

6-2023

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### Recommended Citation

Havea, Jione "Sacred Vernacular, Nativizing Revelations," *Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology*. Vol. 25 : No. 1 , Article 8. (2023) :67-79

Available at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/jhlt/vol25/iss1/8>

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## Sacred Vernacular, Nativizing Revelations

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*Ko e koloa 'a e Tongá, ko e fakamālō*

(Tongan proverb: “multi-plying thanks, is the fortune of Tongans”)

*Mālō faufaua* (multi-pliced appreciations and acknowledgments) to Jean-Pierre Ruiz for the gifts of, and in, *Revelation in the Vernacular* (Orbis, 2021). And special *mālō* (in the Tongan sense of gratitude, rather than the Spanish sense of bad) to Ruiz for not writing another book on the biblical book of Revelation, but on *real* revelations in caves on Mona Island, from the natives of Amazonia, and in debates and written texts under the shadows of western empires and their powerful tools—pens and keyboards. There are of course good and bad revelations (but who decides?), in scriptures as well as in papal bulls, in the enclaves of Rome, in the councils of churches worldwide, in the banks of rivers, and in homes and streets everywhere. *Mālō*, Jean-Pierre Ruiz, for gifting readers with examples of good and bad revelations, as well as some ugly and nasty ones.

Ruiz uses the term “retrieval” to describe his work, and in my head i hear many historians and postcolonial critics cheering—for he has “raided the archives” and brought some of the “hidden transcripts” to our attention. I too cheer for Jean-Pierre, and i invite and encourage Catholic and Latinx scholars, as well as scholars and students of colonization and coloniality, everywhere, to engage with this very engaging work.

I am a native pastor from Tonga (in Pasifika), and i will engage with Jean-Pierre’s work in our native ways. Informally. reStoryingly. Poetically. Inter- and trans-sectioning stuff

here and there. Ruiz and his colleagues do theology *latinamente*; i do my stuff in native- and island-styles.

On that note, i confess that this engagement testifies to my commitment to pick at some academic bones. I will pick on three particular bones in this native engagement: translation, vernacular, and native scriptures. And my picking at those bones is inspired by lines and thoughts that come through strongly in Ruiz's text. In other words, this native engagement will make more sense for readers who have read Ruiz's text. *Mālō* (in both Tongan and Spanish senses).

### **Translation**

In the beginning was the word, asserts John 1:1  
and that word gave birth to many more words  
and as those words crossed borders and waters

from cultures to cultures

for every culture is already polycultural

from cities to slums and ghettos

those words require translations

from tongue to ear

from ear to hands and feet

to tongue again, and again

and translators require trust

from readers

who are stuck in the world of written words

Translation traps us in

in the world of written words

and translators give us the impression

that only written words matter

Those written words crossed into Mona Island and the Americas  
they crossed upon the lips and faces of westerners  
they entered caves and invaded Indigenous communities  
they came in books and tongues that were nonsense to the locals  
whose blood spilled because translators failed them

The intersection of translation, incarnation, and revelation in Ruiz's book teaches me that the word at the beginning, the original text, is not as important as the words that come at the end, the revealed words, the revelation, the manifestation. *Translators* are obsessed with the word at the beginning, but *translations* unavoidably produce more words. Translations work because they produce more words, more words, excess of words.

The critics of Fray Luis and the supporters of those European idiots who threw the Amazonian carvings into the river, are examples of people who are stuck in the word at the beginning. They need to be taught, so that they may learn, that it is normal for translations to produce more words, and that excess of words is expected.

