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**ENDANGERED DANGER:
CHRISTIANITY, AFFECT, AND HARMLESS SNAKES IN SAMOA**

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SIT SAMOA, SPRING 2019**

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“I’m in a good mood, so let us as scholars do what we are good at, and that is making mountains out of mole-hills, constructing realities out of illusions, endowing triviality with significance, and talking about traditional value systems in the year 2000 not knowing exactly what we mean by the term 'traditions' in the context of the contemporary South Pacific, let alone their potential for survival into the twenty first century” Epeli Hau’ofa, *The Future of Our Past* (1985, pp. 152-3).

ABSTRACT

The *Candoia bibroni* (Pacific Boa), is a non-venomous Samoan snake that recently become an endangered species, possibly due to human killing on sight. This interdisciplinary research investigates how Pacific Boa came to be perceived as dangerous animals that need to be killed. Following snake tracks through the history of Samoa and into the present, this research suggests that the relationship between Samoans and the Pacific Boa questions the simple binaries of real/imagined, material/semiotic, subjective/objective, and material/immaterial. Particularly with the introduction of Christianity by missionaries in the early-1800s, the Pacific Boa snake came to inhabit the liminal space between these apparent dichotomies.

Key words: Pacific Boa, snakes, phenomenology, affect, posthumanism, Christianity

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PRELUDE

In Sāmoa, there are two kinds of snakes. One of them is a very physical animal that quietly roams through bushes and trees in the Oceanic rainforest. It is known most commonly as *gata* in Sāmoa, but it is sometimes referred to as the Pacific Boa. In Western science, it goes by *candoia bibroni*. The small animal is a nonvenomous arboreal snake that preys on small vertebrate (Harlow & Shine, 1992). Similar to all other snakes, it is exothermic, meaning it is coldblooded and can endure long periods of time in hiding, patiently waiting for its next infrequent prey (Gillespie & Clague, 2009: 843). Because of its camouflage, metabolism, and movement patterns, the Pacific Boa is often a rare sight to humans in the region. In order to find it, one ought to look into the bushes and climax lowland forests of the archipelago. Even though there is no quantitative data published on the population distribution of the animal, many Sāmoans will confidently say that they are more visible in the island of Savai'i, particularly in the West-most area of the island. Although the Pacific Boa also exists in the island of 'Upolu, the snakes are afraid of humans and tend to avoid contact in this more densely populated region. The fear is mutual, and one of the reasons for the lower population of Pacific Boa snakes in 'Upolu is the fact that Sāmoans tend to kill them on sight.

Given that snakes cannot fly or swim long distances, the very existence of the Pacific Boa in small Pacific archipelagoes such as Sāmoa is rather surprising (Gillespie & Clague, 2009, p. 843). Volcanic islands and atoll islands were never geologically connected to larger continents by land, which is one of the reason why terrestrial vertebrates like snakes are rather rare in the region as a whole (ibid). The *candoia* (as in *candoia bibroni*) genus has a long evolutionary history and a poor fossil record, making it hard to track the mobilities of the species via DNA testing (Austin,

2000). The origin of the species in Sāmoa is still up to debate. It is possible that the Pacific Boa arrived, still in egg form, through the chaotic swirls of the Pacific Ocean currents, rafting from island to island until finding a new suitable environment (Gill, 1993). However, it is perhaps more likely that the species was introduced to these islands via the well documented maritime expeditions of Pacific Islanders, known to be excellent navigators and part of an extensive regional network of socioeconomic practices (Gill, 1993, see also Macpherson & Macpherson 2009).

Oral histories and historical documents about the Pacific Boa suggest that the snake has had a long history in the Sāmoan archipelago (Auckland Star 1898; Krupa, 2002; Williams, 1842). These sources, along with my ethnographic research, suggest that the snake was once eaten, danced with, and represented in indigenous art forms. Unfortunately, today, the snake is despised by Sāmoans. Even though many Sāmoans have never seen snakes in person, occasionally snakes are found in the bushes and then subsequently killed. As a consequence of overkilling, habitat loss, and global climate change, the Pacific Boa has been slowly yet surely disappearing from Sāmoan ecosystem and daily life, effectively becoming an endangered species (Allison, Hamilton, & Tallowin, 2012). The Pacific Boa is slowly and peacefully crawling its way out of the rainforest bushes and towards true invisibility – a complicated politics this article will dive into.

The second kind of snake that inhabited the islands was the Sāmoan crowing snake, a much more dangerous animal. It is sometimes referred to as *gata ula*, meaning “red snake” in literal translation.¹ It was first documented by Llewella Pierce Churchill in a journal of natural history (1898). Similarly to the Pacific Boa, this species was also known to be arboreal (ibid). It was

¹ Another possible translation for *le gata ula* is “snake necklace,” since the word *ula* can also have that meaning in context. I stuck with “red snake” because *gata ula* as a name has a historic relationship to the village of Asau in Savai’i and one of my informants from Asau had a preference for “red snake” as a translation (Mere & Mali, 2019, personal interview).

only found in ‘Upolu and, once upon a time, it was capable of frightening both Sāmoans and *palagi* (white person) alike through its strident crowing vocalization, similar to that of a cock but much louder (ibid). The snake was also known to be dangerous. Gladly, this kind of snake was rarer than the Pacific Boa – it was feared yet not present. Differently from the first species, the Sāmoan crowing snake has no scientific name; it was never put under the scrutiny of science due to the fact that this snake was naturally a disembodied, *an ecologically diffused species*. In other words – although some Sāmoans eyewitnesses might have disagreed with me – the Sāmoan crowing snake seemed to have no immediate physical body, existing as somewhat of a real legend. Because Western natural sciences are often grounded on immediate materiality as ontological prerequisite, they overlooked the species. It is, after all, impossible to put chip implants or make a body count on animals that only exists in the ambiguous space between the real and the mythological. As a consequence, the relationship between Sāmoans and the Sāmoan crowing snake went unstudied, and so did the ecological consequences of this interspecific encounter, sunken into the past by sheer time.

It is rather unfortunate that documents at the time could not recognize the complicated existence of the Sāmoan crowing snake. Llewella P. C., for instance, wrote about the animal only to prove its inexistence (1898). Western scientific paradigms ridiculed the believers of the crowing snake, despite the fact that the snake might have had measurable impacts in Sāmoan ecology. Even though the only evidences of *gata ula* are these dismissive documents, they point at a relatively reliable history: in the late 1800s, people in ‘Upolu were terrified of crowing snakes. Moreover, although the animal itself may not be immediately material, its presence had material consequences. Imagine that, in ‘Upolu, Sāmoans might have burned trees hosting snakes of crowing potentiality. They might have killed or even hunted down Pacific Boa snakes in ‘Upolu,

mistaking one species for another, and ultimately letting fear overflow and flood beyond the human world and into the liminal human-nonhuman world. They might have told the story to their children, who might have grown up wary of any snakes, regardless of kind, leading to an unconscious yet learned fear that maybe lingers to this day.

These plausible consequences are just that – *plausible*. There is no evidence lingering to this day. However, what I would like to suggest, is that the lack of evidence is actually symptomatic of the selective attention of the institution of Western research. The Sāmoan crowing snake, a mythological animal, was never of interest to a brand of science interested in physical bodies that can be used and domesticated. Consequently, the evidences of the ecological and cultural impacts of the mythological *gata ula* were also overlooked, or ignored, if you will. In essence, the lack of material documentation on the animal is easily explained and to be expected given the history of science. European researchers operating under a modern epistemology lacked the framework to adequately describe and explain how a mythological snake could be real, or at least *realized* through human affect and ecological effect.

