

SADO – A NOVEL
AND
EXPRESSIONS OF CREATIVITY AND RHETORICAL
ALLIANCE: NI-VANUATU WOMEN’S VOICES

BY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	4
<i>Sado</i> – a Novel	6
Articulating the Creative and the Critical – a Bridging Essay	216
Expressions of Creativity and Rhetorical Alliance: Ni-Vanuatu	226
Women’s Voices	
Introduction to the Critical Component	228
Chapter One: Research Methodology	233
Chapter Two: Oral History Excerpts	246
<i>Mildred Sope</i>	246
<i>Helen Tamtam</i>	258
<i>Viran Molisa Trief</i>	267
<i>Catherine Malosu (with Mildred Sope)</i>	276
<i>Rebecca Tobo Olul</i>	285
<i>Yasmine Bjornum</i>	296
<i>Joanne Dorras</i>	308
Chapter Three: The Vanuatu Context	321
Conclusion	344
Appendix – Part of introduction and poem ‘Colonised people’ from <i>Colonised People</i> (1987) by Grace Mera Molisa	347
Works Cited & Bibliography	350
Acknowledgements	369

ABSTRACT

This PhD thesis in creative writing explores women's marginalised or under-represented public voices in Vanuatu, focusing on literary writing. The thesis is in two parts and uses the dual lenses of fiction and critical thinking to explore the factors that define women's realities and circumscribe the avenues for their voices to be heard and for their creative work to be published. The creative component is the main research element and consists of a novel, *Sado*, set in Vanuatu. The critical component addresses the invisibility of Ni-Vanuatu women writers and the ways in which they have attempted to overcome and challenge existing social and traditional power structures that silence women. The critical enquiry includes oral history interviews with three generations of Ni-Vanuatu women writers.

This thesis is practice-led and uses an applied research approach, rather than a theoretical approach. The novel dramatises and articulates the moral and ethical dilemmas, regarding women's place in society and the challenges posed by customary traditions rooted in a specific place for an increasingly mobile and urban population. The ethos guiding this project is to hold the space for Ni-Vanuatu women writers to tell their own stories. The thesis sits within the inter-disciplinary frameworks of Pacific Studies and Cultural Studies. It draws on Pacific literature and uses feminist theory and methodology, in combination with articulation and oral history methods, to examine the enabling and constraining factors, the actions, motivation and themes of three generations of Ni-Vanuatu writers, established and emerging, and the alliances they are attempting to forge.

The thesis finds, firstly, that gendered norms, certain policies and aspects of customary traditions that use the male position as a default have contributed to limiting the public space for Ni-Vanuatu women's voices to be heard and given due recognition. It furthermore finds that colonial language policies, particularly in education, have contributed to a reluctance to consider Bislama an appropriate literary vehicle. Finally, literary efforts in Vanuatu continue to be hampered by the absence of a community of writers, supportive institutions, publishing outlets, editorial support and a lack of finance for self-publishing work in printed form.

An exploration of the significance of the poetry and non-fiction of two published Ni-Vanuatu writers, Grace Mera Molisa and Mildred Sope, anchors this research project historically. A creative writing workshop and oral history conversations constitute an extension of my research methodology into decolonising methods of research embedded in

indigenous knowledge and local context. They likewise provide a generative and more collaborative form of meaning-making. In the spirit of Lisa King's ideas on rhetorical sovereignty and rhetorical alliance, I explore various opportunities to generate more published writing from Vanuatu in collaboration with Ni-Vanuatu writers.

ARTICULATING THE CREATIVE AND THE CRITICAL
– A BRIDGING ESSAY

This bridging essay seeks to link the creative and the critical components of this thesis.

In a journal article charting the development of Pacific Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, published posthumously in 2017, Teresia Teaiwa asks: ‘How does one begin to honor and respect the layered, oceanic histories of peoples whose descendants today are some of the world’s most misunderstood and misrepresented groups? Where does one begin?’ (‘Charting Pacific (Studies)’ 266). As a Pacific Studies scholar, she resisted any attempts to reduce the Pacific to one issue, saying, ‘You can’t paint the Pacific with just one brush stroke’ (Husband). For me, this evolved into *Who am I writing this story for?* closely followed by *Whose eyes do we see it through? How do I approach the subject to do it justice?* And it only became more complicated as my project progressed.

*

In an insightful lecture series, Toni Morrison speaks about the perils of writing ‘blackness’ (specifically African-American), and equally the perils of *not* writing about it enough, and thereby contributing to erasing part of the world’s population from historical records and literature.

One month into my PhD journey, in August 2016, I had the opportunity to participate in a Talanoa for Pasifika¹ writers at Victoria University. In the tea break I approached the keynote speaker, the eminent Albert Wendt, with the question how to avoid the double-edged sword of one-sided representation on the one hand, and inadvertent cultural appropriation on the other. For a moment he paused and scrutinised my face (pale, flushed), then his tea (tepid). He placed the spoon on the saucer, shot me one of his fierce glances, and admonished me not to try to be an all-knowing ‘Eye of God’ by writing someone else’s culture from an insider’s perspective I couldn’t possibly lay claim to. He also challenged me to write well or not write at all.

Epeli Hau’ofa’s and Sia Figiel’s words eventually steered me out of my eddy. Hau’ofa’s inclusive view of a connected world seemed to offer opportunities for alliances: ‘As far as I am concerned, anyone who has lived in our region and is committed to Oceania is an Oceanian’ (51). Sia Figiel, meanwhile, provided the kind of assurance that comes with recognition. In an interview with Subramani about *The Girl in the Moon Circle* that includes

¹ ‘Pasifika’ refers to ‘people who have migrated from a Pacific Island or who identify as Pacific Islander through ancestry or heritage’ (Teaiwa, ‘Charting Pacific (Studies) Waters: Evidence of Teaching and Learning’, 272).

references to Wendt, Figiel mentions not wanting her young protagonist to be ‘the eye that knows all,’ and concludes that the only solution for experimental exploration is ‘to write and to write well.’ Like Grace Molisa, Figiel never intended her work, called a ‘novella for performance’ by Subramani, to be limited to a local audience. ‘I would like to think that my work transcends the boundaries of my home, appealing more to a regional and hopefully more universal audience’ (124–25, 132).

It is as much as any writer could ever hope for.

*

The bravery and inventiveness of women stood out for me in my field research in Indonesia for my Masters in Asian studies years ago. The ways in which civil society – specifically the students, the labour movement and the women’s movement – collectively found ways to organise themselves for greater democracy in the post-Suharto era, even if it appeared chaotic. I was intrigued by the ingenuity of women, how they, individually and collectively, pushed the boundaries imposed on them by society, patriarchy, religion and culture. Under the guise of activities men would approve of, such as sewing meetings, activists worked tirelessly to raise women’s political awareness and engagement in overthrowing President Suharto and pushing for societal reforms.

These women activists taught me the importance of smart resistance, of knowing the boundaries and feigning acceptance, while building networks and searching for cracks, for windows that could be pried open to let others in, or escape. There was no mistaking the steel core and resolve hiding behind demure façades. They knew better than to brag, yet did not hesitate to generously share their stories, their experiences. And in doing so, they wrote their own history. Each voice adding a nuance, another shape to a canvas that, had I painted it alone, would have been very pastel-coloured in comparison. Herein lies part of the reason for why this project necessitated an inter-disciplinary and collaborative approach, why a variety of perspectives and voices, other than my own, were essential.

*

The Oceania I first encountered was an old widow named after the southern oceans her father, like many seafarers from my Finnish islands, had sailed and traded across. Years later, when I set foot in the geographical Oceania, there were many aspects of ‘island-ness,’ not least the limitations of small communities highlighted by several interviewees in Chapter

Two, that resonated with me. Similarly, the Cultural Studies' concept of 'roots and routes' which has been picked up in Pacific Studies – the retaining of a grounded connection to the home islands paired with the necessity for mobility that includes seeking education and employment overseas – is familiar, with the frequency of circular migration routes slowing down until there is no return. One day the temporary migrant wakes up to find she has been permanently claimed by the diaspora.

All the interviewees have at some point opted to leave Vanuatu. Spending time overseas has had a profound impact on their writing practice, as has any support and interest at home for sustaining it. For Mildred Sope, studies in Fiji led to her being among the first Ni-Vanuatu writers to be published. Sia Figiel claims it took her ten years to find her voice and 'that had a lot to do with living away from Samoa and being exposed to other writers and other traditions' (130).

As an islander, I can identify with the need to seek opportunities overseas and in other languages. My Åland islands – autonomous, demilitarised and Swedish-speaking – were the hunting grounds for Swedish kings. My Finnish-speaking maternal grandparents were born in the collapse of the Russian empire when Finland gained its independence and was torn apart by a civil war that left a deep-rooted suspicion of communism. In Sweden we were considered second-class citizens; in the main cities on the Finnish mainland, we, the linguistic minority, had to watch our backs at night in case someone decided to beat the Swedish out of us. At thirteen, our history teacher asked us to close our new history books, opting to tell us what our schoolbooks, still censored by the Soviet Union, would not. Sometimes the closest to 'truth' is what is not written down. Fast forward, and I ended up in Vanuatu, managing development aid and humanitarian relief for the New Zealand government.

All of this is to say, I believe our lived experiences shape who we are, our subjective selves, and our positionality. Differences cannot be left out of the research equation; it is nevertheless possible to empathise with aspects of lived experience that ring true, even when unfamiliar. The useful insights provided in the few interviews I found with Molisa, Sope and Figiel made me realise that this was another gap, another way of silencing women who wish to communicate with the world. A gap that I could usefully help populate through oral history interviews with established and aspiring Ni-Vanuatu women writers.

*

There were many false starts before the idea of writing a novel germinated, with individual pieces published, or exhibited. Issues of presentation and representation were at the heart of my concerns. An attempt to approach my subject as short fiction, narrated by an unknowing expatriate, merely skimmed the surface and risked ‘othering’ the Ni-Vanuatu characters, which was the opposite of what I wished to achieve. An experimental piece of fiction narrated from a close Ni-Vanuatu girl’s point of view was never published. It was neither my story, nor my body, to inhabit in this form. A creative non-fiction piece about land-diving won a UK travel writing award and was published in the Air Vanuatu magazine. Yet it placed the author and narrator centre stage in an observing and commenting capacity that did not sit comfortably with me.

In a similar vein, a poem about the pleasures of preparing kava was first published in a literary journal and later paired with a print and exhibited at the 2015 International Women’s Day exhibition at the Fondation Bastien in Port Vila. Although poem and print invited discussion, the attention was once again focused on the writer and artist. A singular voice calling attention to itself.

The benefit of exhibiting poems as art is that it allows the writer to experience, first-hand, how their work is received by listening in on conversations, or by engaging in discussions about their work. As a more collaborative form of meaning-making it was immensely rewarding to gain some insight into how my poetry, art and non-fiction was received by a Vanuatu audience. It encouraged me to keep pursuing whatever it was that I was attempting to do, this hazy sense of story, of connections forged and broken.

The Bastien exhibition flushed out another writer, Rebecca Tobo Olul, who read her non-fiction to a full house (Chapter Two). An account of domestic violence written in first person. It was powerful. It was important. And it made me realise that the poetic form, or the way I was writing poetry, would not allow me enough space to capture all the women’s stories that I, too, yearned to tell. The idea of a novel took hold. Yet there it was again:

Whose voice? Whose stories?

*

Sado is mainly, but not exclusively, written from Cathryn’s point of view, a New Zealander without any Māori or Pasifika heritage, in a close third person limited point of view. First person was never an option; it would have been stifling, too exclusive. A certain distance was required, granting the potential for Cathryn’s actions, or indeed failure to act, to be viewed

and judged by others. So how could I ensure at least part of the story would provide fresh and unexpected perspectives, not filtered through Cathryn's mind?

Lisa King's ideas on rhetorical sovereignty and rhetorical alliance in the writing classroom captured my concerns:

Other voices need to be heard, not only as "other" but as voices in their own right, voices that may participate in the conversation of the discipline and in their own communities by their own rhetorical rules. The voices we consider normative need to be interrogated for the sake of placing them within their own contexts, rather than as prime narrators that might make token space for voice not like theirs. (King 12)

Apart from Cathryn's mother, the entire cast of my novel experience traumatic events – starting with the impact of cyclone Pam, at the time the strongest and most damaging cyclone to hit the South Pacific – and have to find ways of coping, individually and collectively, knowing that everyone has been affected in some way. Therefore, the option of keeping a cool distance and not disclosing what is going on in any of the characters' minds seemed unthinkable. It risked coming across as artificial, emotionally deficient, and would only serve to alienate readers. The omniscient 'Eye of God' was likewise out of the question.

Cathryn and Faia are amalgams of individuals, real and imagined. Cathryn's relationships and love interests are not mine, nor do I share her experience of being a single mother raising a teenage son. She may not have been the protagonist closest to my heart, but she was a deliberate choice. Had I found a form that felt morally and ethically viable, I would have attempted to write a predominantly Ni-Vanuatu female cast, with expatriates reduced to minor secondary characters. In a feminist vein, I had no intention to speak *for* others, yet I wanted to speak *out* for others. My critical and creative components speak to the ways in which I have attempted to tackle this task in solidarity with Ni-Vanuatu women writers.