Words of revelation cross into villages, rivers, and forests across the seas  
they come in books, and require that vernacular languages receive them

they require

vernacular languages

to give up their home and homing

for them

bibles consequently appeared in the vernacular languages  
and the vernacular languages, which used to be oral  
were formalized into scripts and grammars

books appeared and orality was wounded  
those books and bibles were brought to convert our people  
and they also converted our tongues  
    our minds  
    our hearts  
put sharply, translations failed our vernacular tongues  
but not all failed, and not all words were nonsense  
some of those words made revelations possible  
and so, the word that was at the beginning,  
    the word that was with God,  
    the word that was God, according to John 1:1  
that word, is born again in translations  
    John's word was at the beginning  
    but translation is at the end  
translation is required by revelation  
    and revelation is impossible without the vernacular

### **Vernacular**

In the beginning was the word, asserts John 1:1  
In the beginning was the Sense, asserts Goethe  
In the beginning was the Power, Goethe adds  
In the beginning was the Deed, Goethe concludes  
  
With due respect and apologies  
i can't say anything about "the beginning"  
"the beginning" is not my obsession

but i can say something about “before” the word  
before the Sense, before the Power, before the Deed  
the vernacular was  
before the author of John and Goethe with their assertions  
the vernacular was  
before incarnation, the vernacular was  
before revelation, the vernacular was  
before the seeds of the word, the vernacular was  
“before” is such a confluencing word, for it functions in both time and space  
before Mona Island, the Americas, Tiber, and the Amazon,  
before Popes and Councils ...  
before all of them, in time and space  
the vernacular was  
before us, here and now, where you are  
the vernacular was  
our challenge therefore, is to embrace the vernacular in its own terms  
to embrace the vernacular, for the sake of the vernacular  
in other words, to put ourselves  
before the vernacular  
and to understand that the vernacular is more than a language system  
for a language gives voice to (poly)cultures  
to memories, to (be)longings, and to much more  
I currently live with my family, and a few friends (yes, i have friends), in the cluster  
of islands now known as Australia, home to the world’s oldest civilizationS–i stress the  
plural, because there are many Indigenous Australian countries, nations, cultures, ways,

bodies, and languages. Indigenous Australians, as a people of diverse wisdoms and overlapping heritages, have been around for over 60,000 years. Some say that they have only been around for 40,000 years. And that too is a big number, in the context of human evolutions.

Recently, we church and academic folk have come to accept that divine energies—or ‘elohim, in biblical terms—were in the land of the Indigenous Australians before the Christian invasions. In fact, divine energies were present in the land of the Indigenous Australians before Christianity was conceived.

Before the Christian God was revealed in Jesus Christ,

divine Indigenous energies were present among Indigenous Australians  
in the vernacular

Before the Christian God was revealed in John’s logos,

divine Indigenous energies were present in the vernacular  
and in the imaginations and wisdoms of Indigenous Australians

The problem, however, is that we church and academic folk in the cluster of islands now known as Australia think of the divine Indigenous energies with our Christian God lenses. Our Christian senses (*à la* Goethe) of God personalize and individualize the divine Indigenous energies of Indigenous Australians. We do the same with the divine Indigenous energies of other native peoples. I saw this also in the three graffiti left in Cave 18, discussed by Ruiz, and in the council documents in which the sons of Christian soldiers responded to Indigenous wisdom—through their Christian God values. They did not pay proper respect to the Indigenous divine energies in the Amazon and the Americas, prior to when the Christian soldiers came barging in.

Spivak once asked if the subaltern can speak. The answer is simple: YES, they can speak. The problem is that we want them to speak in our language, instead of us learning their language. In other words, we need to put ourselves before their vernacular.

In this line of thinking, the vernacular is not the seed of the word  
rather, the word is the seed of the vernacular  
if we have the humility to embrace the vernacular, for its own sake  
we will realize that even the word that was at the beginning  
according to John 1:1  
is a seed of the vernacular

### **Native Scriptures**

I would have loved to see some pictures in *Revelation in the Vernacular*  
this is not only because visual images are spokes in the wheels of orality  
but because Ruiz was putting words to what i call native scriptures  
and in the process he draws readers to the traps of the world of written words

Thanks to the google gods,  
i found images that i want to share with readers  
in this modern cave (*qua* an article for a journal)  
i invite engagement around two images from Mona Island<sup>1</sup>  
and one from the Amazon

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<sup>1</sup> See Sara Kaiser, “Cave Inscriptions Tell the Story of Mona Island’s Past,” *Island Conservation* (21 Sept 2016; <https://www.islandconservation.org/cave-inscriptions-tell-story-mona-islands-past/>); Dan Robitzski, “In Photos: Cave Art from Mona Island,” *Live Science* (07 Nov 2017; <https://www.livescience.com/60850-photos-mona-island-cave-art.html>).