Moreover, we must also acknowledge how European modernity impacted the Sāmoan crowing snake. It wasn't merely ignored. The modern aversion to superstition, which slowly infiltrated indigenous ontologies worldwide, killed the *being* of this endemic Sāmoan snake, killing its status as a real thing that had real consequences and real power. Even though the mythological crowing snake had a habitat, habits, and the capacity to evolve, it was illegible under a framework interested in a single question: is the snake real? This question decimated the Sāmoan crowing snake and overlooked its ecological presence despite its material absence. Indigenous stories about the snake have almost vanished. During my fieldwork, the story has been recounted once.

Today, the Sāmoan crowing snake is nearly extinct in its natural habitat. At some point between the 1800s and today, it nearly disappeared from the collective imaginary (and thus, also from the Sāmoan rainforest). It is almost as if the crowing Sāmoan snake had never been in Sāmoa in the first place; its only remains are a couple of missionary and travel accounts that fossilized the material-semiotic animal as a myth rather than as an *actant*. For most of my fieldwork, I thought that *le gata ula* had truly went absent; however, towards the very last week of my fieldwork I met one older Sāmoan who had heard of the dangerous crowing snake (Meyer, personal interview, 2019). To him, the snake was most likely a myth (ibid). However, as vague and vivid as the story goes, the animal might end up being real.

For the most part, it is fair to say that, today, in Sāmoa, there are is only one kind of snake.

Some of the questions that underline this prelude are of crucial importance to this research. How can we understand and research something immaterial, such as the crowing snake, through its material impacts? And how can we, twisting this question upon its head, investigate the immaterial influences that emerge from material beings, such as the Pacific Boa snake? What kind of agency can be granted to the material world when it comes to understanding the human experience? Can the same agency be expanded from the nonhuman world to beings that are in the liminal space between the human and the nonhuman, such as mythological and mythologized animals? How is the materially absent productive of a cultural presence? And how can we fully realize the interdependence (or an *intra*-dependence) of these subjective and objective worlds? To

dive into the entanglements of these nearly paradoxical questions, I invite my readers to crawl through the history of the Pacific Boa in Sāmoa, which is an endangered species that has a long yet unstudied history. The results of this research project, which will be distributed throughout this paper, is the realization of a complex global networks of material and immaterial agents that, together, emerge to shape local affect and ecology.

INTRODUCTION

To reiterate, the Pacific Boa is a small nonvenomous snake that has lived in the Sāmoan archipelago likely since pre-colonial times (Gill, 1993). Some Sāmoans believe that the snake was introduced by Germans to control invasive rats, which were ravaging copra plantations and decreasing profits (Meyer, personal interview, 2019; Gill, 1993). However, documents from the 1830s and 40s suggest that Sāmoans were already familiar with the snake when Europeans arrived. One of the earliest written documents that mention the snake is the United States Exploring Expedition during the Years 1838-1842, years before German copra plantations gained traction (Gill, 1993). Moreover, the snake is also documented in the diaries of Rev. John Williams, who mentioned a harmless snake in Sāmoa sometime in the early 1830s and thus years before substantial European settlement (Williams, 1842). As Williams points out, by the time the London Missionary Society arrived in Sāmoa in 1830, Sāmoans already knew where to find the Pacific Boa snakes and enjoyed eating the animal on occasion (Williams, 1842, p. 115).

If the Pacific Boa had already found its way to Sāmoa prior to European ships, there are two questions of interest. Firstly, how did the snake arrive in the Sāmoan archipelago? Secondly, how was it interacted with, consumed, represented, and a part of Sāmoan culture?

As I have mentioned, these snakes have poor fossil record and are similar in physiognomy to other snakes, making it challenging to trace back their exact origin (Austin, 2000). Some of the most earliest sources about the history of Pacific Boa in Sāmoa seem to be historical documents, that is, missionary and scientific accounts from the 1830s and 1840s. Since Sāmoan society was primarily oral, these documents come mostly from the perspective of *palagi* (foreigners, mostly white). As I will show, historical documents suggest that snakes were already present in Sāmoa by 1830 when the London Missionary Society docked in the archipelago (Gill, 1993; Williams 1842).

Today, some Sāmoans believe that snakes were introduced by the Germans as an economic measure against rats in copra plantations. However, as B. J. Gill suggests, Pacific Boa snakes were documented in scientific expeditions before copra plantations gained traction, making it unlikely that this is the origin of the species (1993). Moreover, missionary accounts from the 1830s suggest that the Pacific Boa preceded German colonial plantations by a few decades (Williams, 1842). Sometime during his mission in Sāmoa, Rev. John Williams came across a form of harmless olive-green snakes measuring 3-feet, most likely a Pacific Boa (ibid).

Linguistics can also provide supporting evidence of the long presence of snakes in the Sāmoan archipelago. Sāmoan language emerged from the Proto-Austronesian, along with other Pacific Languages such as Fijian, Lauan, Hawaiian, Tongan, etc. Due to their common linguistic origin, these languages often have words that are similar to the Sāmoan word *gata*, meaning snake (Krupa, 2002). For instance, in Tonga, East Futuna, Niue, Mae, and Fiji, words such as or similar to *gata/ngata* describe snakes (ibid). Even though the linguistic root *gata* seems to be common

throughout the Pacific, snakes are not. In fact, Sāmoa is the Eastern limit for non-invasive snakes in the Pacific (Krupa, 2002).

In places where snakes were absent, the word *gata* evolved to mean actions, mobilities, shapes, or animals that resemble snakes. Hawaii and the Hawaiian language is one example. In Hawaiian, there are no native snakes, and, yet, there are words in Hawaiian that share the same root *gata*. Rather than serving to describe the limbless reptile, the root *gata* in Hawaiian came to mean ‘to peel’ or ‘to crack’ (Pukui & Elbert, 1957, p. 239, as cited in Krupa, 2002, p. 11). Even in the absence of the physical animal snake, language still has a form of holding the memory of the animal, forming a sort of collective memory through semantics (ibid). Moreover, other languages such as Rarotongan also use the word *ngata* to describe an edible sea-slug, perhaps alluding, once again, to the lack of limbs in snakes (Buse & Tarinoa, 1995, p. 109, as cited by Krupa, 2002, p. 11). Lauan and Tuamotuan also share similar linguistic references that appropriate the root term to describe the semantic environment of snakes (Krupa, 2002).

In the Marquesas, which also lack in physical snakes, the word *nata* came to mean ‘eel’, but one Marquesan myth that often comes under the name “Nata” portrays an animal that lives in the bushes, climbs trees, and changes skin which are characteristic behaviors of arboreal snakes such as the Pacific Boa (Krupa, 2002, p. 12). Once again, even in the absence of the real animal that is the Pacific Boa, myths and language can remember the existence of the embodied actions and reactions that once involved snakes.

What the linguistic evidence suggests is that snakes have been in the Pacific long enough to become marked linguistically in the languages that emerged from Proto-Polynesian, travelling through Tonga and Sāmoa and to other Eastern archipelagoes such as Hawaii. Although language continued travelling, snakes themselves stopped travelling when they reached Sāmoa (Gill, 1993).

In archipelagoes where the snakes are absent, such as in the Marquesas and Hawai'i, *gata/ngata* shifts semantically to mean something other than snakes. In Sāmoa and Fiji, which do have a substantial snake presence, the root of the word is still used to describe snakes, which is evidence that snakes have been in the archipelago for a substantial amount of time – time enough to consolidate a linguistic meaning and to spread it to other archipelagic societies further East.

Pacific Islanders are historically known to be excellent navigators that were well interconnected prior to colonial contact, and it is possible that the Pacific Boa travelled from island to island along with the ancestral sailing populations of the South Pacific (Hau'ofa, 1993; Macpherson & Macpherson, 2009). It is unclear whether snakes would have been introduced intentionally or not, but it is possible and likely that the Pacific Boa travelled along with Pacific sailors (Gill, 1993).

