Supporting my dearest kin/Fulfilling each role and responsibility--/Signs of a good fisherwoman" (Teingiaa Ratite 26). That quote shows us that her desires align with her cultural value of family first which shows responsibility and strength in Pacific cultures.

I see the theme of remembering in Teingiaa Ratite's poem through the way that the young woman seeks to bring restoration to her home and also remembers a legendary female figure in order to revive and emulate Nei's legacy. This young woman embodies this theme because she was actively seeking methods of restoration and cultural sustainability, which are acts of remembering that which has been dismembered. We can see that in the poem when we read, "With all her knowledge/I could promote better lives" and "I would help sustain the benefits of tomorrow" (Teingiaa Ratite 25). Identity is another theme that can be found within all aspects of these texts, but is particularly applicable to this text in regards to female identities that break oppressive narratives. Nei's confidence in her identity is what led to her legendary status. The fact that she valued herself and her homeland enough to rise above the displacement and control that was pushed on her, which in this case was to strand her at sea to hide her prowess as a fisherwoman (Teingiaa Ratite 26), shows that her identity was not determined by her oppressors, it was determined by what she valued. She had confidence in her various roles as a woman, a mother, a fisherwoman and provider and this shows readers several valued identities and roles

that are personally and culturally defined. Nei reclaimed her identity from those who tried to take it and used a different measurement of value than that of her oppressors. Lastly, we see the theme of voyaging in this poem. Part of voyaging is sharing, growing and making progress and we see those aspects clearly in the growth and progress of the young woman's knowledge and impact on her community. The poem's first lines of the first three stanzas read as follows "I've always wanted to be like Nei Mwanganiibuki" (Teingiaa Ratite 25), indicating that this young woman is still trying to emulate Nei's knowledge and strength, growing as a cultural role model herself. That is the journey, the voyage. It is a personal voyage that is one of growth, learning and sharing what she learns for the benefit of others. The destination, or end of the journey in becoming more like Nei, is signified by the first line of the fourth stanza which ends the repetition previously stated: "I am like Nei Mwanganiibuki" (Teingiaa Ratite 25). The author is signifying the end of that particular journey, saying that this woman has achieved what she set out to achieve. An important part of voyaging is to reach the destination, but to never forget what the journey brought you. I think this poem embodies the metaphysical concept of voyaging through a beautiful journey of growth and fulfillment as a Pacific woman who is committed to healing her home.

"To Swim With Eels" is a poem by Emelihter Kehling, who comes from the island of Pohnpei. In the poem, a woman is reflecting upon her past experiences with the Lasilap clan of Pohnpei, whose ancestral spirit is the kemisik (freshwater eel). The Lasilap people and the kemisik allow her to swim with them, despite her not being from that clan and the sacredness of the kemisik. This poem combines the use of repetition and the use of the author's native tongue, Pohnpeian. A couplet in this poem is repeated after each stanza, "I could have been eaten/then taken to the mouth of the river" (Kehling 28-29), giving it an almost rhythmic sound that shows

off her writing talents. The use of her native tongue adds authentic voice and cultural significance to this poem, especially because it illustrates her connection to her heritage. We see the theme of origins through the origin story of a specific Pohnpeian clan, the Lasilap, and the sacred roles that ancestors and heritage play in their culture, even today. A short example of the origin story from the text is included here: “Saladak is theirs eternally/descendants of Lien Madauleng,/their eel ancestress, who came to Pohnpei/on a school of marep/and gave birth to four eel daughters” (Kehling 28). Resistance is another theme that can be found in this text, perhaps as a more overarching theme of the work itself. Kehling sharing this story is a form of resistance in and of itself, as it is a nod to a spiritual, pre-colonial belief system that is still surviving and influencing identity and cultural preservation. It shows the prevalence of those beliefs still today in this excerpt: “I have heard of children in Kitti/who swim with sacred eels/in freshwater pools and streams/never to be bit” (Kehling 27). We see the theme of family in this text because there is an emphasis on familial structures, especially in highlighting the roles that kemisik and Lasilap mothers play in their culture and families. The females in those roles were depicted as vital & strong -- both physically for reproduction and spiritually as powerful sacred entities: “I could have been eaten/by kemisik girls and their mothers/long, slick bodies full,/manaman,/swimming upstream to give birth to male chiefs” (Kehling 28).

In Kehling’s poem, I also see remembering as a theme as well, particularly in the woman’s remembrance of her heritage and mixed background. She tells readers where she came from in comparison to the people she grew up with, which shows reflection on past struggles, ancestral identity, and the complexity of heritage: “all my friends are kemisik/while I am only part kitik [ancestral rat]/The other part of me is empty/with no animals to call family/whiteness mistaken/for nothingness” (Kehling 27). It's important for a woman to understand her identity in

Pacific cultures, as Pacific women have long been told by someone else what their identity is. The woman in this poem at first has a hard time understanding her identity and where she belongs because of the aspect of her mixed heritage and also growing up in a clan that she is not blood-related to. As the poem progresses, she seems to quantify her identity, less by blood and more by where she feels accepted, giving her a greater appreciation for her indigenous heritage: "I am not one of them/Sounpasedo, of chiefly lineage and kemisik blood, yet/we swam together and ate together like sisters" (Kehling 28). The theme of voyaging is about journeying, and that journey takes strength and wisdom. In this poem, we see the theme of voyaging in the journey that the kemisik mothers have to make upstream in order to give birth (Kehling 28). By the very nature of swimming upstream, we know that this voyage is not for the faint of heart, and we also know that this voyage has a very important end goal: the mothers will birth their children at the end. This voyage shows the strength and vitalness of mothers in Pacific cultures and also highlights the importance of voyaging to the continuation of Pacific cultures.