*reStorying*



Image credit: *Journal of Archaeological Science*

This is a sacred text, a native scripture, a sacred text  
in this sacred text, in my native Pasifika eyes, we have a woman  
who stands to tell something (stories, instructions) to an audience  
who could be children ... tomorrow people ... on her right  
to her left side, is maybe an animal  
or a male elder, who sits to give her company  
or maybe that figure represents the ancestors  
*before* whom she stands  
in our side of the big sea, no one stands alone  
one stands in the company of *whanau* (pronounced “fānau”), relations  
*before* whom she stands

this woman stands, *before* others

as well as *before* the sun,

which peeks out behind her

as in the image on the cover of Ruiz's book

—an original painting by Darién Farel Irizarry titled “Sol Revelado”—

in which the sun figures prominently

this cave art is a native scripture

that invites me to raid the archive in the cave

to get a sense of what stories she gifted her audience

more work is needed on this native scripture

Ruiz credits Irizarry's “Sol Revelado” for

“so magnificently express[ing] what the words of this book struggle mightily to  
communicate” (p. xiv)

Sol translates as sun, a star, and divine energy

and Revelado is the gist of Ruiz's book—revelation

and so, in my native mind

*before* the word reached the beginning

it needed Sol to enable its revealing

*Ceremonies*



Image credit: *Journal of Archaeological Science*

This second sacred text makes me think of rituals  
what Indigenous Australians call ceremonies  
and i wonder, were they dancing in celebration of success?  
dancing in preparation for tasks at hand?  
dancing as they engaged in the tasks at hand?  
dancing in the day or in the night?  
dancing in shared grief and trauma?  
dancing to remember and to anticipate?  
natives dance for many reasons  
and the reason behind this sacred text  
is most likely unveiled in the images around it

or were they playing a game  
or working in the field, or in the river  
options are many, which is a characteristic of native scriptures  
one word births many words,  
one text births many senses,  
one artwork has many potentials for Revelado

*Mother with child*



Image credit: *Catholic News Agency*

This third sacred text is of one of the carvings from the Amazon  
which were taken from the Church at Transpontina  
that Pope Francis mistook as the pachamama statues

as Ruiz explained in the book<sup>2</sup>

When i found this image on the internet, i immediately saw  
that this is not just a statue  
but a statue of a woman  
an Indigenous woman  
a native woman  
a pregnant woman  
a woman in whose womb is  
a logos waiting  
to be birthed, into many words  
a logos waiting  
to come into the world of revelation  
a logos looking  
for the rays of Revelado

### **Mālō**

From the reStorying woman to the dancing natives to the pregnant woman  
i drew attention to sacred texts  
but texts are imposed upon surfaces, upon contexts  
and cave arts are drawn upon rocks that curve and crack  
and that the landscape is also a text  
a womb that awaits birthing

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<sup>2</sup> See also Hannah Brockhaus, “Amazon synod's controversial carved figures thrown into Tiber River,” *Catholic News Agency*, October 21, 2019, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/42590/amazon-synods-controversial-carved-figures-thrown-into-tiber-river>.

a story that awaits telling

I offer this excess of words with much appreciation  
for native scriptures can make our imprisonment in the world of written words  
more bearable with Senses, Powers, and Deeds

thank you, Jean-Pierre

for the revelations that you have sparked in my native mind

May your readers give space for revelations

to access their lips and hearts

as well

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(Aotearoa New Zealand) and with the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture  
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