With Wendt's words ringing in my mind, Cathryn insisted on taking greater space. Yet it did not imply that Faia was reduced to a mere foil for Cathryn. Faia is more important than Cathryn, in so many ways. What it required was finding a way to curtail Cathryn's *perceived* dominance, a perception that arises out of the voice that narrates and the eyes through which the reader witnesses events unfolding. This is a story about human relationships and interdependencies, about the resilience and strength of women. Every voice carries its own multi-layered life story shaped by context and history.

*

Imagine being denied not only your own language, but also the local lingua franca throughout your formative years and education. It carries echoes of the current debate about te reo Māori in New Zealand. In Vanuatu's case the majority of the population were prohibited from using vernacular and Bislama at school. Where does that position the development of writing and a literary aesthetic that one can claim as one's own? Several of the interviewees mention being punished for speaking Bislama at school. The relationship with Bislama as the language of literature remains ambivalent.

Born into a linguistic minority, I felt compelled to let my characters express themselves in a mix of English and Bislama – vernacular became too complicated – as people tend to do in Vanuatu. And how do you render the richness of non-verbal communication and silences, without resorting to description? Sia Figiel wrote in vernacular to avoid being confined by formal language conventionalities (125). Mildred Sope acknowledges certain ideas carry deeper meaning in one's own language, preferring the Bislama version of her widely cited poem 'Chusum'/'Choice' (Chapter Two). Since my novel is set in Vanuatu and the characters are more insiders than outsiders, compared with someone unfamiliar with Vanuatu, italicising Bislama seemed inappropriate as it would signify Bislama as something alien rather than an integral part of the novel's world.

Interestingly, in the PhD workshop in Wellington, the mix of languages triggered questions about education levels. To some readers it made characters appear uneducated. Other questions concerned the amount of Bislama New Zealand readers could tolerate, whether mixing languages was a sign of respect or disrespect, and whether every Bislama fragment ought to be translated into English, too.

In comparison, a participant in my Port Vila workshop thought the fictional Ni-Vanuatu women sounded too educated and suggested shorter sentences and simpler language. She pointed out that hardly anyone uses words like 'bliss' about love, or says a dress is beautiful. It's simply 'nice.' 'Nice' is possibly the most overused word in Bislama. 'Nice' does not rate on any literary scale, apart from Vanuatu's. And with that I was back to wondering *Who am I writing for?*

*

The women I encountered during my research all have a purpose with their writing, it is seldom merely for pleasure. Although there is no shortage of political poems, poetry nevertheless seems to afford writers, like Mildred Sope and her niece Catherine Malosu,

space to enjoy the writing for its own sake, to linger in observations about nature or in a moment of motherly love. Everything else seems to be written *in service of* something greater than the writer, whether it entails a social commitment to recording history and traditions or raising the awareness of current and future generations. Here, too, I find the influences that contributed to shaping Cathryn's voice, a didactic element that does not always resonate with a Western readership, a voice that arose out of experimenting with narrative choices and point of view.

'I sometimes resist this voice,' a fellow poet scribbled in the margin of my draft chapter. All I could do was nod. As writers we are trained to resist a voice that explains and tries to convince us that they know what they are talking about, even if it becomes obvious, as in Cathryn's case, that the speaker's understanding is limited.

Trauma takes many forms. Its manifestation depends on who you are, which in essence is the sum of your past and all the parts of your existence, whether you treasure them or not. Memory is always subjective. Cathryn is relentless in trying to gain purchase on slippery ground. In her efforts to structure her broken world, she insists that we listen to her as she goes about restructuring it, to the point where she ignores the realities of Faia's broken world. At this point I, too, was growing tired of Cathryn's voice and started exploring ways to include other voices. I abandoned the idea of a polyphonic novel, even though Vanuatu was never going to be reduced to mere setting. Searching for solutions, I came across a helpful essay on Toni Morrison's paired characters in the *Journal of Narrative Theory*:

She [Morrison] creates a hybrid form of the bildungsroman that is simultaneously both ironic and nonironic. To accomplish this paradox, she presents a set of paired characters in each novel: the protagonist, who serves as ironic anti-hero, and her nonironic alternate, a secondary character with a seemingly lesser role, who by demonstrating strength and courage, triumphs in some way despite the enormity of cultural and personal obstacles. Thus, Morrison de-centers the focus of the traditional bildungsroman, shifting ethical emphasis and authority away from the assumed central subject. (Salvatore 154)

The 'seemingly lesser role' and 'assumed central subject' resonated with me as an apt description of what I was trying to achieve with Faia's character and confirmed that Cathryn, albeit the protagonist, could indeed be the anti-hero. What I needed was more voices and a radical shift, something tangible, to physically wrestle authority from Cathryn and pass it to Faia.

The issues I have been grappling with cannot be reduced to questions merely about craft. My entire quest has been concerned with fair representation and achieving a balance of insider and outsider knowledge; with rising to Teresia Teaiwa's and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's challenge of not writing a single story that becomes the only story and in its incompleteness creates stereotypes, while heeding Albert Wendt's caution not to be an 'Eye of God.' Engaging with emerging writers in Vanuatu was immensely rewarding, in the hope it would generate further interest in creative writing, contribute to building a critical mass, a supportive community of women writers who will tell their own stories. Crack the window open. Engagement likewise increased the stakes. Lisa King's rhetorical sovereignty and alliance paired with Susan Sontag's 'What would criticism look like that would serve the work of art, not usurp its place?' (12), impacted on my novel writing, how the creative writing workshop was conducted, and all the interaction since.

'Where is the Ni-Vanuatu Girl?' asks Carol Aru's 2004 poem that, by chance, reached an international audience courtesy of the Commonwealth Games. Aru was the only living Ni-Vanuatu poet whose work BBC Scotland could find online. 'Where is the Ni-Vanuatu girl? / Sitting near granny / listening to dekudekuni / weaving baskets and mats.'² My critical exploration started with the question: *Where are all the Ni-Vanuatu women's voices?* A longing to read more stories from Vanuatu and hear more than one or two Ni-Vanuatu women's voices is what connects my creative and critical projects. This is my rhetorical alliance and merely the start of a sustained collaboration. The shape of it, how it unfolded, is part of an articulated exploration where each part – creative, bridging, critical – can be read on its own, yet the different parts also inform and speak to one another. This thinking is likewise mirrored in the distinct parts of the critical thesis.

² *Dekudekuni* – custom (*kastom*) stories in Carol Aru's vernacular, not specified.

EXPRESSIONS OF CREATIVITY AND RHETORICAL
ALLIANCE: NI-VANUATU WOMEN'S VOICES

INTRODUCTION TO THE CRITICAL COMPONENT

Women were conspicuously absent in Vanuatu's national formulation of its customary heritage (*kastom*) policy until 1992, when Grace Molisa and other women activists drew attention to the discrepancy between a local reality that valued men's *and* women's practice, and a national policy that only seemed to value men's knowledge and practice. Molisa noted, "women are missing. When men talk about *kastom* at this level they omit women; they pretend that women don't have *kastom*." ... "If we make women's work of no importance (*samting nating*), then much will be lost" (qtd. in Bolton, *Unfolding the Moon* 183).

By the end of 1992 women's traditions and creativity were officially acknowledged alongside men's as part of Vanuatu's custom. Creativity and indigenous stories are conveyed through various means, including visual arts, song, chant, dance, theatre, film, sculpture, pottery, sand-drawing and handicraft. Although Vanuatu has no equivalent to the full-body tattooing tradition of Samoa and Fiji, elaborate body painting features in traditional dances. Literature and writing, however, are not explicitly part of the cultural heritage as they are more recent creative expressions, introduced by missionaries and colonial administrations, boosted by overseas scholarships and social media.

As a fiction writer and poet, I am interested in pursuing the literary strand within this wider context for women's creativity to find out how Ni-Vanuatu women represent themselves and what is keeping women's voices – and, by extension, matters that concern women – from being heard more widely. Key research questions include, firstly: What kind of gendered norms, policies and customary traditions have contributed to shaping the public space for women's creative expressions in Vanuatu more generally, and, specifically, served to limit the space for women's public voices? Secondly, considering that Grace Molisa's literary output is held in such high esteem and carries such a high political profile in Vanuatu, yet literature holds such a low profile and prestige culturally, I am interested in why a few Ni-Vanuatu women nevertheless choose to enter this creative, and very public, space. What drives them?

Lisa King argues native people can claim the coloniser's language on their own terms as an act of rhetorical sovereignty (212–13, 219). Most of Molisa's and Sope's literary output is in English. Hence language, and the implications of colonial language policies, are of interest here.

‘Literary culture has often been patronizing or unfriendly to those women who were able to enter it,’ feminist language critic Deborah Cameron reminds us. ‘Women writers have faced a double bind: their work could be criticised as “unfeminine” or, conversely, as “too feminine”, not the work of a “real” writer but merely a “woman writer”’ (7). Not intending to belittle, I am nevertheless referring to ‘women writers’ because my project is specifically interested in the limitations for Ni-Vanuatu women to make their voices heard and for their pursuits to be taken seriously.

One of the aims of Pacific Studies is to move beyond Western disciplines and theories to promote more inclusive indigenous methods of research alongside models that are embedded in indigenous knowledge and local context (Wesley-Smith; Teaiwa, ‘For or Before’). In line with this thinking, a more collaborative and reflexive part of my research methodology entailed holding a creative writing workshop in Port Vila in 2017 in order to: a) learn what topics and themes are of interest to Ni-Vanuatu women in their own writing and the multi-layered ways in which they represent themselves; b) share insights into the craft of writing gained from my Masters in Creative Writing at the International Institute of Modern Letters and from being a writer whose first language is not English; and c) invite feedback on my draft novel chapters depicting women’s agency and public voices in Vanuatu. The oral history conversations are a continuation of the writing workshop discussions.

Apart from Jo Dorras’ TV-scripts and theatre plays, performed by Wan Smolbag and directed by Peter Walker, less than a handful of literary works have been published in Vanuatu in English and Bislama since the late 1990s. The poetry of Grace Mera Molisa, Vanuatu’s most prolific and distinguished poet, provided a starting point for my research. The last of Molisa’s non-fiction was posthumously published on the first anniversary of her unexpected death in January 2002, together with a tribute of creative writing in her memory, including contributions by members of the Vanuatu Creative Writers’ Association Molisa had founded just months before she passed away (Randell).

Acknowledging the lack of published material, yet reluctant to approach it from a deficiency point of view—a key criticism in Pacific Studies of much Western scholarship concerning the Pacific (Hau’ofa 29–30)—meant that I had to search for spaces where Ni-Vanuatu women express themselves in writing. While my project is grounded in Grace Molisa’s writing, an analysis of Molisa’s poetry is not within this project’s scope. This thesis is practice-led and engages with emerging women writers in real time, rather than taking the traditional route of scholarly research based on key literary sources. My aim has been to create an inclusive and accessible text, grounded in scholarship, and thereby contribute to our

knowledge about the Pacific, Pacific literature and feminist theory. The creative writing workshop and oral history are both feminist research methods. As Gluck (5), Reinhartz and Davidman (126) highlight, 'Women's oral history ... is a feminist encounter, even if the interviewee is not herself a feminist,' because it validates women's experience by producing new knowledge, unearthing historical facts, and affording women 'a previously denied sense of continuity.'

It would be misleading to think Grace Molisa was the only Ni-Vanuatu writer in the early post-independence period. Attempting to address this gap in scholarship, this thesis looks at Mildred Sope – a poet, political activist and contemporary of Molisa – who was published before Molisa, although her poetry has received little attention to date.

Important influences in my thinking include Sia Figiel, the first contemporary female Pacific novelist of Samoan heritage, published in New Zealand, whose fiction captures the experience of Samoan women and girls; as well as writer and scholar Epeli Hau'ofa's ideas on how to rethink the Pacific and the dual purpose of creative writing as entertainment and as a critical tool—sentiments pursued and extended by Teresia Teaiwa and Selina Tusitala Marsh in their academic and creative work. Acknowledging the visual roots of story-telling, and the fact that artists are more valued than writers in Vanuatu, the imagery of Juliette Pita, Vanuatu's most renowned contemporary female artist, is briefly mentioned. In her motifs, Juliette Pita draws on stories that belong exclusively to her Erromango clan that are not allowed to be replicated (McDonald 190).

The critical thesis comprises three chapters. Chapter One sets out the research approach and methodology. Here, I justify the use of Pacific Studies as my framework, why feminism is a useful lens for looking at writing produced by women, and the use of articulation, oral history and a creative writing workshop with a group of self-selected women writers as viable methods from a feminist as well as an indigenous research methods perspective.