"I Have Seen Sirena Out at Sea" was written by Evelyn Flores who is from the island of Guahan. This is a poem that parallels the Chamorro folktale and proverb of Sirena, the Guahan mermaid. In the poem, a young girl sees Sirena out at sea, hears the sea calling to her, and is torn between staying with her mother or going into the sea. She ultimately chooses to stay on land, potentially because she had been warned of the consequences by the legend of Sirena. It's important to note that Flores wrote this poem in English and then wrote it in Chamorro, placing the two translations side by side as a way to acknowledge her culture and keep her native tongue alive -- this was an intentional aesthetic decision that influenced the poem's effectiveness and showcased Flores' pride in her origins and heritage. The theme of origins is really prevalent in this poem. The origin story of Sirena influenced the little girl in this story, not only by affecting

her identity but also by teaching her some of her culture's most important values. That influence shows the power of proverbs/myths in Pacific cultures, how they teach generations about values and the beginnings of their cultures. The young girl recognizes the call as Sirena from the origin story of Sirena that she grew up hearing: "I have seen Sirena out at sea call to/me,/slender brown arm raised,/half in farewell, half in beckoning" (Flores 29). We can also clearly see resistance as a theme in this text. The fact that the poem was written in her native tongue of Chamorro speaks volumes about how resistance can take on different forms. This poem exemplifies the preservation of the mother tongue and active resistance, which is a way to keep her indigenous language alive and relevant in the postcolonial era. It is activism facilitated by a strong Pacific woman writer, which is the theme of resistance in action. To show an example of native Chamorro, here are a few lines from the poem as they were written in the poem: "'Maila,' ilekna./ 'Dingu i ha'iguas para i prensa;/Dingu i uriyan i eskuela./Siempre mankonsisgi ha mo'na sin/hagu'" (Flores 29). There is a quote from our previous reading of "The Mother's Tongue" by Sharleen Santos-Bamba and Anne Perez Hattori that supports our understanding of language activism being facilitated as resistance, and more specifically, how it intertwines with the roles and empowerment of Pacific women: "These language activists reflect the cultural continuity of women as power-brokers within the Chamorro tradition, drawing upon their roles as mothers, caretakers, and family decision-makers" (288). Along with resistance, we also see the prevalence of the theme of family in this poem. To see the theme of family in this poem we look to the girl who considered her commitment to family before herself in order to fulfill her role as a Chamorro daughter and take on her familial responsibilities willingly. The story of Sirena itself is directed at the family, both children and parents alike, serving as a cautionary tale and highlighting key Chamorro values. We see a heavy influence from her family, which shows us

the important role that family plays in Pacific culture, and the influence of matriarchal figures on decisions that need to be made: “My mother [Nana] pleading,/my godmother whispering,/ ‘The land, the land, the land!’” (Flores 29-30).

To apply the theme of remembering to Flores’ poem, we again look at the fact that this poem is written as a close parallel to the original legend of Sirena. Because of that parallel, it revives and re-members the story of Sirena, which may have fallen off the radar of many native Guahan residents and introduces those readers who have not heard of this legend. This acts as a physical re-membering of an important cultural folktale that tells so much about Guahan’s culture, values, and structure. I see the theme of identity in this poem through the little girl that comes to recognize certain aspects of her identity through Sirena’s beckoning. The girl realizes that she has a connection to her environment, particularly a connection to the sea, which is important because so much of Pacific culture is defined by their proximity to the ocean and connection to their environment. The idea of environmental connection being a part of Pacific identity is supported by a quote from “From a Native Daughter” by Haunani Kay Trask: “And when they wrote that we were superstitious, believing in the mana of nature and people, they meant that the West has long since lost a deep spiritual and cultural relationship to the earth” (125). But, with that desire, she also realizes her commitment to her family and the important role that she plays in that structure, thus teaching her two new aspects of who she is and where those aspects of identity come from: “And I have made as if to go/turned half willingly toward the/shore/half toward the door/ of my mother’s house” (Flores 29). The theme of voyaging may at first seem elusive in this poem, but I saw aspects of voyaging in the mind of the young girl. Navigation is a huge part of the literal act of voyaging, but when we apply the concept of navigation to a metaphorical voyage of the spirit, I think it fits with the girl’s navigation through

desires and decisions. The girl is trying to navigate her life with the help of her family, discovering which “star” to follow and which way to turn her metaphysical sails when she is faced with a tough navigation decision: which direction do I go? She chooses to follow the direction that leads her home over the direction that leads to the unknown, in part because of the help of her mother and godmother’s advice and wisdom -- navigating on a voyage is not a task that should be done alone, it should be shared.

The application of these six themes highlight Pacific women as the path-forgers that they are and gives insight into the integral roles that women play in Pacific cultures. In these texts, both in their content and through the authors of them, we saw metaphorical and concrete examples of how women facilitate cultural preservation and resistance through the fulfillment of their roles as mothers, caretakers, leaders and activists. That notion helps us more clearly see the parallels between the women in the texts analyzed and Pacific women writers of today, as both entities stand as examples of culture representation, preservation and resistance through fulfilling the many roles that Pacific women inhabit. Through this analysis and application of our course themes, I learned about the distinction between roles that confine and roles that promote, especially in regards to the roles of Pacific women in their cultures. There are certainly roles that confine, and seek to define, like the narratives and perceptions that oppressors have imposed on Pacific women for centuries. But in Pacific cultures, the roles that exist for women in their cultural structures can generally serve as promoters of identity and prosperity, and don’t seek to hold them back. Rather, in correlation with the themes we examined today, Pacific women can be empowered through their important roles as women, mothers, educators, leaders, and activists.

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