This brings us back to the second crucial question of this introduction: how were snakes interacted with in Sāmoa throughout history? During my fieldwork, I came across only three significant sources. The earliest source, published in 1842, suggested that snakes were abundant in the island of Savai'i and that it was customary to eat a green snake that measured 3-feet or so, most likely a Pacific Boa (Williams, 1842). Another source, from the end of the 19th-century suggests that Sāmoans showed very little fear of snakes (Auckland Star, 1898). According to a the source, published in a newspaper, “none of the reptiles [snakes] here [in Sāmoa], however, are venomous, and in consequence the natives show absolutely no fear of them” (Auckland Star, 1898, ¶ 2). The article also described how Sāmoan women danced with red snakes wrapped around their neck, wrists, and ankles (Auckland Star, 1898). Given that these snakes are portrayed as harmless, it seems fair to say that they are not related to the myth of *gata ula*, despite their red color. The

snakes depicted by the Auckland Star are most likely small Pacific Boa snakes, whose tonality varies from dark olive-green to warm brown tones.

P. C. Llewella, who wrote first about *gata ula*, wrote that “it comes as a positive relief to learn that there are no venomous snakes in Sāmoa, always excepting the snake which crows” (Llewella, 1898, p. 366). Even though the author herself did not believe in the existence of the snake, her language would occasionally give space for the real existence of *danger* in the image of snakes.

Historical references often get entangled, making it rather difficult to separate what is real from what is collectively imagined. Ultimately, the goal of this article is not to separate the real stories from the fabricated ones, but rather to reveal how these two categories are inevitably interconnected. When Sāmoans believed in crowing snakes, maybe red Pacific Boa snakes could metaphorically crow, coming to embody a different animal that was perceived differently by Sāmoans. Prophetically, Llewella wrote that “it is safe to say that proof or no proof, the Sāmoan will always believe in the animal [crowing snake] as a peril of the jungle” (ibid). Today, Sāmoans are not afraid of snakes that crow and, yet, they are most certainly not indifferent to the Pacific Boa.

Today, most Sāmoans are afraid of the Pacific Boa. Snakes have become rarer in Sāmoan perception, both because the snake population has been slowly decreasing due to overkilling and habitat loss (Allison, Hamilton, & Tallwin, 2012). In Sāmoa, snakes are spatially and

intellectually separated from human activities. During my time researching snakes in Sāmoa, I was unable to find any evidence of social, cultural, or religious activities involving snakes, with one exception: snake killing. It is most certainly not a sport of Sāmoans today to go looking for snakes in the bushes, plantations, or forests; however, Sāmoans inevitably encounter Pacific Boa snakes and when they do, the snake is killed. It is neither sacrificed nor eaten – just killed. Sāmoans describe it as an instinctual response (that is learned nevertheless, as I will argue).

Because snakes, real or not, have been less present in contemporary Sāmoan daily life, they have also become less known. Many Sāmoans do not know that there are snakes in Sāmoa. Of the many Sāmoans who do know about the presence of snakes in their homeland, a few are unaware that the snake is nonvenomous and harmless to humans. Those may fear the snake as a physical animal that poses a physical danger, a threat to human life. However, what the overwhelming majority of Sāmoans can agree on is that snakes are not a part of their lives and that snakes are Evil animals. Sāmoans may not know about the material snake that is the Pacific Boa, but all Sāmoans of age are certainly familiar with the passages of Genesis in the Holy Bible – which prominently represent a particular kind of metaphorical snake.

After reviewing recent literature on animal studies that will guide us through an analysis of the historical and cultural importance of the Pacific Boa, I explore the impacts of the introduction of Christianity and the Holy Bible to Sāmoan society and to the cultural ecology of Sāmoan snakes. I argue that these introductions, not unlike the introduction of invasive species, has the capacity to alter the ecological balance of particular places. In the case of Sāmoa, missionary work had profound consequences on Sāmoan storytelling practices and on their affective dispositions to towards the Pacific Boa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One thing needs to be acknowledged upfront: the Pacific Boa is most certainly not an usual anthropological subject. Firstly because anthropology is the study of culture, which is an attribute rarely extended to nonhuman animals. The founders of anthropology, for the most part, considered culture to be self-evidently a human phenomenon. Animals occasionally featured in anthropological cannon, with the particular example of Clifford Geertz description of Balinese cockfights coming to mind (Geertz, 1973). However, even in this particular case, Geertz centers human interpretation. The implication is that the cocks are merely a conveyor of human cultural meaning in the context of Bali, as if the animals themselves were devoid of an agency that also shapes human interpretation and culture. Similar to anthropology, history has also often denied nonhuman animals the status of agents (Benson, 2011). However, some authors such as Etienne Benson (2011) and Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga (2011) suggest the possibility of a history of animals that extends beyond human interpretation. Benson writes that “textual sources seem always to arise from the experience or activity of one particular kind of animal— the writing animal, the human” and yet, it is not as if there were no “animal traces” in the historical documents written by humans; in a way, all history is a sort of animal history (Benson, 2011, p. 4). I might add, also, that documents ought not to be written to be shaped by animal presence. I hope my short introduction conveyed the possibility of finding animal presence, traces, and activities in human language. In essence, my first justification for textually dwelling with the Pacific Boa in my research is that Sāmoan culture and the Pacific Boa snake are not disconnected, but are inevitably and dynamically related through their materiality and semiotics.

However, the second problem that arises is that, at first glance, Pacific Boa snakes are, for the most part, neither physically present nor discursively important to Sāmoan culture *today*. On the contrary, it is a rare animal that is perceived to be despicably invisible, and with little inherent ecological or cultural value. The relative absence of the Pacific Boa makes it certainly a challenging anthropological subject – unless this absence is understood in light of presence— the presence of absence (see also Bille, Hastrup, & Sørensen, 2010). Even though the average Sāmoan has no reason to go looking for snakes, those encounters happen and when they happen they are *always already* embedded in the cultural life of its parts (for the origin of the italicized term see Heidegger, 1962). As I will argue, the representational and physical absence of the Pacific Boa in contemporary daily life is *productive* of a particular cultural disposition that appears in the form of an affective aversion to snakes when they emerge discursively or physically. From a historiographic standpoint, the importance of the Pacific Boa snake becomes even more justifiable, since historic documents reveal that the snake was once of relative importance to Sāmoan dance performances, decorative practices, and traditional art forms (Auckland Star, 1898; Williams, 1842). It was also eaten (Williams, 1842). Today, none of these practices continue and there is no research done on their particular disappearance. This paper seeks to provide an exploratory framework for the material and semiotic disappearance of the Pacific Boa snake.

In order to track these anthropological and historic matters of subtle change, this research explores the literature that followed from what became known as the ‘material turn’. These new materialisms, which go by a few different names, emerged as a response to the interpretive social sciences literature of the 70s and 80s. Ultimately, they seek to reintroduce matter as agents, rather than as mere vessels of human meaning. Authors such as Jane Bennett (2009) and Anna Tsing (2015) use the material world as both a field of social investigation and as a way of understanding

how humans engage and inhabit this world sensorially. In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett expands some of the insights of Michel Foucault regarding the politics that construct, shape, direct, govern, and manage human bodies (Bennett, 2009). While Foucault centered the human experience in his discussion of embodiment, Bennett takes a step back to understand how the material world enters our embodiment as cocreators of reality, effectively expanding biopower beyond the human realm. By dwelling at the overlaps between body and world, Bennett questions this very division. The author is markedly posthumanist, and occasionally returns to some of the earlier insights of phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Bennett, 2009; Merleau-Ponty, 2013).

The Mushroom at the End of the World, by Anna Tsing, is a fantastic case study of a particular kind of mushroom called *matsutake*, which often emerges in environments that have been disturbed by human activity (Tsing, 2015). The *matsutake*, born of change, gives birth to foragers that are interested in selling the *matsutake* through the global supply chain (ibid). By tracking the mushroom through the senses that they awaken and the material conditions that they require and create, Anna Tsing suggested a beautiful emergent history that allows political ecology to rethink the concept of precarity in times of climate change (ibid). Together, these two authors, Bennett and Tsing, engage with materiality as an emergent property of things, things that shake humans into particular ways of being, things that—to borrow Bennett’s term— *vibrate* (Bennett, 2009).