Chapter Two is a series of excerpts from oral history interviews conducted in Port Vila in August 2018 with three generations of Ni-Vanuatu writers, established and emerging: published poet Mildred Sope, her niece Catherine Malosu, Helen Tamtam, Rebecca Tobo Olul, Yasmine Bjornum, as well as Viran Molisa Trief (Grace Molisa's daughter) and British-born playwright Jo Dorras, currently the most prolific and well-known writer in Vanuatu. The central placement of the interviews is my response to the main question concerning the invisibility of Ni-Vanuatu women's public voices. Since creative writing by Ni-Vanuatu women writers is not readily discoverable, I have approached women who are

passionate about writing to gain historical understanding and insight into contemporary writing practice in Vanuatu. My analysis and reflections appear in Chapter Three and the Conclusion. For the integrity of this project it was important that the women speak for themselves, rather than merely extracting common themes. Oral history allows the women to articulate their experiences of navigating patriarchy, religion, culture and feminism in claiming a voice and a platform. In doing so, they reflect on their own creative journeys, on Albert Wendt's and Grace Molisa's influence, and the gap in literary output that became apparent with Molisa's untimely death in 2002. Only a few of the interviewees identify as feminist, while others explain their ambivalence about feminism.

Chapter Three investigates the representation of women's marginalised, or under-represented, public voices and creative expressions. Reflecting back on the writing workshop and the oral history interviews, I examine the gendered norms, policies, power structures and customary traditions that have contributed to limiting the public space for Ni-Vanuatu women, and describe the literary scene. Rather than providing a comprehensive survey of all existing policies in Vanuatu, the aim here is to demonstrate the slipperiness of concepts like 'policy' in a context where custom influences local norms and by-laws, including where the local and the global intersect. The material is clustered under five sub-headings: *kastom*, feminism and the women's movement, language and feminist critique of language, the literary scene and publishing, and the Ambae poets. The latter addresses Grace Molisa's prominence. The role of the church is raised under *kastom* and feminism, while political and cultural aspects are addressed throughout.

The central findings are that gendered norms, policies and customary traditions have circumscribed the public space for Ni-Vanuatu women's voices to be heard and given due recognition. Secondly, colonial language policies, particularly in education, have contributed to a reluctance to consider Bislama an appropriate literary vehicle, thus limiting writerly exploration from an early age. Thirdly, literary efforts in Vanuatu continue to be hampered by the absence of a community of writers, institutions, publishing outlets, editorial support and financial backing for self-publishing. Finally, as several of the women testify, the two older generations, in particular, nurture a social commitment to document local history and 'herstories' for future generations.

Nearly forty years after independence, there is a sense of urgency about the importance of documenting life pre- and post-independence in the face of urbanisation, changing ways of life, fading collective memories, and natural disasters, such as the recent Ambae volcanic eruption that has forced entire populations to relocate and leave their

ancestral lands and traditions behind. Younger writers, especially those writing from a social justice or a feminist perspective, nurture a desire to connect into a regional or international literary scene. One of the key concerns for this project, alongside the intellectual enquiry and novel writing, was to find ways of supporting emerging writers in order to see more published writing from Vanuatu in the future. In the spirit of Lisa King's ideas on rhetorical sovereignty and rhetorical alliance, I explore various efforts at collaboration and suggest some opportunities worth pursuing further.

The next chapter sets out the research approach, methodology and methods used.

CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Pacific literature is among ‘the youngest literature in the world,’ as Albert Wendt is keen to emphasise (Wilson 1). Published literature by Ni-Vanuatu writers is scarce and, similar to other Pacific island nations, there is very little writing *per se* by women for reasons I will outline. Looking beyond literature, a wealth of creativity exists that conveys rich indigenous stories, such as oral storytelling, weaving, visual arts, song, chant, dance, hip-hop, theatre, film, sculpture, pottery, sand-drawing, handicraft, flower arrangements and cooking, to name a few. Ni-Vanuatu women are very much present, skilled and articulate in all of these areas, just as they take an active part in the daily communal, social and political life.

Aware of only two published Ni-Vanuatu women writers, yet suspecting there were unpublished writers toiling away in silence, meant the traditional route of conducting a close reading of selected literature would have significantly limited the scope and potential of this project. The interdisciplinarity of Pacific Studies and Cultural Studies offered ways of understanding the broader context. Using feminist methodology, in combination with articulation and oral history methods, I have examined the actions, motivation and themes of three generations of Ni-Vanuatu writers, established and emerging, and the alliances they attempt to forge as they are seeking to make their voices heard. The thesis draws on existing literature by Pacific authors, including literary critique and interviews. Samoan writer Sia Figiel, the first female novelist from the Pacific region, provides a useful point of comparison.

Feminism

While I have acquired some first-hand insight into the local context, my limited, privileged experience is not, and can never be, the *lived* experience of an indigenous girl or woman who has grown up in Vanuatu. My positionality is addressed in the bridging essay. Ramazanoğlu and Holland remind us that ‘the interconnections between “otherness” as abstracted theory and “otherness” as lived experience remain morally, politically and epistemologically significant for feminism. Leaving difference out of research without acknowledgement has implications for what knowledge feminists produce, what power relations they consider, and whom they constitute as absent’ (12; ch. 8).

Even though feminism, and any attempts to claim ‘sisterhood’ based on being a woman, are fraught with issues and limitations, as bell hooks points out (43–67), the connecting tissue in this context is nevertheless womanhood, the urge to write (for multiple, equally valid reasons), and the aspiration to publish literary writing in English. Resonating with a more collective worldview and the idea that we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, I take my cue from Reinhartz’ and Davidman’s ideas about a feminist sisterhood connecting us to the past (127), and bell hooks’ thoughts on the kind of bonding between women that the feminist movement should encourage, namely over shared resources and strengths rather than powerlessness or victimisation (46). Molisa’s writing collaboration with women and men from outside Vanuatu, such as Randell and van Trease, speaks to the value of alliances.

In referring to ‘women,’ I am mindful of the dangers of conflating women’s diversity into a single category. As Cameron reminds us: ‘when “women” speak in one voice, the inevitable if paradoxical result is to silence many women, to speak for them and so prevent them speaking for themselves’ (8–9). Similarly, Marsh (‘Theory’), Teaiwa (‘Reading Paul Gauguin’), Jolly (‘Imagining Oceania’) and Henderson (‘Fleeting substantiality’) have voiced the dangers of generalising and conflating the Pacific diversity into one universal, stereotypical ‘Pacific woman,’ usually Polynesian, who comes to represent the Pacific as a whole. The iconic hula girl image has rendered millions of Melanesian women invisible, as they do not match the Polynesian type (Teaiwa, ‘Reading Paul Gauguin’ 254). Western feminism has furthermore been guilty of imposing Western value systems and attitudes towards the ‘other’ (Smith 43); and of equating oppression based on gender with racial oppression, which has not served feminism well (Marsh, ‘Theory’ 345).

Social and cultural differences with implications for women’s empowerment likewise exist *within* Vanuatu. Varying education levels, the urban and rural divide, as well as women’s position in matrilineal Ambae, are highlighted by Mildred Sope and Viran Molisa Trief in Chapter Two, as well as by Grace Molisa. In a 1981 report from a Women and Development seminar in Wellington, published in the feminist *Broadsheet*, Molisa identifies the power structures of colonialism, dual education systems, churches and national political systems that, in combination with aspects of traditional society, have contributed to oppressing women in Vanuatu. As the second secretary to the Prime Minister Walter Lini, Molisa is introduced as the ‘most powerful woman in Vanuatu’ (McCallum). Six years later these systemic obstacles reappear in Molisa’s poetry collection *Colonised People*.

Because Molisa is the most prominent Ni-Vanuatu writer and the touchstone that anchors my thesis historically, my methodological approach entailed focusing on the power structures Molisa identified as detrimental to women and examining how they have played out in the post-colonial era. It does not imply uncritical acceptance of Molisa's words, but acknowledges her rhetorical sovereignty, and the usefulness of these constant themes for guiding my research.

The collected works of Grace Molisa and Mildred Sope provided a starting point, together with three poems by Helen Tamtam and Carol Aru found on the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre website. The imagery of Ni-Vanuatu artist Juliette Pita provides another perspective on women's place in society and custom, or *kastom* in Bislama. In this context I will limit my art exploration to ideas about *kastom* copyright and the opportunities art exhibitions offer writers. In this context it is worth repeating Wendt's caution that no culture is a static entity ('Towards New Oceania' 52). Lisa McDonald's thesis on *kastom* and contemporary art depicts Port Vila as a site of rapid social change where indigenous heritage and creative expression are constantly redefined (2, 187). McDonald's findings resonate with my experience of exhibiting poetry at the Fondation Bastien in Port Vila and raises the possibility for writing to be considered art and, by extension, valued more. Faulkner (23) advocates using poetry in research 'to engage in feminist methodology and pedagogy through collaborative work, reflexive engagement as feminist ethics, evocative critique and resistance of the status quo,' which I have pursued through the workshop and subsequent poetry collaboration.

In my research I consider relevant indigenous epistemologies and interpretations of feminism in the Vanuatu context. My thesis builds on Selina Tusitala Marsh's feminist analysis of Grace Mera Molisa's poetry and Molisa's strategies to address the imbalance of power between coloniser and colonised, and between women and men in Vanuatu, as well as Marsh's ideas on Pacific feminism, *Mana tamai'ta'i*, as a way of approaching Pacific literature written in English (*Ancient Banyans*; 'Black Stone Poetry').

A creative writing workshop

Field research is intrinsically linked to the discipline of anthropology and practice of ethnography. Speaking from an anthropologist's and a Pacific Islander perspective, Hau'ofa provides insight into the pitfalls, but also potential benefits of fieldwork, provided the horizons are widened and subjectivity is tapped into, rather than suppressed (3–10).

Similarly, in her essays Kamala Visweswaran explores the relationship between ethnography, feminism and literature. She discusses an ‘anthropology in reverse’ that would disrupt the insider/outsider binary by encouraging researchers to return to their own places of origin and habitation, and direct their gaze homewards rather than outwards. She terms this ‘Homework’, rather than fieldwork (102–104). Of interest for my project is how Katerina Teaiwa—of Banaban, I-Kiribati and African American heritage—has navigated her insider/outsider position when applying Visweswaran’s ‘Homework’ in her own research. In using the term ‘Homework’ I am not trying to claim Vanuatu as my ancestral home, merely signal that this project draws on the philosophical and methodological mindset of Katerina Teaiwa’s navigation of her insider/outsider position. Using ‘Homework’ is a deliberate choice to avoid using ‘fieldwork’ – with its connotations of the anthropological fieldwork of the colonial past and of examining the exotic ‘other’ – and instead choosing what Teaiwa has termed ‘a critical confrontation that enables learning, unlearning and indigenous authority.’ In my case, ‘Homework’ entails opening myself up to a high level of accountability and paves the way for the practice-led, applied research approach and sustained engagement with Ni-Vanuatu writers in real time. This, in turn, leads to rhetorical alliance and rhetorical sovereignty.

In a small way, the writing workshop was an act of reciprocity, a way of giving back in return for the wealth of experiences, learning and friendships I was privileged to enjoy during four years in Vanuatu. A second part of my ‘Homework’ entailed following up on ideas from the workshop through in-depth conversations a year later. The conversations provide rich narratives to complement existing literature. The writing workshop and the oral history interviews are feminist research methods.

The purpose of the workshop was to provide emerging Ni-Vanuatu women writers with an opportunity to share their poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction and receive considered feedback – perhaps for the first time – to be able to progress their writing to the next level. Lisa King’s ideas on mutual and respectful recognition—acknowledging that we need each other’s contribution to achieve balance—set the framework for reading each text on its own terms, asking for ‘respect between Native writer/rhetor and the audiences who interact with his or her text’ (230). Rhetorical sovereignty and alliance imply a mindful interaction, to locate yourself responsibly in the writing classroom and the story-telling, but it does not equal shallow or uncritical reading. ‘It asks for close analysis. It asks for students to understand meaning making as a communal process and to respect that differing communities will have unique goals and rhetorical strategies’ (209, 230).

In the spirit of learning and critical confrontation, I opted to step out of the facilitator role and become a participant, too, with another participant facilitating my feedback session. Like everyone else, I submitted writing (excerpts and statements from my novel in progress) in advance, and received valuable feedback on dialogue, interpretations of *kastom* and character portrayals.

As a facilitator, I shared insights from past creative writing workshops, encouraged participants to voice their thoughts and justify their views, beyond personal likes and dislikes. I provided written feedback to everyone who submitted material, including those not able to attend. I prepared reading packs containing writing by Molisa, Sope, Figiel, Teaiwa, Hau'ofa, Marsh, Tusiata Avia, Patricia Grace and Sherman Alexie, among others, and prepared brief one- or two-page resources on topics reflecting participants' interests, such as writing for children, haiku, images in writing, craft advice, creative non-fiction and memoir writing.

As a researcher, the verbal and written interaction provided me with opportunities to reflect on my approach, the ethical aspects of research and knowledge production, the limitations of my understanding of the local social and political context, which is part of the self-reflexivity adopted in feminist research (Jorgenson 115; Ramazanoğlu and Holland 17–18; ch. 6). It was an invaluable opportunity to learn what topics and themes are of interest to Ni-Vanuatu women in their own writing and the multi-layered ways in which they represent themselves. It contributed to both my critical and creative research.

