

# TO BE YOUNG, MORMON, AND TONGAN

Moana Uluave-Hafoka

In his article “Toward a Tribal Critical Race Theory in Education,” Professor Bryan Brayboy posits that our stories are our theories.<sup>1</sup> I feel most comfortable in story. As both a Mormon and a Tongan, I have used stories to educate and edify.

I learned how to read (in English and Tongan) through family scripture study. I remember blowing the *palangi* first grade teacher away when I used “abomination” and “iniquity” to describe my day. Stories have been the way I’ve understood the world and this experience of life—stories of Jesus, of Nephites, of Lamanites, of Tonga, of migration, of assimilation, of Salome.

Let me provide some context for the stories I’m about to tell.

Tonga boasts the highest percentage of Mormons of any nation, nearly 60 percent.<sup>2</sup>

There are approximately 57,000 Tongans in the US, and Utah is home to one in four Tongans.

There are approximately only 200,000 Tongans worldwide, 100,000 in Tonga and 100,000 in the diaspora.

---

1. Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, “Toward a Tribal Critical Race Theory in Education,” *The Urban Review* 37, no. 5 (December 2005): 425–46.

2. Sixty percent of the island self-identify as Mormon. See <https://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/country/tonga/>.

So let us begin here. With these statistics, it may be safe to say that the majority of Tongans in America either are, have been, or are related to Mormons.

The LDS faith was a great impetus for many Tongan families to immigrate to the States, but so was the promise of education and economic stability.

The first wave of Tongans who came in the '50s were largely Mormon pioneers, and those who followed were tied to those who came first. My paternal grandparents arrived in Hawaii in the late '60s, my mother came in the late '70s, and after my parents married they arrived in Utah in the late '80s just in time for me to be born in the Salt Lake Valley.

To be honest, I don't know much about my ancestry before Mormonism. Those stories have been largely silenced or erased. The beginning was always conversion: baptism—rebirth. The rest of history are names to be recorded in genealogy books to be taken to the temple and saved there.

As I trace the lines of my Mormon lineage, it is a line of women that have brought me to this very place.

My paternal grandmother Salome joined the Church after her faith in Mormon missionaries' healing power saved her from polio. Against the wishes of her husband, in-laws, and the entire village, she was baptized. My maternal grandmother Tava was baptized as a child and, although her parents did not become members, she and her brother would walk to Primary alone each Sunday. Losaline, my mother, left home, not knowing if she'd ever return, to live in a new country and learn a new language while attending BYU.

These stories hold both power and pain for me. What was required of these women to convert?

Before Grandma Salome's death, when her memory was no longer linear, she'd often weep and tell me how shortly after joining the Church, three of her young children passed away. The village ridiculed her and said it was the curse of the Mormons. Even though these events had

transpired nearly sixty years prior, she spoke of it as if her children had just died.

My mother has often described the time my grandfather took her to the airport with a plane ticket that took years of saving to pay for. When it was time to leave, my grandfather embraced her and said, “you may never return to home, find your own life and know that we gave you all that we could. If we do not meet in this life, we will in the next.”

Grandma Tava never talks much about details of her childhood. Her silence may point to some trauma and sadness. She cries often about the humility her parents had in order to let her be baptized at nine.

Too often these stories aren’t even told. And even when they are told, they are sanitized for mainstream Mormon consumption under the patriarchal white gaze, which always emphasizes the completeness of our conversions and extermination of our cultural heritage. These are the programmed Sunday School responses and takeaways:

They had so much faith.

They feared God more than man.

Families can be together forever.

All the above may be true, but what also happened? What was required for my foremothers?

They had to:

Forget their familial ties

Forsake their ancestral lands and eventually, their ancestral tongue.

There are consequences for forgetting and forsaking. Even the Book of Mormon teaches us this. It teaches us that clinging to preferred and convenient narratives is an abomination and can thus lead to our complete and utter destruction.

Today, as a young Tongan, Mormon, woman, I am seeing the prophecies unfold.

Let me provide some context for the stories I am about to tell.<sup>3</sup>

Sixty-six percent of Tongans are low income or live in poverty in the United States (47 percent are low income, 19 percent live in poverty).

Only 13 percent of Tongans graduate with a bachelor's degree in the US.

Tongans are plagued by negative stereotypes that characterize them as aggressive, gang bangers, stupid athletes, and as prone to getting knocked up at young ages.

So let us begin again here with these statistics.

I was born and raised on the west side of Salt Lake City. My parents carried the dream of my grandparents in their search for economic stability and educational opportunity. For my family, most of these dreams have had to be deferred, as we have encountered a system that has racialized us into flat, negative stereotypes. Contrary to common Mormon belief, the church does not function outside of the confines of sociological trends but within them, often amplifying them from the pulpit.

As a child, I learned to be proper, obedient, and submissive to the paintings of the white Jesus that hung in our home. One day we'd receive our paradisiacal glory as a fair and beautiful people. In our church classrooms, I was taught to dismiss our *fahu* system that honored and respected women's voices and, instead, adhere to the strict patriarchy that is the celestial order.

As I watched many of my fellow Tongan family members and friends' inability to conform, I was asked to make the same sacrifice as my foremothers had once done:

Forget my familial ties.

Forsake my ancestral lands and my ancestral tongue.

And I did so. Because all the promises of heaven were tied to this. But there are consequences for forgetting and forsaking.

---

3. See the 2010 US Census (<https://www.census.gov/2010census/>).

I wonder if my grandmothers would have joined so fervently, so resolutely, had they known the complicated journey ahead. Had they fully understood the weight of their sacrifice. A sacrifice that would be tested by racial, socioeconomic, and gender discrimination from the very institution that said would save them.

Maybe they knew that we would adapt and survive. But the survival of us, Tongans, with our few numbers and many believers has been a difficult task.

It becomes increasingly more difficult to believe as my foremothers did and still do.

Before mainstream Mormonism started noticing young white millennials were no longer in the pews, we were already playing in the streets. We were brought here but not wanted here. Our numbers reflected in the semi-annual reporting, our quarters and dimes counted towards the building of Zion, our names recorded in the book of Heaven, but our presence void. Sione had already been absent from the sacrament lines for *kava* sessions; Mele had already skipped Young Women's for friends of other faiths.

We, as the young, Mormon, and Tongan generation, have not been here for some time. But that has not meant that we no longer believed the faith tradition that our foremothers sacrificed so much for.

We have always been comfortable with duality, multiplicity.

To be young, Mormon, and Tongan can mean daily Book of Mormon reading in a concrete cell; tribal tattoos under white shirt and tie.

To be young, Mormon, and Tongan can mean belief in Maui and Jesus; belief in the temples' promises but never knowing if you'd receive them.

To be young, Mormon, and Tongan means we did not lose our faith in anti-literature while studying at BYU-Provo. Those institutions did not even admit us unless our bodies could move from yard line to goal.

To be young, Mormon, and Tongan means our faith has been separate and complicated.

For decades now, we have been praying West of the Temple in the shadows; relying on the one true God to liberate us from our poverty, and sins.

To be young, Mormon, and Tongan means we live on the margins of Mormondom.



I end with this testimony that  
I found God in the land of the long white cloud and the high place  
in the mountains;

Hip hop and reggae moves me to reverence

To appreciate the divine.

Jesus is found in all places;

In *kava* circles,

In my aunt's' loud laughter,

In Amanaki's prison cell,

In my daughter's small, chubby hands,

Jesus is her.

To be young, Mormon, and Tongan means to live on the margins of Mormondom;

Maybe it is because we still believe in the gods of our foremothers;  
or maybe it's because we have forsaken them.