I borrow on the groundwork of Bennett and Tsing in order to explore new ways of understanding climate change, human impact, and the material world. Their insights in the decentering of human subjectivity in favor of attending to embodiment (which is a particular liminal space between the subjective and the objective) will help to explore the Pacific Boa snake beyond its discursive interpretation, and thus allowing me to discuss its ecological importance,

material existence, and progressive absence. As authors exploring *new materialisms*, Bennett and Tsing rarely explore the *immaterialisms* that also compose our experience of the material world and permeate our daily life. To attend to the complicated relationship between the present and the absent, I will make extensive reference to the frameworks developed by Donna Haraway in her understanding of the collapse of materiality and semiotics into a material-semiotic reality, a brilliant term she coined (Haraway, 2007). Haraway is one of the founders of STS and certainly one of the key figures of contemporary posthumanism and postphenomenology. In *When Species Meet*, Haraway dwells specifically in the relationships between the human/nonhuman, reality/representation, organic/*technes* in order to reveal an incredible lived complexity that renders these binaries obsolete (Haraway, 2007). To bring these abstract questions to life, Haraway asks a key question in *When Species Meet*: “whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog?” (Haraway, 2007, p. 3).

The common goal between all of these authors is to formulate new epistemologies and ontologies that allow humans to grapple and adapt with our existence in light of climate change. Understanding nature as a resource external to us has created a series of problems that the Global North has been incapable of handling politically and intellectually. Bennett, Tsing, and Haraway seek to at once reveal and forge new connections between embodiment and the natural world to redefine what it means to be human. As Haraway puts it, perhaps summarizing one of the goals of posthumanism, “to be one is always to become *with* many” (Haraway, 2007, p. 4, emphasis on the original).²

² There is an uncanny resemblance between Haraway’s quote and some passages of *Where We Once Belonged*, by Sia Figiel. At one point, Figiel poetically describes the Samoan interdependent notion of identity: “My self belongs not to me because ‘I’ does not exist. ‘I’ is always ‘we’” (Figiel, 1996, p. 135).

One last reason why I argue for a consideration of the Pacific Boa snakes as anthropological and historical subjects is the fact that they are entering a slow process of extinction due to human forms of globalization that manifest themselves in everyday practices, which is precisely the realm of anthropology (Inda & Rosaldo, 2002). Although a quantitative study could have provided an useful objective population statistical body, it would not have explained the history and culture underlying the negative perception of Sāmoans towards snakes. Political ecology, history, and anthropology provide a framework to understand the human-environment relationship as a certain performance that is constructed and maintained, rather than as an timeless and placeless fact. Here, snakes are killed like nowhere else, in a relationship that is place-specific and time-specific. For this reason, understanding the ecology of the Pacific Boa requires an interdisciplinary framework that reveals the intersections between the objective materiality of a nonhuman species and the ways in which human subjectivity and culture have been impacting this shared materiality.

In essence, this paper is interested in crawling *with* the Pacific Boa through the tracks it left in history, leading to the mediated encounters that lead to this very day. Borrowing from the new literature on ~~im~~materiality and with particular attention to the ways images shape both bodies and reality, this research will answer a few questions about the Pacific Boa. How did it become an animal to be feared? How is fear manifested and constructed over time? What are the impacts of this affect onto the Pacific Boa's material existence? By attending to the traces, marks, and movements that happen between people and snakes, this paper seeks to reveal how global forces such as the dissemination of Christianity, climate change, and media are experienced at the local level through the everyday experiences of people living through and creating history.

EMBODYING FEAR: CHRISTIANITY, COLONIALISM, AND METAPHORICAL SNAKES

I would like to argue that, in Sāmoa, snake ecology and religion are inevitably intertwined. To explain how the metaphorical snake of the Bible *becomes* real, or realized, I will tie two narratives together. Firstly, I suggest that controlling indigenous connections to nature has always been at the center of the missionary and colonial enterprises in Sāmoa. The ethnocentric label of the “savage” is not simply about European perceptions of non-European peoples, but also about the relationship Europeans developed with nature during modernity. Missionary work was inevitably embedded in the colonial logic (Macpherson & Macpherson, 2009). Inside the missionary ships that docked in Sāmoa in the 1800s, there was something more than simply people and translated books – there was an underlying ideology that sought to displace Sāmoan connections to nature in order to both civilize and Christianize a group of people that was allegedly doomed by savagery and sin.

Secondly, I will narrate a biblical passage that is foundational to Christianity: the Fall of Humankind from the Garden of Eden. I will make a conscious effort to infuse contemporary Pacific Theology within my description of the book of Genesis, while also attempting to describe the motions of snakes and their participation in the Original Sin.

Lastly, I will conclude with a passage by Rev. John Williams of the London Missionary Society (LMS) about snakes, which is perhaps the first written account of snakes in Sāmoa. The account ties the two narratives together, uniting discourse and practice in one shared history with lasting ecological impacts to this day.

In 1830, the London Missionary Society's vessel *Messenger of Peace* docked in Sāmoa. The expedition, led by Reverend John Williams, sought to be the first to bring Christianity to the Sāmoan group (Robson, 2009). The *Messenger of Peace* arrived late, since a couple villages had already converted by 1830, and there is some evidence that a substantial number of Sāmoans had already embraced Christianity without entirely abandoning indigenous spiritual customs (Robson, 2009). Despite not being first, the LMS was certainly the most influential mission to reach Sāmoa. They landed at the right time and in the right place.

Their timely arrival was not a matter of chance, but of encounter. Rev. John Williams had been in the Pacific for some time working on spreading the Gospel. It was in Tonga that he met a Sāmoan man named Fauea who guided the *Messenger of Peace* to his motherland (Robson, 2009). After a decade in Tonga, Fauea and his family were in need of a ride back to Sāmoa (ibid). Fauea guided Williams and a number of Polynesian teachers to the village of Sapapali'i, home to Malietoa Vainu'upo. Malietoa was a well-known warrior just one *papa* title away from achieving the highest honors of the Sāmoan hierarchy (Robson, 2009). Conveniently, Malietoa had been waiting for the fulfillment of a prophecy that stated that his time to rule would come with the arrival of people from the sky, *palagi* (Robson, 2009). Today, the word *palagi* is used to refer more generally to non-Sāmoans, particularly white people. To Malietoa, the arrival of Rev. John Williams was an opportunity to gain more respect, followers, and a form of spiritual monopoly that would support his cause in war (ibid). Although Rev. John Williams himself spent very little

time in Sāmoa between 1830 and 1832, Malietoa's success carried the word of the Gospel and evidenced the power of the new religion (ibid).

The politics of Sāmoan conversion with the arrival of the LMS reveals also the ways in which conversion was not only a spiritual decision, but an economic one (Macpherson & Macpherson, 2009; Robson, 2009). Even though the LMS as an institution was not in the trading business, conversion rested on the promises of material benefits that came with belonging to a transnational community (Macpherson & Macpherson, 2009). These material benefits were one of the reasons why Malietoa sought to prove his commitment to the new religion by slowly abandoning the old Sāmoan deities (Williams, 1842, pp. 112-3). For him, it was important to maintain a sort of spiritual monopoly that at once expanded and justified his position of power. Malietoa became entitled to rule by blood ties to the land and by the grace of the Christian God, a double entitlement.