The participants were largely self-selected. In order to encourage and strengthen the nascent local writing community I started by inviting three writers known to me. As invites were accepted or declined—predominantly due to competing work priorities or being overseas—I sought nominations and extended more invitations. There were multiple reasons for not advertising locally. I was looking for writers who were serious about writing, aware that the project's academic and literary nature, which could be read as overly Western, could deter some. Individuals studying or working overseas would not see a local advertisement. Interested writers had to identify as women, preferably Ni-Vanuatu, ideally a diverse group with regards to education, demographics and geographical origin. The numbers were capped at ten participants, including myself, to ensure each writer would receive the attention they deserved during the two days. Given these limitations, targeted selection by invitation seemed the best approach to ensure a quorum, without having to turn down individuals with little writing experience.

With regards to language, the decision to focus on writing in English, and allowing for discussions in Bislama and English, was to ensure an informed discussion could take

place in a language everyone was comfortable with. The use of colonial languages in education and writing is discussed in the next chapters. A francophone writer was invited on the condition that she would submit writing in English, but declined. Chapter Three briefly discusses literature in French and the Alliance française's role in supporting creativity.

Literary writing in Bislama is an aspirational goal, hence it was exciting to receive enquiries about submissions in Bislama, and to learn of someone who had completed a rare Masters' thesis in Bislama. In the end, it was the writers abroad who delivered multi-lingual work: a Ni-Vanuatu emerging poet in Fiji sent fifty haiku (posted on her Instagram), including a few in Bislama, while a poet from the Solomon islands, formerly resident in Port Vila, circulated 'Kava lover' in English, Bislama and French from her poetry collection in progress. The remainder of the submissions were in English.

In a parallel development, the *Vanuatu Daily Post's* editor, Dan McGarry, sought sponsors for a prize in literary excellence in English and Bislama, stating: 'The only way we can produce more people whose capacity for self-expression draws more from Grace Molisa than YTS is actively to encourage it.'³ Referring to discussions with Dr Robert Early at the University of South Pacific's (USP) Pacific Languages Unit, he added, 'it would be a useful and positive intervention to begin to popularise a standard approach to Bislama spelling and syntax. Encouraging writers to use the bislama.org dictionary would be one aspect, but fostering literacy necessitates fostering an appreciation of literature, too' (McGarry; Early).

Robert Early generously assisted with the facilitation of my writing workshop, which was held at the USP in Port Vila in August 2017.

Oral history

Albert Wendt highlights the importance of looking to the past, present and future in order to understand a culture and how it positions itself in a changing world ('Towards New Oceania' 53). Interested in understanding the context in which writing is produced, and following up on discussions held at the workshop, I held in-depth conversations with women writers in August 2018 about the representation of women's marginalised, or under-represented, public voices and creative expressions in Vanuatu. The interviews were conducted in accordance with oral history methodology and the ethical guidelines of the National Oral History Association of New Zealand. Seven broad questions guided the conversations:

³ Yumi Toktok Stret, a popular Facebook group.

- What attracted you to express your creativity in this specific way? When did you start?
- What themes and topics are you interested in?
- What is important to you?
- What keeps you engaged? (Why are you doing this? When do you find the time?)
- What support systems can you access and draw on?
- What obstacles have you encountered on your journey?
- What do you think would be needed to support women's creativity (particularly in the written form) in Vanuatu?

Far from exhaustive, the questions aim to grant participants space to articulate their own creative journeys, therefore the scope of each conversation was decided on an individual basis through e-mail exchanges, pre-meetings and, predominantly, by how the conversation panned out. Some issues from preceding interviews were subsequently raised in the interest of comparison. As with any oral history, a substantial amount of background research went into preparing for the interviews. Themes that emerged included: Grace Molisa's prominence, Vanuatu's political independence, the lingering effects of colonial language policies, impacts of *kastom* and patriarchal behaviour, views on feminism and the role of the church, and the limited opportunities for writerly development and publishing in Vanuatu. New Zealand's relationship with Vanuatu and its people is part of the broader context that frames my enquiry, hence I was interested in the personal connections to New Zealand.

In presenting curated interview excerpts, I am mindful of what Francis Good terms 'the distance between a transcript and the voice,' i.e. any interpretation by the interviewer or transcriber; potential misunderstandings due to language, social class, ethnic origins, personal expressiveness, punctuation and grammar (458). There are different schools of thought on the treatment of interview material. In simplified terms, one school of thought advocates further distancing in order to produce usable research manuscripts, including reordering material so it makes sense for future researchers. At the other end of the spectrum, researchers value retaining verbatim transcripts with all the repetition and backchannelling this entails. 'Transcription is more of an art than an exact science ... There is a world of difference between grammar rules we follow in spoken and written language, and trying to fashion the former into the latter will always be an individually subjective reflection of the transcriber's thought process' (458–61).

Some interviews that read like a volley of short questions and answers contain silences that resulted in follow-on questions. Apart from discomfort, pauses often indicate a search for a right answer, even when there is no right answer. The opposite is true for the assertive interviewee who effectively closes down the discussion, prompting new questions. During my research both scenarios occurred. That silences carry meaning is acknowledged by oral historians and feminist language critics alike (Anderson and Jack; Cameron).

Provenance and process are nevertheless important (Good 466). Oral history builds on relationships and these conversations could not have taken place without a personal connection (albeit originally in a different capacity than writers); without first meeting as writers in a workshop setting; or through personal introduction (e.g. Mildred Sope through her niece, who participated in the workshop). To fit within the stipulated word limit the accounts in Chapter Two are factually accurate, but edited, records of interviews lasting up to two hours. The excerpts have been cleared with the interviewees.

The final part of my 'Homework' entailed presenting my research findings at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, where a copy of my thesis will be deposited for local access and future research. Interviewees were given the option to deposit copies of their recordings with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre's audio collection. The full oral history recordings and abstracts will be deposited with the J.C. Beaglehole Room collection at the Victoria University of Wellington for future researchers.

Articulation theory and method

According to Stuart Hall, articulation theory is 'both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects' (Grossberg 53). Context and conditions matter, as the interviews confirm.

Articulation is a useful tool that brings together context and actors, and thus provides a way of understanding power dynamics and culture as human acts. It is particularly 'helpful in describing the coexistence of complex historical, political and cultural dynamics' (Teaiwa, *Militarism, Tourism* 31). The explorative and open-ended nature of articulation, as theory and method, allowed my research to be mapped out as it progressed, as it depended on the outcome of the writing workshop that ushered in new thinking rooted in local context.

Articulation is primarily used as a method in this thesis to bring together the strands of my research enquiry. It is part of a practical and applied research approach, rather than a

theoretical approach. Articulation is predominantly applied and demonstrated in the creative part of the thesis, and in the manner in which the oral history interview excerpts are curated to illuminate various aspects of the same issues (e.g. feminism, gender-based violence, *kastom* and societal norms). I am interested in how various elements, at different junctures in Vanuatu's history, have become fused and created systematic barriers that keep women from making their voices heard—and, equally, under what circumstances women's literary expressions can thrive.

The principal architects of articulation in the 1970s and 80s were Ernesto Laclau and Stuart Hall. Hall found the economic and class reductionism in classical and orthodox Marxism problematic; it couldn't account for all social formations and the existence of a non-revolutionary culture among the working class. Likewise, it tended to ignore important factors besides class that complicated relationships based on power structures, such as gender, race and sub-culture, and he found it too essentialist. Hall's articulation theory draws on a broadly Marxist framework and Gramsci's idea of commonsense (Grossberg 53–55; Slack 116–17; Clifford, 'Indigenous Articulations' 479). Clifford, Slack and Grossberg are key scholars who have made Hall's considerable body of research and ideas on articulation accessible outside of the United Kingdom and in other disciplines besides Cultural Studies. My research draws on these scholars, as well as Teresia Teaiwa's application of articulation in Pacific Studies.

Articulation has not been widely applied in Pacific Studies. Key work includes Clifford's essay 'Indigenous Articulations,' where Clifford, inspired by Jean-Marie Tjibaou's ideas and actions in New Caledonia, proposes a theory of articulated cosmopolitan indigeneity. Teresia Teaiwa in her doctoral thesis (*Militarism, Tourism*), supervised by Clifford, uses articulation to draw together the seemingly incompatible concepts of the Native, militarism and tourism in Fiji—concepts further discussed in Teaiwa's 'Articulated Cultures' and 'The Articulated Limb'. Emelihter Kihleng, supervised by Teaiwa, uses articulation in her thesis, a poetic ethnography of Pohnpeian skirts (*urohs*), to make a case for the emergence of Pacific literature from its visual roots. April Henderson's exploration of the representation of Samoan men in the United States reveals the racialised stereotyping, marked by size and violence, of Pacific masculinities ('Fleeting substantiality'). Vicky Shandil's research, supervised by Henderson, looks at articulations and disarticulations of gendered identities through performances that challenge 'IndoFijian heteronormative gender(s)' (3).

Cultures are malleable and respond selectively and unpredictably to local and global change. Wendt emphasises the organic and changing nature of culture—the way it accommodates new aspects like Christianity and the Rule of Law, internalising or adapting them to a local context, causing practices like human sacrifice and cannibalism to be deemed unsuitable and dropped along the way—leading Wendt to conclude that the past should not be overly glorified ('Towards New Oceania' 52–53). Wendt's thinking fits with articulation theory, even though Wendt could not have known that Stuart Hall was reshaping articulation theory in Birmingham. Wendt was possibly a step ahead of Hall, voicing similar thoughts about cultural formation in the Pacific region, which he preferred to call Oceania in an effort to counter colonial terminology, like the Pacific and its artificial subcategories, Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia.

Hall has likened articulation to an articulated lorry (a truck), with trailers that can be connected and disconnected, as required (Grossberg 53). This hooking and unhooking of the various elements that constitute a forever changing whole is key to understanding articulation. We are constantly reminded: what has been articulated can also be disarticulated. New ways of reading history and culture are at the core of articulation, collecting overlooked voices and stories along the way, assembling the material in new ways that challenge conventional thinking.

This provides the rationale for my methodological approach to use oral history to raise the visibility of women and generate new material to complement existing literature, with rhetorical alliance as my guiding principle. Allowing the women to speak for themselves is an attempt to counter assumptions about what matters to Ni-Vanuatu women, and in line with rhetorical sovereignty and feminist principles. Weaving back and forth between Chapter Two and Three, the interviews reveal the social, political, historical and cultural power structures that silence Ni-Vanuatu women; highlight women's motivations for nevertheless pursuing writing; and provide insight on feminism in the Vanuatu context.

Elaborating on what articulation means to him, Clifford uses the metaphor of tacking, as in sailing, endlessly navigating and repositioning himself ('Interviewer' 51–52). Having repositioned myself while digesting theory and practice, my sense of articulation is like a Wallace Stevens' poem: a similar sentiment of observing events and actors from different vantage points and articulating fragments or strands, one part at a time, in order to build up a complex picture that speaks to our senses and enlarges our worldview. Perhaps this enquiry, because of its open-endedness, always carried a risk of amounting to thirteen ways of looking at women's creative expressions in Vanuatu.

At the outset my supervisor Teresia Teaiwa tasked me to 'weave a waterproof basket' from the different strands of my enquiry. Pacific Studies is the net that holds everything together. Applying articulation, my research was set up as an exploratory journey of learning and unlearning, connection and disconnection. Teresia suggested I frame my enquiry by first finding out what space Vanuatu inhabits in the New Zealand mind, including any fiction written by New Zealand authors about Vanuatu since its independence, before moving on to the self-representation of Ni-Vanuatu women and their creative expressions. Her point was that in order to draw any conclusions about cultures and cultural impact, we must first understand our own culture, and how we imagine and construct each other. Lisa King likewise advocates for this pedagogical practice to responsibly locate ourselves in the writing classroom (211).

Because the context for how we know and how we build knowledge changes over time, I acknowledge here the existence of formal relationships between New Zealand and Vanuatu (e.g. missionary, diplomatic, aid, trade, education and seasonal labour). This thesis will not delve further into the nature of the formal relationships, other than note that they have contributed to shaping the space for Ni-Vanuatu women, from the Mother Hubbard dress the missionaries introduced (Cummings), to the kind of education, overseas scholarships and careers women have been able to pursue.

New Zealand established a High Commission in Vanuatu in 1987 to manage the diplomatic, aid and trade relationships. Official interaction, in combination with education opportunities in New Zealand and a growth in tourism since the 1960s, has spawned countless people-to-people relationships beyond the state's purview. Even so, many New Zealanders are surprised to learn Vanuatu is only a three-hour flight away. Over the past decade New Zealand's horticulture and viticulture industries have employed thousands of Ni-Vanuatu seasonal workers (Bedford), yet New Zealand remains firmly focused on Polynesia, with Vanuatu conspicuously absent in official accounts and in fiction. This suggests a disconnect, a poverty of imagination in New Zealand's engagement with Vanuatu, a gap this thesis seeks to bridge.

There is no single authentic, or dogmatic, form of Pacific Studies, although the fundamentals, according to Wesley-Smith, and Teaiwa and Henderson, stipulate that it ought to be interdisciplinary, acknowledge and incorporate indigenous knowledge, have a comparative angle (a preference of Teaiwa), and encourage creativity and subjectivity.

Building on Albert Wendt's legacy of weaving the creative and the critical, first expressed in his ground-breaking essay 'Towards a New Oceania,' writers and scholars have sought to find alternative ways of articulating and explaining issues, tensions and contested sites in the geographical, cultural, historical and political flows of people, goods and knowledge between the islands and the continents – or the centres and edges, depending on perspective – with New Zealand, Australia and the United States placed firmly on the edge of the Pacific.

Clifford challenges scholars to think about indigenous articulations as the 'lived dialectics of urban *and* rural,' while avoiding easy binaries of before and after, home and away; to consider the portability of roots, the grounding it provides and how "indigeneity" can be both rooted in and routed through particular places' ('Indigenous Articulations' 469–70). The interrelationship of creative and critical has become increasingly important, with the ongoing search for 'native productions of indigeneity' and a Pacific scholarship that is on the edge: innovative, grounded as well as ground-breaking, creative and critical (Diaz and Kauanui 315, 322–23). The roots versus routes, widely cited by academics, is a key concept in Cultural Studies attributed to Paul Gilroy. It has become shorthand for a much larger body of work, including in disciplines such as African American Studies, anthropology, Native Studies and Pacific Studies. Clifford's *Routes: Travel and translation in the late twentieth century* (1997) builds on Gilroy's non-fiction account, *There Ain't no Black in the Union Jack*, published a decade earlier that dismantles the cultural politics of class, race and nation in the United Kingdom.

The appetite for linking the creative and the critical, particularly in scholarship relating to Pacific island nations and Pasifika communities, has not diminished. In a special issue of *The Contemporary Pacific* on Wendt's critical and creative legacy, Teresia Teaiwa and Selina Tusitala Marsh state their hopes for future Pacific scholars and writers:

What we hope to both signal and project is that our generation of artists and scholars, and subsequent generations of Pacific public intellectuals must begin or purposefully continue to

- (a) draw on both scholarship and art as equally valid sources of critical and creative perception for the consolidation and invigoration of social and political analysis in Oceania; and
- (b) foster a sense of intellectual history to successfully navigate the ongoing challenges of representation by and for the Pacific. (Teaiwa and Marsh 243)

The ongoing challenges of representation have historical roots and are a result of colonisation and missionary accounts, compounded by more recent global forces and worldviews that, in simplified terms, have not appropriately represented dispersed populations that are still connected (Clifford, 'Indigenous Articulations'), while continuing to label the Pacific alternatively as mysterious and exotic, or as a story of deficiency. Wendt ('Towards New Oceania') and Epeli Hau'ofa (6, 30) have both taken issue with these limited narratives.

Intersectionality is frequently invoked in Pacific Studies and feminism. For feminism to be responsive to women's issues, it needs to be intersectional and consider how the social world is constructed and the way multiple oppressions (e.g. race, class and gender) are experienced simultaneously. Only through understanding how privilege plays into gendered oppression, power relations, and how women's and men's roles and spaces are defined, can we begin to address issues like gender-based violence and the marginalisation of women's public expressions. Ramazanoğlu and Holland state that gender-relations are inseparable from other power relations: 'the numerous interrelations of gender with, for example, racialized power, heterosexism, the effects of capitalism or disability, complicate any study that is focused exclusively on gender' (4; ch. 8).

In the next chapter representatives of three different generations of women writers provide insight into their formative journeys.⁴ In the final chapter, I reflect back on the interviews and explore sites where gendered norms, policies and behaviour that constrain and silence women become visible.

⁴ I am not suggesting that their views are representative of all Ni-Vanuatu women or women writers. These women are all urbanised, educated overseas, articulate and acknowledge their privilege.

CHAPTER TWO: ORAL HISTORY EXCERPTS

PORT VILA, AUGUST 2018

MILDRED SOPE

Mildred Sope was born in 1950 on Ambae into a strong matrilineal tradition. She was among the first Ni-Vanuatu poets to be published before independence. Through her father, Mildred is related to Grace Mera Molisa. Mildred attended Torgil missionary school, trained as a teacher in Fiji, and taught at the British Secondary School in Port Vila (Malapoa College after independence 1980). She was active in Vanuatu's independence struggle and is married to Barak Sope, Vanuatu's Prime Minister from 1999 to 2001. At the time Mildred owned and managed her own hotel business. Her poetry collection, *The Questioning Mind*, was published in 1987. In September 2017, Ambae's Manaro volcano erupted and has remained dangerously active. Not long before this interview (at Mildred's niece, Catherine Malosu's, home), Ambae's entire population had to be evacuated.

MILDRED SOPE

I started teaching in 1975 at Malapoa college and I'm proud to say I was the first Ni-Vanuatu teacher among expatriate teachers. I'd been at Malapoa College [the ex-British Secondary School] as a student and went to Fiji for my training, from 1972 to 1974.

MIKAELA NYMAN (MN)

You mentioned that Albert Wendt influenced you as a writer. How was he as a teacher?

MILDRED SOPE

He was one of my lecturers in Fiji, where I started writing poems. He was a big influence at that time. He introduced writing to us. We read his books as well, that inspired us, and he got us to write poems, like a competition in the class. He would pick on each one to go in front and read, and then we would comment. Boys and girls, Albert Wendt took everyone as equal.

MN

Some modern poems from the New Hebrides was collated by Albert Wendt and published in 1975.⁵ You're one of the first Ni-Vanuatu poets to be published. Eight poems in total, a large share of the book together with Albert Leomala. Poems like 'Motherland', 'Speak to me', 'Friend', 'Act', 'Me no kia', 'Chusum', 'The Rush' and 'To my Daughter'. This was before Grace Molisa was published. You both became poets.

MILDRED SOPE

We are both from Ambae! Grace Molisa came to Fiji for her degree, and that's where she started. She came with us for lessons in poetry and writing.

MN

I believe Ambae holds a special place in Vanuatu when it comes to women. Can you tell me about the grading system on Ambae? I believe both you and Grace Molisa are the female equivalents of Chiefs.

MILDRED SOPE

Yes. But at first [women's] tradition and culture was like a barrier and that's men's excuse, until today. Women are now trying to wipe that barrier. Slowly, we are. We, the Ambaeans, thought we'll be the first to wipe out this barrier, but now that Manaro has ejected people ... I posted on Facebook, now that Ambae is a ghost island with nobody living on it, I might as well tell my story, usually good things about a person are told after they're dead. Especially on Ifira. During the funeral service or the memorial service, that's when they say everything good about the person, but she's already gone!

I started school late, maybe you've read that in [*Ni-Vanuatu Role Models*]? There was no schools in those days, but next door there was a boys' school. I would stand there and watch, thinking: How can we join them? At this age, and I'm a girl, how can we change the system? When I was ten, the doors opened. Anyone who passed a test could go to Torgil missionary school. I was the first to come forward. The eldest in my clan, my father's father, said: 'You have to kill a pig before you go.' So I killed a pig and was given the name Molibui. I went to school from 1961 until 1964 when Torgil and Furias school were amalgamated, we were the

⁵ Republished 1983 as *Some modern poems from Vanuatu*.

first intake. Before I came to Malapoa college the grandparents said, this is another stage up, you have to kill another pig. So I did. And I was given the name Vireiaho. I was at Malapoa until 1971 and then in Fiji from 1972 to 1974. Then I got married. In our Ambae custom, before you get married you have to kill pigs, more than one pig, maybe ten or so, but one special pig so you'll be given another name. Some only killed one pig before they married, but this was my third one. And so they gave me another name, Viredaliure, which means 'you will travel around the world.'

Molibui means 'they can call you mother.' Vireiaho means 'you are like the flower of the sun that shines on it.' It's like an induction, they talk about things before things happen. It's unusual for women to kill that many pigs. Men do to gain status to become Chiefs, but not women. That's why I had to post it, because I realised Ambae is no longer! I gained all my status in Ambae. Ambae was different then ... its nature speaks and everything was calm and inviting, everything was good. Whatever I can remember, I might as well put it down before I forget.

MN

Is that what drives you, a wish to write for future generations, or for people now to know what it was like?

MILDRED SOPE

Both. Youth today don't know. Most people from the islands come into town, they don't know anything about their island or custom. So those of us who know about our custom, we might as well write it down. We had Chiefs and we had rules. Now they run wild and don't know. I want to write for people in schools so it can be taught. So children will learn and remember. I'd like to tell them what it was like before independence and who was involved. Because now they don't know who took part in the struggle, what they did!

MN

The Curriculum Development Unit at the Ministry of Education is looking for resources, also in vernacular and Bislama. Have they ever approached you and other teachers of the independence generation?

MILDRED SOPE

Maybe others, but not me. Personally, I don't agree with teaching Bislama in the classroom. If you're learning English, Bislama will disturb everything. For us, Bislama was not spoken in school, if you were caught speaking Bislama you'd be punished. Bislama is like English slang. If questions are asked in English, they'll be thinking in Bislama to come up with answers and it will take them longer. They end up writing slang English.

MN

In the 1975 collection you have 'Mi no kia' ('I don't care') and 'Chusum' ('Choice') in Bislama. Which version sounds more true to you? Could you read 'Chusum' and 'Choice'?

MILDRED SOPE

'Chusum'

Laef blong woli i blong man i laikem
Man i mas chusum weswe hem i go
Wea ples hem i ko
Wanem bae hem i kakae
Wanem bae i makem
Wat kaen klos bai i havem
Bae i mas chusum fren blong hem
Bae hem i save sei hem i no stap
Long wol hem wan nomo
Hem i kat fren
Hem i kat kakae
Hem i kat ples long silip
Hem i kat evriting

'Choice'

Life in this world is for man to
Make his choice
Where to go
What to eat
What to do
What types of clothes to wear
Which people to be his friends
Then he can say he wasn't
Alone or left astray in this world
He has friends
He has food
He has a place to sleep
He has everything

MN

Thank you. Of these two, which one resonates more with you?

MILDRED SOPE

I think Bislama ... the meaning is deep down in you, but when you translate it, it's not deep enough, not like Bislama – I mean, that's personal!

MN

You write about domestic life, but also about your teaching profession and marriage.

MILDRED SOPE

I wrote actively about politics for ten years, a lot of politics, in the 'Vanua'aku Viewpoint' [Vanua'aku Party newsletter]. But we haven't found them! We had a lot of Vanua'aku Pati everything, because my husband was the Secretary General, but we looked through them, and no ...

MN

To me it seems that when you write about your domestic life and relationships, it has double meanings: you are also quite political about women's situation, marriage, and the necessity of going separate ways because of education or political career choices. Can you talk a bit about that?

MILDRED SOPE

I realise a lot of my poems relate to life and love, many poems that haven't been published. I'll have to give them to Catherine to type up. When I read them I realise my poems relate to life, living and love, and politics. Everything comes together.

Father Walter Lini⁶ lived on Pentecost and spent a lot of time on Ambae. Our parents were related. I met my husband, Barak Sope, in 1972 in Fiji. When Father Walter Lini came to Fiji to meet Barak Sope, I introduced them. And from there we started working together. My husband graduated in 1973, he left a year earlier. Father Lini became the Vanua'aku Pati

⁶ Vanuatu's first Prime Minister.

President and Barak Sope the Secretary-General. They were together all the time, and we were behind them.

MN

You established the party's women's wing?

MILDRED SOPE

We had to do something, otherwise the men would leave the women behind. We went to every village to make sure the grassroots understand what is politics, what is independence. Usually men come, but not women. They'd tell my husband and Walter Lini: 'You have to make the women come because they will fight as well, they need to understand so that everyone will work together.' I was the only woman who would stand up with the men to explain. I didn't give a damn. If they criticised me, I said, 'I'm here to help, I don't do anything just to be proud.' The men explained, but not right, not like women, in a way that women would understand. What's the reason, and what will happen after that. I would say: 'Women, you have to come, even if you don't talk, come and listen. When you listen you'll understand and you can spread the news to other women. We are together!'

MN

Did women and men have different roles and tasks in society? Was it okay for women to be politically active?

MILDRED SOPE

Women are at home, in the kitchens, with the kids, that's all. Now things are different from when people were explaining independence. Slowly, women understood that things will be different, not like before. Then, slowly, men too realised that if we work with women things will be different than if we work only with men. We formed the women's wing within the party so women can explain to women what we want to do, and get hold of women faster, from the top.

MN

Who were the women active in the independence struggle?

MILDRED SOPE

The wives of the men who were there – Mary Lini, Walter Lini's wife, Peter Taurakoto's wife Neri Taurakoto, Margret Worek, a Solomon Islander who married [George Worek] from the Banks, and a few ladies from Pentecost, and Stella Korisa. Not many. We were the women's wing. So we had to get more women to come. And it has kept going until today.

Grace Molisa joined 1979-80, when she started working with the Prime Minister, she graduated late. And Hilda Lini, I don't know where she was, in Papua New Guinea or where, she came late as well. I'm not criticising, but lots of people talk about Grace and Hilda Lini, but they were late in joining. But all the women who did a lot, their names have not been mentioned.

MN

You mentioned writing about the independence struggle with Hanson Mataskelele.