The diaries of Rev. John Williams suggest that missionaries would normally suggest that the newly converted people abandon their old deities through material destruction. In the materialist mentality of Williams, which is representative of European colonial expansion more broadly, it was crucial to physically destroy the institutions of the host culture in order to successfully install Christianity. However, according to his journals, Sāmoan old Gods were a matter of personal connection to the natural environment. For Malietoa's family in particular, a ritual was set in motion as their performance of the acceptance of Christianity. Below, is Williams's description:

As the people have generally no idol to destroy, they adopted a rather singular ceremony for the abandonment of their former system. In order to render this intelligible, I must inform the reader that every chief of notice has his *etu*. This was some species of bird,

fish, or reptile in which the spirit of the god was supposed to reside; and, on this occasion, one of the class was cooked and eaten, by which act, in the estimation of natives, the *etu* was so thoroughly desecrated that it could never again be regarded as an object of religious veneration. (Williams, 1842, p. 113).

This passage shows what was at stake for during Christianizing missions in Sāmoa and elsewhere in the Pacific: *the relationship between people and nature*. The intention of Williams was perhaps that the Sāmoan eating of the *etu* was a performance of both abandoning paganism and of becoming civilized by distancing oneself to nature. I want to argue that this understanding is based on 19th-century racialized lenses that created a particular image of Polynesians. As a number of authors noted, racial frameworks were foundational to the British missionary work and to the way Europeans interpreted cross-cultural encounters in Oceania (Douglas, 2008; Steinmetz, 2007, p. 245). As Bronwen Douglas noted, Pacific Islanders were categorized through social evolutionist lines and, by the 1920, the now Christianized Polynesians were understood to be superior to the Melanesians, who were understood to be ‘barbarous savages’ (Douglas, 2008, p. 12). In Sāmoa, the connection between missionary work and racism is extremely complex. On one hand, white supremacy justified British export of religion as a form of philanthropy that inevitably shaped Oceanic contexts and ‘plowed the grounds’ for later colonization. On the other hand, neither the missionaries nor Sāmoans were homogenous, and it was only through their collaboration that Christianity became the important force that it is today (Douglas, 2008). Regardless of how we understand the multitude of directional forces during the 1830s in Sāmoa, this encounter inevitably shaped Sāmoan understandings of space and nature.

What I would like to suggest is that, in Sāmoa, the understanding of racialized differences rested not only on assumptions about religious, aesthetic, physiology, and intelligence, but also on relationships to nature. Certainly all of these differences are intricately connected, since comparative anatomy seemed to support intellectual hierarchies, and ‘savage’ aesthetic suggested a less than Christian, less than civilized behavior (Douglas, 2008). From the evolutionist lens of the 1800s, differences between races were understood to be not only spatial, but temporal. It is in this context that the idea of a “noble savage” emerges, which suggested that there were “primitive” people living in a “state of nature” of sorts (Steinmetz, 2007). Much like other Polynesians such as the Tahitians, Sāmoans were stereotyped and framed as an innocent people that, due to their lack of civilization and intellectual capacity, lived within nature. This myth of sameness with nature created a sense of nostalgia to Europeans who longed to see pristine pastures without abdicating their modern lifestyle. Ultimately, despite occasional European dreaming and romanticizing, in order for Sāmoans to become civilized and Christian in the image of *palagi*, they needed to abandon nature as a force. This is what is represented in the eating of the *etu*, the separation between the human and the nonhuman and the destitution of agency within the natural world. Only through an epistemology such as this the human could be understood as the sole center, the one master of nature (and possibly the master of other people akin to nature).

Abandoning nature was central for both Christianity and for the European colonial enterprise. European modernity sought to manufacture modular projects that could be scaled indefinitely – or until natural resources lasted. Naturally, pun intended, Europeans sought to expand their model beyond their small territories. Expansion was not a choice, but rather a requirement of their capitalist method of alienation that rested on their own cosmogonic superiority. Some members of the human species were deemed by Europeans to be closer to nature

than to civilization, reason why it was Europe's duty to spread the Gospel, their machines, and their whiteness; only then the so-called 'savages' would leave their barbarous state. In essence, the supremacy of the human over nature, conveniently named civilization, was an epistemological framework that worked in favor of colonialism and directly fueled the maritime expansion of the British. Thus, in the act of eating what Williams called the *etu*, Sāmoans would be abandoning both their old deities and their lack of civilization, marked by their closeness to the natural world.

In Sāmoa, missionary work was one of the vehicles through which Sāmoans and Europeans exchanged their understanding of the relationship between people and nature – which perhaps surprisingly brings us back to snakes.

One of the most foundational passages of the Holy Bible is present in Genesis, in which the Devil takes the form of a snake and deceives Adam and Eve, the first humans, into betraying God and eating the forbidden fruit of Knowledge. For committing the original sin, Adam and Eve are then punished by God and descend from their state of bliss. Although interpretations on the meaning of this story do differ, every Sāmoan is familiar with this passage and knows well the role of the Devil-as-snake in the fall of humankind from the Garden of Eden. The passage is central to Christianity, regardless of denomination. Every Christian form has a creator, sin, and then salvation (Meyer, personal interview, 2019). Although the presence of God as a creator and of Jesus Christ as the savior of humankind seem more consistently interpreted, the origin of sin seems more controversial, as it rests somewhere between humans and snakes.

The snake-as-Devil is a metaphorical snake, if a snake at all. The Sāmoan *faiifeau* and their followers obviously know that the role of the snake is not to be taken literally, since snakes cannot themselves talk. They see the snake in the Holy Bible to represent something rather ethereal: deceit, doubt, and Evil. These attributes are not themselves physical but manifest themselves physically through the presence of the snake, which leads Adam and Eve to go against God's will. This is where the complicated relationship between image and materiality can be found. Although Sāmoans know that the snake is metaphorical, that is disembodied and immaterial, the semiotics hold true. The snake in the Holy Bible is indeed Evil and deceitful, even if it is not actually there. To understand the story, one has to enter this world of narrative in which certain objects have meanings beyond and yet related to their materiality.

Perhaps one of the better ways to understand that the metaphorical snake is still nevertheless related to snake materiality is to ask a Sāmoan to recount the passage of the original sin. God had told Adam and Eve what to do and what not to do. To Sāmoans, the snake *slithered* along, *crawling* through the grass, *whispering* confusion directly into Eve's ear (Meyer, personal interview, 2019; Mere & Mali, personal interview, 2019). These actions are embodied and can be felt, they can be translated into particular affect that can be seen, though subtly, in the very facial expressions of my informants (ibid). Snakes' lack of limbs and slithering mobilities are particularly salient in their retelling of the story. The snake almost seems to invade the space of humans, as an unwanted invasive animal, as if it was a wild pest. Perhaps above any other emotion, Sāmoans *despise* the animal and this is certainly visible, felt, and embodied when their face frowns and their arms wiggle to mimic the unnaturalness of an animal that seems alien to Sāmoa today (Meyer, personal interview, 2019). Because of the embodied descriptions of snake movement that was

recurrent throughout my informants, it became clear that it was not only the Devil that disgusted them, but also the *snake-ness* of the animal the Devil personified.

For the most part, Sāmoans today have naturalized their affective and embodied dispositions towards snakes. They are not afraid of snakes, rather, snakes are *fearful* animals (Lobo & Ma, personal interview, 2019). The fear they feel is an intrinsic property of matter (Bennett, 2009). They form what can be called a *vibrant materiality*: “in this assemblage, objects appeared as things, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics (Bennett, 2009, p. 5). In the mobilities of snakes, we find something that is not entirely human and yet enters the human realm through the very act of its separation as Other, as nonhuman. This is the power of images, religion, and ideology, to infuse the material world with a form of agency that quickly gains a life of its own and starts to exist beyond the human world but through *material-semiotic* assemblages (Haraway, 2007).