MILDRED SOPE

Father Walter Lini asked me, my daughter Angela and his daughter Lora to start writing about the independence struggle. I started interviewing Joe Natuman, Donald Kalpokas, and one more. My husband I didn't need to interview. Before Father Lini died [on 21 February 1999], he asked, 'Have you started yet?' and I said 'Yes yes yes, I've started interviewing.' He kept asking his daughter, but I don't think she's done anything. Then my daughter died. Eventually Kalkot Mataskelele's wife, Hanson Mataskelele, and me, we said, okay why don't we start a book? Why don't we start with our history? Both of us married these boys from Ifira, Kalkot and Barak. So we started that way. She was writing and I was writing, we'll put everything together and publish. But then she died. And everything ... I know she wrote because we talked about chapters. I know she did! After her death, I asked her daughters to look for her material and they said, 'Oh, dad has everything of mum's and has hidden it away.'

I think he's just mourning. When she died and everybody was talking over her body, he came up to me: 'You're the one who was close to her, can you say something?' And I talked about our book, the title would have been *How many miles we walked* and everybody came up to me and said, 'Finish off the book.' I said okay, but there were two of us, and now I've lost my partner. But I'll try and finish mine. That was in 2010.

MN

There's the pre-independence Wendt collection [1975], then the French, *Poemes du Pacifique au Feminin* [1983]. From Vanuatu it's only you, Grace and Dorothy Regenvanu. Do you recognise your poems in French? This one, 'Talk to me' or 'Parle moi.' Do they sound the same to you?

MILDRED SOPE

They translated the poems into French. If I write a poem in French, English or in Bislama, the language makes its real meaning, it's deep down from your heart when you write it. When it's translated, it sounds the same, but it's not really the same.

MN

In *A Pacific Islands collection. Seaweeds and Constructions*, published 1983, you have one poem. They all came around the same time, except for the early Wendt collection and your collection, *The Questioning Mind*, in 1987. What happened after that?

MILDRED SOPE

I'm still writing, until now. I have written a few short stories as well, but, to tell the truth, I don't have enough funds to print. That is the main reason.

MN

Is that the main reason for why we don't see more poetry in print from Vanuatu?

MILDRED SOPE

I think for me, yes.

MN

How have you managed to fit in writing between being active in politics, being the wife of a politician who ended up being the Prime Minister, having children and being a teacher?

MILDRED SOPE

I write my poems from about 11 pm to 1 or 1:30 am. That's when I'm alone, not being disturbed, except by Catherine. She rings me up and we talk for one or two hours. We know

the two of us stay up late. I write my poems mostly at night when I'm alone and everybody is sleeping.

MN

Have the themes that interest you changed over time?

MILDRED SOPE

If you read my poems nowadays, I think you can decide for yourself that the themes changed from year to year.

MN

The problem is we can't find your poems, Mildred. How many poems do you think you have written over the years, and have you always written in Bislama and English? What about short stories?

MILDRED SOPE

Over three to four hundred, only one or two poems in French. I've written short stories in English, they haven't been published. They end up in my collection, in my house, in my cupboard.

A group of kids will come to me in the evenings, and ask me to tell them *kastom* stories from Ambae. And I'm glad, because I thought I'd forgotten. So I tell them *kastom* stories and I think, oh, I remember them again!

MN

What would you say was the women's contribution to independence?

MILDRED SOPE

Women voted for the first MPs in Parliament, and Vanua'aku Pati was in power for eleven years. If women wouldn't have voted, they wouldn't have been in Parliament.

MN

Grace Molisa's poetry collection *Colonised People* (1987) was used to raise awareness, so women realised their vote counted, and that women were needed in Parliament. You

contributed too. You had published some poetry and were also publishing in the Vanua'aku Pati newsletter.

MILDRED SOPE

That was before independence. I was writing a lot of political poems because it was part of the struggle, you couldn't say it in public, so you put your thoughts on paper. During independence it was really hard. They used women during the demonstrations, we were always in front, Mrs Hanson Mataskelele and myself. We were told by the British Government, because we were teaching: 'Don't take part in politics!' But they always saw us at the front in demonstrations. Secret meetings were held in my house. Even our Vanua'aku Pati mobile radio from New York was in our house. Today it would be here, tomorrow in Tanna, next day on North Efate.

MN

After independence, you were keen to have more women's voices heard and more women represented, and you continued with the party. You said men didn't want women to speak up but they came and sought your advice.

MILDRED SOPE

Yeah, and even then ... They would accept women's names, but come Election Day, everybody would vote for men. Have you heard they've formed a Women's Party? In May. I'm not sure whether it will work or not. The men look at us, the women who are trying to talk for the rights of women, and say, 'Not that lady again!' or 'Okay, go for that!' They know who to vote for and agree on it.

If we campaign correctly, women will vote for these two women candidates. Or have reserved seats in Parliament. I've been asking for that since I don't know what year. We can't have just one or two, because they'll be dominated by men, ten would be good. I've been asking for that in our congresses. I will always talk talk talk. I've said, sometimes I think my voice just goes in the wind, you old men sitting there watching me, you don't listen to what I say. So maybe the solution would be reserved seats for women. I've asked Catherine to stand in 2020.

MN

I asked Catherine once if she was writing anything besides poems and she said she was writing about her uncle, Barak Sope, and I asked why not write about the women behind him. You two wrote a profile on Barak?

MILDRED SOPE

Yes, just to help with the presidential candidature.

MN

There are very few writers in Vanuatu, possibly because it's not regarded as a job in its own right. Yet you work in different organisations, writing reports, political newsletters, keynote speeches with poems, leaflets for presidential campaigns ... Where does creative writing come in? Like, for your children, to see themselves reflected on the page?

MILDRED SOPE

We haven't thought of that [to see themselves reflected in writing]. When you get married everything starts all over again. My grandchildren come and say: 'We have to read a poem in class tomorrow. Can you write one?' And I sit down and write one. Then one says, tomorrow is Mother's Day, and asks for a poem. People come up and say, can you write something, we're having this competition or speeches tomorrow. Okay, what's the title? And I'll sit down and write it. Okay, here you are, rewrite it in your own handwriting and take it.

MN

So you have become ghost writers. Does this have some root in *kastom*, a kind of exchange?

MILDRED SOPE

No. Maybe because we love writing, it's part of everything we do and we just do it with our heart, from our heart. Then we forget about it.

MN

Yet we don't see your name on anything published. You have so much in the Vanua'aku Pati newsletters, even though you couldn't find them, written over the years. What do you think is needed for the future, besides education, to see more women's writing?

MILDRED SOPE

They may have been in Father Lini's house, but they would be destroyed now ... I think publishing, how to look around for [publishers]. How do we find them?

MN

Would you call yourself a feminist?

MILDRED SOPE

Nooo. When I was in Fiji, I mixed with these feminist ladies, but I don't believe to the extent they do.

CATHERINE MALOSU

Very extreme.

[MILDRED SOPE NODS]

MN

Is there a difference, a Pacific kind of feminism as opposed to Western feminism? What is it to you when you say it's 'extreme'? More radical?

MILDRED SOPE

Probably radical, yes. I believe in women to come out, but not in that feminist way that you stand there and say women are this, men are that. I don't put a line between them and us. But I want them to accept us like we are, qualification-wise and everything. We should work side by side.

HELEN TAMTAM

Helen Tamtam was born in 1962 on Epi. Together with Carol Aru she belongs to the second generation of writers who came of age around independence. Helen Tamtam is an advocate for education in Bislama and vernacular. She worked at the University of the South Pacific (USP) and with the Curriculum Development Unit at the Ministry of Education to implement Vanuatu's new language policy and translate educational resources into 81 vernacular languages. This is also the topic of her Doctoral research.

HELEN TAMTAM

My Dad was a missionary nurse at Peyton Memorial Hospital, on Iririki, then got transferred to Tanna. We would never have gone to the southern islands. Mum was from Epi and dad from Malekula. I attended the British Primary School and Kindergarten [now Central School] and remember crossing on the last British resident Commissioner's boat from Iririki with his and the doctor's children. In those days people didn't think it was worth educating women. When mum passed away in 1980, the family said: 'You need Helen to be at home and do all the work she's not around to do.' But Dad saw it differently and said, 'No, I'm not going to bring back Helen. I want her to complete her education.'

I attended British Secondary School and had the opportunity to go overseas on a scholarship, but because Mum was unwell I went to the Vanuatu Teachers' College. There was a diploma programme with the USP. After four years I went to teach in schools.

We had few high achievers, because they were teaching us very second rate of work. The diploma allowed me to see beyond teaching to a leadership role. The secondary French teachers trained at Ecole Normal and we, the English teachers, were at the Teachers' College.

We were strictly told to use English, you were disciplined or punished if they heard you speaking your language or Bislama. After independence the two systems were amalgamated. A challenging time. The French students had a different way of thinking from the anglophones. I was one of the head students and reminded students that we're Vanuatu students, not English and French. The French had their rude and loud ways and didn't want to

carry out responsibilities, while the anglophones were very dedicated, and so we clashed. I had to make strong decisions. The head boy would hide behind me and I had to announce to the school that this is what students want.

MIKAELA NYMAN (MN)

Your teachers' training coincided with independence. Do you remember that day?

HELEN TAMTAM.

I started in 1980, but went home to Malekula in June because my Mum was dying, and died in June, so didn't witness the independence celebrations. We witnessed the political unsettlement. We shifted to Malapoa college because the British marines had their camp at the Teachers' College, to ensure the country would achieve independence peacefully.

MN

There was still an uprising afterwards, in Santo.

HELEN TAMTAM

Yes, but not in Vila. When Mum passed away we couldn't go by plane because of unrest in Malekula. We couldn't land at Lamap because the French speakers were around that airport and against the anglophones because of their support for independence. We couldn't fly to Norsup. The Presbyterian church had a boat, Mum was a church leader, so they took my brother and I from Port Vila to Malekula to witness her burial.

MN

As a leader in the Presbyterian church, what kind of freedom of expression did that give her?

HELEN TAMTAM

She was active also in politics. She was quite strong. When everybody ran away to the hills, fearful of French groups attacking, she stayed on. She said she's going to face them, so she stayed in the village.

Mum didn't write, but the church respected her, she was an outspoken woman, especially in the Presbyterian Women's Association. Very prominent and recognised for her contribution

in church. I taught in Malekula for two and a half years, then the Teacher Service Commission appointed me as language lecturer at the Teachers' College.

Anne Stamford⁷, a language and literature teacher at the British Secondary, made us write stories. I remember writing poems but I never kept a record. With the challenges we have, with disasters and humidity ... In today's digital society a lot is stored. Whatever you wrote in those days was not well kept. Yes, paper rots ... I realised I had this strand of writing, but was too busy. Coming back to Teachers' College, I wrote short poems and read those. People came together and read their poems in the schools. That somehow faded away.

MN

Did you ever write for the Malapoa school journal?

HELEN TAMTAM

No, the journal was no longer written, not sure why. We had speaking competitions and public reading competitions. As a senior I was rewarded first prize in reading.

After my first year at Teachers' College we had an opportunity to go to Australia. I went in 1987 for a Graduate Diploma. I was given a second opportunity to do a Masters [in Education at Sydney University of Technology]. I wrote down everything. A thick journal, hidden somewhere in my house. I lectured at the Teachers' College for another 15 years and then I resigned. Not that I wanted to leave the teaching profession. We were supposed to go to PNG to observe vernacular schools. The day before, I was told I couldn't travel, a political advisor would go instead. This was in 1994. Because I was the only female. I thought if the Ministry of Education doesn't recognise that I have the capacity to do something for Vanuatu, I might as well resign. USP approached me to assist with student support. I worked with the Pacific Languages unit, did projects with Dr Robert Early, an adult literacy survey in 2007. My passion for vernacular education was still strong. So I enrolled in a PhD programme. My focus is vernacular education in Vanuatu, what we've achieved.

⁷ Anne Stamford edited *Gong: young voices from the New Hebrides*, published by the South Pacific Creative Arts Society in 1975. Republished in 1983 as *Gong: Young Voices from Vanuatu*.

MN

Tell me about vernacular education. It started with a language policy change in 2010.

HELEN TAMTAM

Yes. After the language policy was drafted we needed to implement it. Education specialists have realised the best way for a child to learn is through his language. In 2013-14 they were looking for someone for the vernacular literacy programme and found me, I'd attended writing panels for the Secondary's English curriculum. They knew me as someone with a passion for vernacular education. It's part of the Curriculum Development Unit.

We have about 113 languages and the three [official], English, Bislama and French, that's 116. But the actively spoken languages are about 81. Bislama was the best to have our resources in. It's had a huge impact to have French and English teachers using the same book. Now we have common planning, French and English teachers working together. For vernacular, we need to consolidate more, there are schools that need help, children should be using their local language for instruction. We've translated stories into 60 languages already. All schools should be receiving their resources before next year. We've worked with languages that have more than 1,000 speakers and some readings and alphabets done.

MN

You were awarded the Hanson Mataskelele award in 2015, on International Women's Day. How do you think it's viewed by men, women pursuing higher education, a PhD?

HELEN TAMTAM

The award was for contribution to Vanuatu languages. I wanted to record what existed before and what is done now. It's just time for writing ... I withdrew and said when vernacular education is up and running I will have time to write. That's the challenge. People say, 'why do you want to write, get your thesis?' I'm not sure if it's the thesis or the recount. It's so people later will understand what we have done.

MN

It's a complex journey. Women with a PhD degree can still be counted on one hand.

HELEN TAMTAM

Very complex. This is the challenge for us. Some think what's the purpose of getting a higher qualification? Those with a PhD, people have assessed their contribution and finding very little. I'm quiet, but I hear people saying, 'he or she's got a PhD but he's not doing enough.' You can't assume that everyone with a PhD will have the answers, solutions to everything. You've got your limits, how much you can create change.

MN

You participated in last year's writing workshop. Passionate poems about Bislama, fiction and non-fiction stories about the time of independence and life in the islands. What drives you to write these themes?

HELEN TAMTAM

We enjoyed a carefree life, our children don't have that. The population has increased and urbanisation brings other interests. People are more cautious who they talk to. Our children miss out. An aunt from Pango, who grew up on Malekula, tells me stories of babies after birth – a beautiful story – they're kept in ashes, they leave the babies there so they're warm. I really want to get that story, because it doesn't exist anymore, but that's how children were saved and were looked after in those days. There's been ways, traditional ways of children surviving, that we've not learnt, yeah. Things like that have challenged my thoughts, things we don't know today. This is how they became who they were.

MN

With increasing urbanisation you have a whole generation growing up in Port Vila, who don't know their parents' islands. This is also a theme of your writing: telling stories of how things were.

HELEN TAMTAM

Yes. They may say they're from that island, but you're not sure whether they've ever seen their parents' islands. I think another reason is that growing up on Tanna was very interesting. We had traditional seasonal events. We played lots of traditional games. You don't see that anymore. But we're hoping the vernacular education will revive those traditions.

We always thought of reviving our *kastom* stories. We have a narrative unit in year 4 writing stories, and a unit telling stories orally. We're bringing in cultural ways of telling stories. We want children to discover different traditional ways of telling stories.

MN

With the Ambae volcano erupting, Mildred Sope said it's 'a ghost island'. There seems to be this urge to collect stories from Ambae.

HELEN TAMTAM

Even if we're not from Ambae, imagine if you're going to be displaced ... That's the strangest and saddest thing in life.

MN

I found you and Carol Aru on the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre with a couple of poems. How did they come about?

HELEN TAMTAM

A lady came around, she was interested in poetry and needed some poems for a website. She held a writers' workshop and a few of us attended. In 2005 or 2006.

MN

For a short while there was a Vanuatu Writers Network. Was it after that workshop, or when Grace Molisa was still around?

HELEN TAMTAM

Carol would know. When Molisa was still alive she wanted to get a few of us around. She said she needed to get us together to write. But I was having babies, it was very challenging for me. I couldn't produce what she wanted.

MN

I came across an interview with Grace Molisa in *Mana* journal, where she mentioned that there were a few women who write in Vanuatu, specifically in curriculum development. I thought it must be you and Carol Aru.

HELEN TAMTAM

She related to us well. She knew we wanted to write and when we saw each other we would remind ourselves that we needed to write. But at the time each of us were starting our families, so we couldn't. She was really missed.

MN

What kind of support networks do women need to write?

HELEN TAMTAM

We need someone strong, someone who has time and availability to draw us together. I see Rebecca [Olul], I'm identifying she will. After we left your workshop, I thought we'd rely on one girl studying here to get us together, but it never happened. Rebecca and I go to the same church, I'll suggest to her that, when she has free time, could she get us to come together.

MN

You said some of the women have started reading their poetry. Is it not enough to write something and e-mail to each other?

HELEN TAMTAM

[Rebecca] reads her poems in church and everybody adores that. We could do that ... If someone is willing, or has time, to take whatever we have written and send it back to us. We just need someone to be there.

MN

Grace Molisa was not afraid to speak out for other women. There doesn't seem to be that urge now. Why do you think that is? It's not like there's less need for women to be heard.

HELEN TAMTAM

There's a Women's Department and the National Council of Women, they work well together. Things have evolved, people are realising the power women have. It's just the mentality ... I'm not sure if it's going to be today or how many years. In education there are powerful women, but all the high-level positions are men. But at classroom level the majority of teachers are women. I'm not sure, and I'm afraid too, it's very different here. If you keep shouting and saying here you are, this is who you are, you're going to be looked down on.

You just need to prove yourself, okay, I can make a difference. In my position I find I have a lot of respect from men.

MN

Many published writers happen to be teachers, like Mildred Sope and Grace Molisa.

HELEN TAMTAM

Mildred was my teacher at Malapoa College. Only later we realised she was doing so much for the Vanua'aku Pati, that her home was used. She came to school just as a woman teacher, and she was someone who ... not just a teacher who tells you what to do, but gets down and is part of it. In sports, she'd be running on the sports field, doing everything we had to do. That's one thing we enjoyed about her. She was humble in her ways and very enjoyable to be with as a teacher. She was writing at the time, because we saw her poems published in her book.

MN

Did she inspire you to write?

HELEN TAMTAM

Yes, she must have, because we saw who she was and she was a role model.

MN

So who are the role models for women today, especially for younger women?

HELEN TAMTAM

I think Grace is one, and even Mildred, they're two outstanding women.

MN

Do young people know about Grace's and Mildred's writing?

HELEN TAMTAM

Not much. See, we don't, we don't.

MN

Why are they not taught in the school curriculum?

HELEN TAMTAM

They should be taught in the curriculum! My project is just primary school but in the secondary phase we should have more say. We should be able to raise that. We had an argument, writing the syllabus, the French Ni-Vanuatu staff felt the French literature was very foreign and written hundreds of years ago. We cannot have people read that.

All the [resource] writers are non-supporters of Bislama, very anti-Bislama. Especially the very educated women. They think Bislama disturbs the learning of languages, especially English. I'm trying to say it's okay. Bislama has its role in society that languages like English and French cannot play.

People say, please write what you're doing, people across the world are interested in what's going on, fascinated by what we are doing. But I don't have the time to write.

MN

Last year the *Daily Post* editor suggested establishing an award for excellence in writing. Not for schools, he wants adults to write more in the vein of Grace Molisa. You carry the torch for vernacular and Bislama, including in your poems.

HELEN TAMTAM

People hardly read poems in Bislama, they think poems can be written in English only, but I'm going to keep on.

MN

So this new generation, starting out with vernacular education, where are they heading? They are going to be on a different footing.

HELEN TAMTAM

I see a very bright future for them. They'll be a lot more Ni-Vanuatu. Through language, the decisions we've made, we're going to retain our cultural values. Cultural respect is going to be brought back. So much has been lost. Not only are we educating children to preserve and maintain their languages, it's also for them to do well when they study in a second language. We hope to see more scientists and mathematicians, people who will be outspoken, who can express what they want. We have a very bright future.

VIRAN MOLISA TRIEF

Viran Molisa Trief was born in 1977 in Port Vila, the oldest of Grace and Sela Molisa's three children. Viran attended Nelson College for Girls and holds a double degree in law and tourism management from Victoria University of Wellington. Returning to Vanuatu, she joined the State Law Office as Solicitor General. At the time of the interview she worked for the Vanuatu Australia Policing and Justice Program. On 15 July 2019 Viran Molisa Trief became the first Ni-Vanuatu woman to be appointed a Judge of the Supreme Court. Viran has recently begun to read her mother's poems in public, but does not consider herself a writer. She hoped to republish Grace's collected works in 2019.

VIRAN MOLISA TRIEF

My mother hailed from north Ambae and my father from northwest Santo. They grew up in village life. My mother had the opportunity to go overseas for education, to New Zealand. They met at the University of South Pacific (USP) in Fiji, studying. It was the 1970s, a time of intense movement towards political independence for our country. A spirit of nationalism and desire for independence swept through the Ni-Vanuatu at USP and other tertiary institutions in Fiji. They were caught up in the excitement and activism for political independence. In October 1979, we agreed a Constitution for the new republic of Vanuatu and on 30 July 1980 we received political independence from our joint colonisers, Britain and France. Immediately thereafter my father was involved with assisting to quell the rebellion in Santo. The people involved wanted the island to secede from the newly independent country. The Papua New Guinea defence force came in and dad was the lead negotiator for the new government to bring an end to that rebellion. Mum had taken up office before independence to serve with the Prime Minister, Walter Lini. So that was our life.

I have so much fondness for the Prime Minister's office, as a child I spent days up there. Back then we didn't have the whole gamut of political advisors that surround our Ministers now. Back then we had three – a first secretary, a second secretary and a third secretary. Mum was the second secretary out of only three that served with the honourable Prime Minister. My father ended up becoming a member of Parliament in 1982 in a by-election, and in 1983 a state Minister, and was pretty much a Minister until he finished in Parliament in

2012. So I've always been in the midst of two high-profile people involved in the inner workings. Exposed to all sorts of people and things happening within the highest levels of government. That's what I was born into and grew up inside.

MIKAELA NYMAN (MN)

How do you think that has coloured you and the choices you've made?

VIRAN MOLISA TRIEF

I'm sure it had a huge effect. I finished Uni with a double degree, a Bachelor of Law and a Bachelor of Tourism and Services Management. But I had the blessing of coming back from Uni straight into working as a government lawyer at the State Law Office. I've always felt my calling was to serve in the public service, as a lawyer within government, and not in private practice. I've always felt a real sense of responsibility to serve for our people. So what I'm doing now, with the Vanuatu Australia Policing and Justice Program, is only the second workplace ever in my life.

We work with all the different sector agencies within policing, justice and community services, up to 13-14 different organisations, including Corrections, Women's Affairs, Malvatumauri [Council of Chiefs], Customary Land Management Office, and then the community services part. There's a Child desk within the Ministry of Justice and the Disability desk. Very exciting. Before that, all I knew was working within government in the State Law Office.

MN

Do you recall your mum writing her poetry and booklets? She had a tremendous output, on all kinds of issues – the UN, women's rights and women's voices. You never felt the urge to pick up the pen and write in the same vein?

VIRAN MOLISA TRIEF

As I get older, I wish more and more for it, but it hasn't happened. Some massive mental block or something. I look around and see the dearth of writing since her passing and I think: Vanuatu can do better. We have that artistry and that art inside us, the people of Vanuatu do, but for whatever reason it's not out there in the public domain.

MN

Why do you think that is? An answer I often get is: we're not into writing. It's about the orality of language, the multiple languages that exist, the fact that education was in French and English. But it seems overly simplistic to blame language.

VIRAN MOLISA TRIEF

Yes. Well, here I am, talking about this without actually doing it myself. I feel writing is a secondary or third something. You write down what you already have in your heart, in your thoughts. And I firmly believe that art and music, performance, we have all that, it doesn't need to be taught. The people it comes for naturally, it's innate in them. I mourn that since Mum's passing, we haven't had work published, that artists aren't celebrated more. I still see the intense reaction, emotion, that comes out in response to Mum and her writing. And I wonder how would it be if we had more of our peoples' work out there? It would be welcomed, there's a real openness and hunger for that. There's something in our place ... there's a phrase from elsewhere: the tall poppy syndrome, cutting down people. I can't help wondering if part of it is jealousy. If that is why we don't have more of us putting themselves out there, on the line, open for criticism and attack. My mum – for all the positive reactions after her death – the very people who now speak about her in the most glowing terms were her most virulent attackers in life, and right up until she died. Hypocrisy is a massive something in the world I see within us.

MN

Do you think that applies to the women's movement as well?

VIRAN MOLISA TRIEF

I think that speaks for itself. Yes yes yes! Tall poppy syndrome, hypocrisy, not being able to support each other for the sake of progressing the status of women together, oh yes. And I mourn that too.

MN

When your mum published *Black Stone* in 1983 she was talking about a Vanuatu in transition. That was three years after independence. She then turned from writing about the colonised people of the New Hebrides to talking about the colonised people of Vanuatu – the women, still oppressed by patriarchy [*Colonised People*, 1987]. What do you think changed?

It feels as if Vanuatu is in a place of transition again, but it's not as clear where Vanuatu is transitioning to. Where is Vanuatu heading, and where are the women in this?

VIRAN MOLISA TRIEF

I had the opportunity last year to go to a forum that CARE International organised⁸ and I read a couple of poems of Mum's. The first one was the opening poem of *Colonised People*, and I got quite emotional reading the poem out loud. Because when she was still alive, I was there, in public. I can remember at least one time when she read that poem out loud, and she was quite emotional in her delivery. So when I read it I, too, was quite emotional. One part was just the honour of reading Mum's writing in public. The other part was that as I was reading, it struck me: it was so sad. Large parts of the poem are lines from medical records from the Vila Central Hospital of women who've come in. It's saying out loud the injuries they've received at the hands of their partners. Domestic violence. And it was so confronting and saddening as I was reading it, because what kept going through my mind was that she wrote this in 1987 and this could well be describing what is happening *right now* at the Vila Central hospital, what happened yesterday and today, in 2018. It hasn't changed! The situation for women in terms of domestic violence is the same, it hasn't changed in all these years. Domestic violence, for me, is a symptom, but it comes back to our norms, how we regard our women in our society.

MN

I talked with your aunt, Mildred Sope, who is related to you through your mother and also from Ambae, where women enjoy a special status through the matrilineal system. Do you think that helped them?