As Bennett suggests, understanding human subjectivity leaves behind traces of meaning that can be found in the stories matter itself can tell (Bennett, 2009). The power that exists when a Sāmoan meets a snake involves not only the semiotics of the Holy Bible but the very snake-ness of the snake, its crawling mobilities, its slim tubular body, its multicolored scale patterns, and all of its other embodied characteristics (including possible crowing vocalizations) with which humans are *always already* familiar with, even those who have never seen snakes in person (see Heidegger, 1962). The fear that the snake *emanates* transcends something purely human and exists now in the diffused space of interspecific Sāmoan ecologies.

However, it is not as if all material-semiotic networks involving snakes are the same. The materiality of the snake might be crucial to the creation of an otherness between snakes and

humans, but the unfolding of this differentiation is also culturally marked. Some societies in the world have approached the differences between snakes and humans with certain with veneration, in which case the power vested in snakes gives way to a distanced form of admiration rather than to killing. For instance, snake handling is a ritualized practice in some Christian churches in the United States. In other cases, snakes have been conceived as pests regardless of relationship to humans in particular such as it is the case in Guam (Gillespie & Clague, 2009; Ohashi & Oldenburg, 1992). The particular disposition to kill snakes that are seen is not a response that arises exclusively from the materiality of snakes but rather in an ambiguous association with culture, politics, and religion, which themselves are never entirely human or nonhuman. In essence, the fact that Sāmoans kill snakes on sight is neither entirely a result of an objective facts or subjective creations but rather a result of the human familiarity that arises from a complex network of agents that are of both human and nonhuman origin. In the absence of the Pacific Boa snake in Sāmoan daily life, the snake in the Holy Bible becomes the primary mode of contact between human perception and the embodied mobilities of snakes.

As I have conveyed earlier, the separation between nature and humans was crucial to the missionary enterprise. Missionaries such as Rev. John Williams came to the Pacific to accomplish what he saw as a sort of philanthropy – to raise the people of Sāmoa from their state of nature through Christianity *and* civilization. Both of these goals had to pass through the Sāmoan relationship to nature. What I will now attempt to show is that the Sāmoan relationship to snakes

is included within LMS's broader goal of bringing civilization and the Gospel to Sāmoan society. In one particular passage in the diaries of Rev. John Williams, the two narratives I have conveyed finally meet.

In one particular day, shortly after after the ritual eating of the *etu*, Williams gets the chance to spend one afternoon with the wives of Malietoa (Williams, 1842, pp. 110-5). For one reason or another, the topic of snakes appears in their conversation and Williams is instigated by the harmless snakes of Sāmoa (*ibid*). He asks that one 'specimen' be brought to him. And it is then, half an hour after his request, that Williams gets to see a live snake twined around a woman's neck (Williams, 1842, p. 115). He makes no utterances of surprise. Rather, he writes:

“The manners of these females were pleasing; and, while I gazed upon their good-natured countenances, and listened to their cheerful conversation, I could not but rejoice in the hope, that the period had arrived when they would be raised from the state of barbarous vassalage into which sin and superstition had sunk them” (Williams, 1842, p. 115).

One can imagine his piercing yet silent judgement upon the Sāmoan woman. The snake wrapped around her neck could not crow but it was so clearly visually loud as to compel Williams to write these words. To him, the Sāmoan relationship to the snake emerged as a marker of Sāmoan Godlessness and uncivilization.

To Rev. John Williams, relationship Sāmoans had with nature and with the Pacific Boa snake was in opposition with the colonial framework in which Christianizing missions operated. Particularly in the case of the snake, an animal loaded with meaning because of biblical stories, it

was an animal that needed to be separated from humanity. Implicitly, in Williams, the separation between civilization and “barbarous vassalage” is parallel to the separation between the human and the nonhuman, the cultural and the natural. In a way the snake embodied the nonhuman, untamed natural world, fully entering the performance of these dichotomies. To be civilized in the image of 1800s Britain, Sāmoans had to not only eat up their spirits, gulping them down with coconut milk, but they would also have to seize themselves from nature, and from snakes.

CONCLUSION

The Sāmoan response of killing snakes upon sight is neither misinformation nor instinctual but rather a result of their familiarity with physical-semiotic snakes. Ultimately, I have argued that Sāmoan familiarity with Pacific Boa snakes is mediated by Christianity. This mediation happens both through reading and through everyday practice of religion in the cultural context of Sāmoa, where religion has become one of the pillars of society (Macpherson & Macpherson, 2009). Through my interviews and participant observation, I was able to glimpse into the way that Sāmoans encounter snakes most often – through the metaphorical snake present in the Holy Bible. In the book of Genesis, the unhuman mobilities and form of snakes are used as a vehicle to convey the complex ideas of deceit and evil. Sāmoans know full well that the snake present in the Holy Bible is metaphorical; it is the Devil taking a particular embodied shape or form (Mere & Mali, personal interview, 2019; Lobo & Ma, personal interview, 2019). In the relative absence of real snakes in the Sāmoan archipelago, Sāmoans acquire a closer familiarity to a semiotic creature than to a material one.

However, Sāmoans encounter Pacific Boa snakes on occasion and, when they do, the material and the semiotic collapse into a particular form of affect that develops into the killing of the snake. Consciously or not, Sāmoans translate the evil present in the snake in the Holy Bible to the Pacific Boa. In an interplay between that which is symbolic and what is real, the nonperformatic killing of Pacific Boa snakes becomes a culturally learned response to what was naturally existent in the material world: difference.

The material differences between humans and differences are always already perceived through Sāmoan political, social, cultural, and religious life, all of which are connected. As I have shown, the historic documents that mention the Pacific Boa are infused with political ecologies, evolutionism, colonialism, and racialized politics. These documents reveal the point in which the *fa'asāmoa* and Christianity meet to form a global network of exchange.

Although my research has lent itself to an interpretation of globalization as an unidirectional act of power from the center to the periphery, this has not been the general case in Sāmoa. As Malama Malaisea notes, part of the success of Christianity in Sāmoa is due to the fact that it *didn't* contradict the *fa'asāmoa*; on the contrary, the Christian narrative served as another way to ground some of the social hierarchies and values that existed in Sāmoa in the 1800s and today (1992, p. 21, as cited by Macpherson and Macpherson, 2009, p. 33). Christianity entered Sāmoan culture through the *fa'amatai* (the sociopolitical system of *matai*) rather than against it. Moreover, it is not as if the Sāmoan way of life had not shaped Christianity in Sāmoa. In one of my visits to a theological college in Apia, I was told that there are two prophets in the land: the cats and a small wall (Mere & Mali, personal interview, 2019). According to my informants, these nonhuman actants would behave in unusual manners if something bad had happened. Despite their

nonhuman status, these cats and wall conveyed a message, and thus communicated with the humans of the property, including the theologian doctors that lectured in the college.

In regards to nature more broadly, it is undeniable that Sāmoans are still connected to nature, and particularly to land, *le fanua*. *Fanua* in Sāmoan means not only the land but everything of the land, including us, the people (Pitu, personal interview, 2019). It has a linguistic double-meaning, also signifying ‘placenta’. Today, 81% of the land in Sāmoa is customary and thus owned by the *matai*, the elder chiefs of the Sāmoan way of life (Macpherson & Macpherson, 2009). To Sāmoans, *fanua* is a matter of identity, making the territory of the ground something unalienable by people or institutions. In a way, the Sāmoan understanding of land evidences how even space itself – the *vā* in Sāmoan – is inevitably relational and linked to human subjectivity through the umbilical cord of our existence, which we share with some many nonhuman animals, inanimate places, and with the plants that sustain life on this planet. To the *fa’asāmoa* land and people are interconnected and interdependent. The events that I have described in from the 1800s, from the eating of the *etu* to the arrival of the political ecology of the Bible, were not able to unidirectionally erase the Sāmoan epistemology about the nonhuman world.

However, if we look at the history of the Pacific Boa in Sāmoa, the introduction of Christianity most certainly had an ecological impact. As Epeli Hau’ofa notes in *The Future of Our Past*, the cultural values of South Pacific societies has inevitably changed since the intrusion of non-Pacific material conditions and ideologies (Hau’ofa, 1985). Hau’ofa notes in particular the changes that came with Western bureaucracy, writing cannon, and political system. According to the author, from a Pan-Pacific perspective,

“truth was, and still is to a large extent, negotiable. The idea that Pacific islanders were slaves to the dictates of their cultures is a

myth; islanders were in fact masters of their cultures - they manipulated them at will. This was made easier because of the absence of written records. Pacific cultures were based on oral traditions; [. . .] anything can happen provided that the transmitters have the ability and power to make things happen” (Hau’ofa, 1985, pp. 157-8).

With writing and literacy, truth gained a material rigidity. Stories such that of the crowing snake nearly disappeared with the presence of an account that had another form of material existence: the metaphorical snake of the Holy Bible. Every Sāmoan knows this story and every Sāmoan inevitably encounters it through social networks (Meyer, personal interview, 2019; Pitu, personal interview, 2019). In Sāmoa, Christianity enters all spheres of life (Macpherson & Macpherson, 2009). Even though oral narratives were never entirely displaced as a concept in Sāmoa, the case of the snake is rather unique because all Sāmoans can track down and return to a single material source, the Holy Bible. Today, Sāmoans have an affective disposition towards snakes, a relationship of mistrust, a controlled fear which leads to the killing of Pacific Boa snakes in Sāmoa. As I heard many times, when you see a snake, there is only one thing that you can do: you must kill it.

Today, Pacific Boa snakes are materially endangered and slowly sinking deeper into semiotic disappearance (Allison, Hamilton & Tallowin, 2012). As it becomes a known unknown animal, it becomes killed for being feared and feared *for* being absent. In a way, the presence of the Pacific Boa snake becomes confined to representations originated from the Holy Bible. Ultimately, the story told in the Holy Bible has become more materially present and more familiar than the Pacific Boa itself. Far from being just a set of stories, the Holy Bible gains materiality

when Samoans unexpectedly encounter Pacific Boa snakes and the material world and the world of images collapses into one ambiguous action and reaction: Samoans ought to kill the Evil snake.

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APPENDICES

METHODOLOGY

To investigate the relationship between Sāmoans and snakes through history and until today, this paper will rely on two interdisciplinary frameworks: Phenomenology and Pacific Research. As a mode of inquiry, Phenomenology is interested in the relationship between the objective and subjective worlds. Rather than having the Real as a starting point for investigation, phenomenology as a method suspends the question of reality in order to investigate the ways in which humans grapple with their condition. Perhaps the primary question posed by phenomenology is that of meaning and intention – what makes human perception *about* something, regardless of its status as Real? For Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, two of the most praised European phenomenologists, investigating this question led them to believe that the dichotomy between subject and object was more complicated, and more central, than previous philosophy acknowledged (Merleau-Ponty, 2013; Heidegger, 1962). To these two authors, the primary way of engagement humans have with the world is through perceptual and embodied familiarity, a view radically different from that of a distanced observer peeking into a world and inferring a representation (ibid). Focusing on reality as it is lived rather than how it is thought about enabled these philosophers to propose that the objective world shapes the subjective expressions of the objective world, and vice versa. Phenomenology acknowledged that ontology, the knowledge of beings, emerges through that everyday familiarity in which we are permanently and inevitably immersed (and despite our capacity for abstract thinking). Particularly pertaining to the object of this research, the phenomenological lens will allow me to ground the Sāmoan familiarity with

snakes in something more than physical reality – namely in the *presence* of Christian ecotheology as a discourse and in the *absence* of the actual Pacific Boa snake in the Sāmoan daily life. Through this lens, Sāmoan perspectives can be taken seriously and understood in light of Sāmoan daily life, familiarity, and values. Thus, Phenomenology serves to make sure that this research considers both the objective reality and the human subjectivity that permeates that reality, which are two sides of the same coin.

Pacific Research will be paired with Phenomenology as a way to expose the limitations of Research and acknowledge its colonialist history. As I have suggested in my short prelude, Research as an institution has been historically dominated by the powerful and in order to sustain their power on both material and intellectual spheres. Most of the evidence I encountered regarding snakes comes from dismissive missionary and Western scientific accounts that are incapable of taking indigenous knowledge and realities seriously. As I have suggested, these Eurocentric writings are concerned with the immediate materiality of things and with the domestication of the colonized. Today, in Sāmoa, the harmless Pacific Boa is taken as a dangerous animal by Sāmoans. Rather than prescriptively suggesting that Sāmoans have no reason to be scared of a nonvenomous snake, this research project chose to dive into Sāmoan daily life in order to investigate how fear is produced and reproduced by people and in partnership with Sāmoan ecology.

The data for this research is entirely qualitative. Although there is an urgent need for quantitative research in the natural sciences regarding the population of snakes and their habitat conditions in Sāmoa, qualitative data was more fit for a study of the relationship between humans and snakes. Through informal conversation, it became clear that the overwhelming majority of Sāmoans were averse to snakes; quantitative data not have helped to answer the question of how this fear is produced and how it is manifested at the level of everyday life.

The data collection for this research occurred over the timespan of a month and in three forms: collecting historical documents, participant observation, and formal interviews. As an outsider to Sāmoan culture, engaging in family and church affairs was particularly enlightening to my research. I spent some of my time with a host family that lived in Vaivase Uta. Despite my status as an outsider, I came to understand some aspects of Sāmoan culture because of my participation in family and church affairs, such as cooking, gardening, and attending mass. Despite their apparent simplicity, all of these activities are embedded in rich networks of meaning that I would not have been able to appreciate without the wonderful family that welcomed me into their home. I could have read about the importance of the *fanua* (customarily owned land) to Sāmoan identity for years without truly being able to understand it. A few months were certainly not enough to fully grasp the concept, but it certainly allowed me to appreciate the sacred importance of land and the environment to Sāmoan society – a realization that I hope will be reflected in my writing.

Although participant observation was fundamental in my research, it was contextualized by more formal conversations that I had with guardians of Sāmoan knowledge such as *matai*, *faiifeau* (church minister), academics, and government officials. In total, I interviewed eight individuals: two *matai*, two titled woman, four religious figures, one historian, and the ACEO for Environment & Conservation in Sāmoa. I have also exchanged emails with NGOs and conservation experts in Samoa. Three of the formal interviews were conducted as *talanoa*, more informal dialogues in which I was able to interact with their expertise in conversation. These *talanoa* were between myself and couples with which I had already developed a previous relationship. The remaining three interviews were more formal and directed. The two *matai* I interviewed were from Savai'i, which is often where snakes are found. According to them, the village of Asau has a higher population of snakes than other areas of Sāmoa. For this reason, I

interviewed also one elder theologian originally from the village of Asau but teaching in ‘Upolu today. Four of my eight informants were titled women of respect in their community and/or experts at the highest level in their professional fields. I have also balanced my pool regarding their Christian denominations: three informants are Catholic, two are Methodist, two are EFKS, and one Anglican. My primary concern was to control for gender, place of origin, and religion.

Of all of these interviews and *talanoa*, one of which was not recorded and it will not be quoted directly or indirectly but still acknowledged for its contribution.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Every person connected to this project in any manner was informed that their participation would result in the publication of an academic paper for the School of International Training and for further academic publishing. They have all consented to participate. The people that I have formally interviewed also have consented to have an audio recording made during the interview for further use. They have also been informed that I will be in possession of the recordings for three years before deletion, expiring on May 2022. As I have also made clear to them, the interviews will be used only in educational contexts and with their permission, which they have all voluntarily granted.

I have asked the participants of this research for verbal consent, which was recorded. Since I have not made use of any named direct quotes, their consent has not been transcribed to written form, as it seems unnecessary. All of the interviews present in text and bibliography are under pseudonyms.

All of the participants in this research were kept anonymous and their information is digitally stored protected through digital encryption.

Finally, all of the participants will be granted free digital access to this research. I hope that it will be particularly useful to institutions interested in the present situation of the Pacific Boa, namely the MNRE, SPREP, and the Samoa Conservation Society.

FURTHER RESEARCH

There is a palpable lack of quantitative research done on the Pacific Boa. Governmental institutions, NGOs, and international organizations point out that the populations have likely been decreasing but there is little numeric data on snake populations, Pacific Boa or otherwise. Snake demographics are urgent, since I have found a rather large number of Samoans that have never seen snakes in an archipelago that was allegedly abundant in snakes less than two hundred years ago.

Moreover, if I was to continue this research, I would have included the Pacific Boa within the sociozoologic scale, in order to gauge numerically Samoan perceptions. Although it is rather clear that Samoans see Evil in the Pacific Boa, it would have been beneficial to this study to separate aesthetics and morality. For instance, do Samoans see the snake as evil and ugly? Are these separated? Where do perceptions of beauty intersect with perceptions of morality? Appended there is one questionnaire about this matter. Although it was not distributed, it might serve for further research in the future.

One last weakness is my lack of command of the Samoan language, which would have allowed me to investigate deeper on possible publications in Samoan language. It would also have been beneficial to understand the possible etymological connections that would arise from the descriptions of fear and interspecific encounter in Samoan language. I avoided close reading quotes linguistic given that my interviewees all had English as a second language. Although their capacity to express was excellent, as a non-native English speaker myself I understand that words are not as loaded with meaning in any language that not our first. Dissecting words in English would have possibly have created unnecessary biases in this study.

This study ought to acknowledge that globalized media certainly has an impact on the Samoan perception of snakes. Christianity seems to be the primary presence, given that many of my informants mentioned it as an explanatory framework for their fear of snakes. However, it is clear that globalized media contributes to that fear by portraying primarily large venomous snakes, which possibly impacts particularly Samoans who are unaware that the Pacific Boa is nonvenomous.

Finally, I have also received an email from an expert scientist that suggested that Samoa has finally been reached by invasive garden snakes, which is yet to be confirmed by further studies. Given that blind garden snakes are much smaller, they may be confused with worms. Apart from one expert account, no Samoan mentioned seeing this kind of snake, reason why I decided not to include it in my research for the time being.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- How would you describe your role in Samoan society? In what areas are you active?
- First we are going to talk about snakes. Do you know if there are snakes in Samoa?
 - Where would you encounter them?
- Have you ever encountered them yourself?
 - If yes, please describe the encounters.
 - If not, how do you think you would react to encountering a snake in Samoa?
 - How would you describe snakes to someone who doesn't know what they are?
 - [for older *matai* and theologians] Were there more snakes in the past?
- Do you know of any Samoan proverbs, tales, oral history, or *siapo* designs that have snakes in them? I am wondering if you have ever seen snakes represented in Samoan art and culture.
- Are you afraid of snakes? Why? How do snakes make you feel?
- Changing topics a bit, have you ever read or heard about Genesis, in the Holy Bible?
 - How would you describe the creation by God?
 - Talk about the Fall from the Garden of Eden and the snake in that passage.
- [for theologians] Now that we are talking about Genesis 3, what is your interpretation of nature from a theological perspective? What messages about nature and the environment do you believe and try to convey to your followers?
- Do you think that understanding of nature is different from an Oceanic or Samoan understanding of nature? What similarities and differences do you see?

- Could you tell me any anecdotes or stories that, to you, present the relationship between humans and nature from a Catholic understanding? What do you think makes this story Catholic?
- Slight change of topic here, but could you tell me about the *vā*?
 - In what kind of moments do you see the *vā* playing a big role in your life? When does it become important or salient to you? Give me examples.
 - Does the *vā* ever make it to your preaching? How?
 - Do you think there is a *vā* between humans and other animals? Inanimate things?
- What can you tell me about the *vānimonimo*?
 - When and where is the *vānimonimo* present and salient for you? Exemplify.
 - Does the *vānimonimo* ever appear in your preaching? IS it something talked about in religious circles in Samoa?
- How has religion impacted the relationship between Samoans and their surroundings today and in the past? What changes do you see most and as most important?

SNAKES IN SAMOA CAN MAKE LOUD NOISES YES / NO / UNSURE

SNAKES IN SAMOA WERE CREATED BY GOD YES / NO / UNSURE

SNAKES ARE PART OF THE SAMOAN ECOSYSTEM YES / NO / UNSURE

IN THE PAST, SAMOANS USED TO EAT SNAKES YES / NO / UNSURE

IN THE PAST, SAMOANS USED SNAKES AS ORNAMENTAL NECKLACES YES / NO / UNSURE

TODAY, MOST SAMOANS ARE AFRAID OF SNAKES

|STRONGLY DISAGREE| |SOMEWHAT DISAGREE| |NEUTRAL| |SOMEWHAT AGREE| |STRONGLY
AGREE|

IN THE PAST, SAMOANS WERE LESS AFRAID OF SNAKES

|STRONGLY DISAGREE| |SOMEWHAT DISAGREE| |NEUTRAL| |SOMEWHAT AGREE| |STRONGLY
AGREE|

IN THE PAST, THERE USED TO BE MORE SNAKES IN SAMOA

|STRONGLY DISAGREE| |SOMEWHAT DISAGREE| |NEUTRAL| |SOMEWHAT AGREE| |STRONGLY
AGREE|

SNAKES IN SAMOA ARE DANGEROUS

|STRONGLY DISAGREE| |SOMEWHAT DISAGREE| |NEUTRAL| |SOMEWHAT AGREE| |STRONGLY
AGREE|

SNAKES IN SAMOA ARE HARMLESS

|STRONGLY DISAGREE| |SOMEWHAT DISAGREE| |NEUTRAL| |SOMEWHAT AGREE| |STRONGLY
AGREE|

SNAKES IN SAMOA ARE RARE

|STRONGLY DISAGREE| |SOMEWHAT DISAGREE| |NEUTRAL| |SOMEWHAT AGREE| |STRONGLY
AGREE|

SNAKES IN SAMOA ARE GOOD

|STRONGLY DISAGREE| |SOMEWHAT DISAGREE| |NEUTRAL| |SOMEWHAT AGREE| |STRONGLY
AGREE|

SNAKES IN SAMOA ARE EVIL

|STRONGLY DISAGREE| |SOMEWHAT DISAGREE| |NEUTRAL| |SOMEWHAT AGREE| |STRONGLY
AGREE|

ALL SNAKES IN SAMOA SHOULD BE KILLED

|STRONGLY DISAGREE| |SOMEWHAT DISAGREE| |NEUTRAL| |SOMEWHAT AGREE| |STRONGLY
AGREE|

SNAKES IN SAMOA ARE FRIENDLY

|STRONGLY DISAGREE| |SOMEWHAT DISAGREE| |NEUTRAL| |SOMEWHAT AGREE| |STRONGLY
AGREE|

I AM AFRAID OF ALL SNAKES

|STRONGLY DISAGREE| |SOMEWHAT DISAGREE| |NEUTRAL| |SOMEWHAT AGREE| |STRONGLY
AGREE|

I AM AFRAID OF SNAKES IN SAMOA

|STRONGLY DISAGREE| |SOMEWHAT DISAGREE| |NEUTRAL| |SOMEWHAT AGREE| |STRONGLY
AGREE|

I HAVE SEEN OR HEARD ABOUT ANY SNAKES IN

[TELEVISION] [RADIO] [SOCIAL MEDIA] [YOUTUBE] [NEWSPAPERS]

I HAVE SEEN OR HEARD ABOUT ANY DANGEROUS SNAKES IN

[TELEVISION] [RADIO] [SOCIAL MEDIA] [YOUTUBE] [NEWSPAPERS]