VIRAN MOLISA TRIEF

Definitely. That was part of why Mum was who she was. Someone asked me about that the other day. People can have all sorts of views on gender and stereotypes about women, but anyone Mum ever had a discussion with she would get them to think about it, and they'd always accept that men and women have different roles in society. And no matter whatever people say about *kastom*, about life now, life imagined back in the day, that women and men

⁸ On the 13th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women held in Fiji in October 2017.

have different roles – both of them are equally valued in society. That was something she got from her upbringing on Ambae. Equally valued. Women have roles, men have roles. They are both essential for the family, for good life together – from the nuclear family to the extended family, to the community, and national life even. Her ability to be able to break it down so people could grasp that as the basic starting point. She was able to speak out and make sense for people, speaking for the advancement of women, no matter where in Vanuatu they were from, no matter what walk of life.

MN

In an interview in *Mana* journal from 1993, she talked about trying to express what the ‘silent bulk of womanhood’ has not found a voice to express before. Yet today, women seem more hesitant to speak on behalf of someone else, and unwilling to speak up. What do you think is needed to change that?

VIRAN MOLISA TRIEF

Myself included, perhaps. For all I’ve just talked about, she was subject to intense criticism and attack throughout her life. She had real conviction. And so, even at times when it was hard, to see that she had the support network that she had, she was able to keep going.

MN

What kind of support networks did she have?

VIRAN MOLISA TRIEF

She had lots of friends from all over, a talent of making friends. She had her Christian faith. Just knowing she was making a difference helped her. She drew on what she could and kept going. Whereas I wonder now, with no one doing it since ... Confidence has something to do with it, but it’s also not a nurturing environment for people to start, then they can practice and get better. I’m not out there either ...

MN

With *Colonised People*, she wanted to raise awareness ahead of the 1987 Parliamentary elections to prepare the ground for more women to enter Parliament. Two women got into Parliament. I see a new women’s party established itself recently, with quite ambitious goals.

What's your view? It seems to come from the top end, rather than building from the grassroots up.

VIRAN MOLISA TRIEF

Yes, and I've said that too. And they accept that. It totally is a construction from a tiny group at the top end, as opposed to something that's coming from a mass base to build up from. From our history, from our track record, it would be quite surprising if they were able to garner enough support from women.

MN

Could you tell me about the book withdrawn from publication, *Wea Rod?* She was critiquing the government at the time, wasn't she?

VIRAN MOLISA TRIEF

Yes! It wasn't withdrawn from publication, but from the shelves. The police physically removed every copy from the bookshelves. I remember when *Black Stone* came out in 1983, touching those newly minted copies. Then, in 1987, Mum was involved in the campaign for getting the Vanua'aku Pati female candidate elected, Hilda Lini. And she did get elected. I remember a political rally held at Independence park, campaigning for the Vanua'aku Pati and for Hilda Lini. And I remember with one of my cousins walking in the crowd through Independence park and the adjoining park in front of the MSG [Melanesian Spearhead Group] secretariat building, trucks and people on both sides, and we walked around with copies of *Colonised People* selling them on the day. Because Mum had included, knowing it was coming out as part of her leading and supporting the campaign for Hilda, that poem about Hilda Lini in the book. And so we walked around and every so often we opened up the book and said, 'Look, we are here for Hilda and here is a poem about her!' And people were taking out cash and buying the books.

So that and then *Wea Rod?* in 1991. I remember when that came out too. I remember her sacking by the Prime Minister, and the books being swept off the shelves, and one of the supporters of the Prime Minister burnt down a house we had in Ohlen, in the same yard where we now live. Torched and burnt to the ground. No one was hurt. It was such a difficult time for her. And I remember crying, not with her, because she didn't cry, but I was crying for her. And she said, this does seem difficult, and talked to me about it. That was her

pointing out nepotism within government, pointing out corruption. She had always been one to point out all sorts of issues for Vanuatu, and so to have the party that led the struggle for independence to come out just ten years later – the corruption that can come with power, and the abuse of power – was a terrible something that she *had to* talk about and write about.

MN

I've had discussions with some younger women who are outspoken feminists, who only recently discovered Grace Molisa's writing, and didn't know about Mildred Sope. Their comments were that your mother's writing is extremely powerful, it also feels very relevant today. Any chance that her pamphlets, publications and poetry collections would be reissued, including *Wea Rod*? Are you thinking of republishing her works?

VIRAN MOLISA TRIEF

Yes, definitely. There is something you get from seeing the written word in hard copy that you don't get from digital form. I would really like to get that out into the hands of our people, especially our young people. And my children! I'd really like that to happen.

MN

It seems like an opportunity to have a discussion about something decades removed, and yet speaking to today's situation. Your mum's company, Black Stone Publications, has not been used since your mum's passing [in January 2002]. But it still exists as an imprint that you could revive? Would you be interested in publishing other women writers?

VIRAN MOLISA TRIEF

It was never set up as a company, but my brothers and I have talked about getting on to that. I've spoken about feeling quite saddened about the lack of writing since. What we can do to promote more of that, or to make more of that happen, we would like to support. I can't help thinking that it will come down to money, but if that can be addressed, then definitely!

MN

What is the role of the university? USP published several collections of writers across the Pacific in 1983. Fiji has a strong writing and cultural centre, the USP here not so much. Very little seems to have happened since the 1980s.

VIRAN MOLISA TRIEF

Yes, I think they've moved away from that. Howard van Trease looked into that, also into possibilities of the USP being involved in reprinting Mum's books. They used to promote and publish Pacific writing. That's not something they do much these days. Maybe it's not money-making. Like many universities it comes down to funding.

MN

Still, here is a woman activist, writer, poet who is highly regarded outside of Vanuatu. It seems odd that the children of Vanuatu don't know of Grace and wouldn't get to read her. Do you think *kastom* contributes to silencing women's voices in public?

VIRAN MOLISA TRIEF

It definitely can. And you would already have all sorts of views on that. It can be used as a blunt instrument and, you know, *the* authoritative voice for a whole bunch of things that is an abuse of power!

MN

What about the role of the church? You mentioned your mum had a strong faith. Talking with women of different generations, the younger see spirituality, but not necessarily the institution of the church, as important. Whereas the older generation definitely thinks the church has the answers, also in relation to women's role.

VIRAN MOLISA TRIEF

Yes. Well, during the course of things that went down in 1991, Mum resigned from the Vanua'aku Pati. Close to that, whether it was before or after, she also resigned from the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu. She was very, very disillusioned.

MN

And what about feminism? Again, a generational divide. Some younger women definitely see themselves as feminists. Then there are many in between, who believe women and men should be equally respected and have equal opportunities, yet they would never call themselves feminists. The older generation is even more anti, thinking it's necessary that women and men work together. Where do you stand? Is feminism viable at all in Vanuatu?

VIRAN MOLISA TRIEF

I never thought about it much. My mother was a feminist, I'm a feminist, I haven't thought twice about it. So it's been really interesting and good to see the emergence of that again among some of our younger women, and the discussions around it. I, personally, have never thought twice about it. That was what my mum was, that's what I am. That's what my brothers are. I'm completely comfortable calling myself a feminist. But having said that, only recently would someone raise that as a question. My mother was a feminist and lived that and put that into action throughout her life.

MN

Your mother left a huge legacy. Have you ever felt she left you big shoes to fill?

VIRAN MOLISA TRIEF

Oh yes, definitely, definitely. I don't think too hard about that, because it's massive shoes to fill, and perhaps no one could ever fill them.

CATHERINE MALOSU (WITH MILDRED SOPE)

Catherine Malosu was born in 1979 on Ambae and belongs to the post-independence generation of emerging writers. Her family moved to Port Vila when she was three months old. Together with her aunt, Mildred Sope, she wrote the campaign material for her uncle Barak Sope's presidential campaign. She undertook undergraduate and postgraduate studies in New Zealand.

CATHERINE MALOSU

I visited Ambae during my primary school years, but it's been a huge gap. A quarter of my life was on Ifira, growing up with Mummy Milly [Mildred Sope]. Mummy Milly and my other mothers remind us: this is your custom, your relatives are from this village, this island. This is how you relate to them. Don't call them this way. Even at events, like a death or wedding ceremony, we are told. And we appreciate that, because we live in town. Whenever there's a ceremony, we feel obligated to participate. The urban environment can become very challenging because we're working and society is quite organised. It's about protecting those values. My mother, Nancy Malosu [née Garae], spent more time raising us. My father, Douglas Malosu, was the first Ni-Vanuatu Director of Agriculture, just working and working. So we had more of an attachment on [mother's] Ambae side than [father's] Nguna side.

MIKAELA NYMAN (MN)

So would you say you are from Port Vila?

CATHERINE MALOSU

I don't say Port Vila, I say Nguna, Ambae and Ifira. When I come across my Ifiran family I feel that connection, and also Nguna and Ambae. I don't want the inside of me to segregate, I believe in keeping those places intact. My father didn't teach us his language, he spoke to us in Bislama and English. My mother spoke in Bislama and Ambaean. I mostly write in English. It's the language taught in my home, I feel confident in expressing myself in English. Poetry connects well with English, I can relate to it.

[At school] Bislama was not allowed, full stop. My son showed me what they're doing in English class. He goes, 'I've got this poem to write.' He opened his book and I go 'Oh, can I get a picture of that?' They're taught how to write haiku, and the meaning of onomatopoeia. And I go 'This is so cool!' And he looked at me, 'What's the big deal?'

I showed him what I wrote, one of those 'I remembers,' having received your e-mail. I thought okay, this is the easiest way to start, I'll write an 'I remember.' I wrote about when I delivered him. And it was so touching, I couldn't believe I wrote it! So I showed it to him. And he read it, and I go 'So what do you think?' And he just hugged me, speechless.

MN

So where to next? Both of you write for your drawers, and you write about similar themes, about family, love, relationships and the pain that goes with motherhood.

CATHERINE MALOSU

Yeah, it has to go somewhere. It's true, I've written a few things for children at school – speeches, poems, assignments. I'm writing and giving it away. Now I'm helping someone write for a women's empowerment project.

At Malapoa College I got into writing, it just suited me, following instructions from auntie Milly and writing away. I'd go, 'How do you write?' And she said: 'Find a quiet place.' Okay. 'Sit, maybe under a coconut tree.' Sit under the coconut tree. So that's the second bit. 'Feel the breeze. Let the wind come past you.' And I'd go, 'Okay!' 'And then write!' And I'd go, 'Okay. Just write, let it flow.' So these three things – quiet, under the coconut tree, and the breeze. And from those three things the writing started. I was twelve or thirteen.

MN

Has your auntie Mildred ever read your poems and given you feedback?

CATHERINE MALOSU

We do, we do.

MILDRED SOPE

She reads hers to me and I read mine to her. 'I've just written a poem. Do you want to hear it?' And she goes, 'Okay.' But we don't touch each other's poems, we just read to each other.

CATHERINE MALOSU

Yeah, no we don't. Because she told me this is the magic about poetry writing. No one can touch it, augment it, amend it, add to it, no one. It is magical at that very moment. And I believe it. When somebody reads something I write and they like it, I'm sharing that magical moment with them. I don't believe in people saying: add this line, add these words. It takes away the whole meaning, the whole value altogether.

MILDRED SOPE

I enjoy us talking together. Sometimes I write and would love someone to sit with me and we'll talk about things, like this. But then she phones. We only catch up at night, we spend one or two hours talking and it's night and it's only us.

MN

You two are lucky to have that kind of close relationship. You probably kept the inspiration going that way.

CATHERINE MALOSU

With the father of my children, we talk and try to encourage, inspire, or empower each other. I always tell him about the strength and energy that existed during the independence struggle. And I say, 'Did you know my parents started this independence struggle at the age of 23-24? Look at us! What excuse do we have?' Imagine them, they believed in something, they had that drive, that vision – and we're complaining. We should be carrying on their legacy. And they look at us and think, what excuse do we have? They've done so much for this country. People are becoming complacent, like auntie Milly said. At the 2017 Vanuatu Games' opening ceremony those involved in the struggle for independence walked in and some young women were trying to identify them. They didn't know! And I thought, my goodness, this generation, people are so fixated on what they're doing that they don't realise the foundation started with these very people. We need to educate about the independence struggle!

MN

The church has played various roles during colonial times, independence and today. You have lots of people who talk and write well in church. Is there no education about the past?

MILDRED SOPE

Very little. The first MPs in 1980 were Anglican priests and Presbyterian pastors. During the struggle those two churches were really involved. But today most are new churches or religions. I don't think they teach anything about independence.

CATHERINE MALOSU

No. But our pastor reminds us he saw the struggle. His message is about the strength of men at the time, that God gave them a vision of an independent nation. These men listened to their Father about how to live, how to think. His message is: What are you doing? When your parents speak to you about certain things, do you listen to them or do you disobey? Because they see the vision in you, but do you see how they see you?

MN

And does he see women in there as well?

CATHERINE MALOSU

Both men and women, together. He makes it clear that 'When I say "men" I don't only mean men, I mean women as well.' That equality is emphasised.

MN

Do you think the church contributes to making women heard, or have they, particularly in the past, encouraged women to keep quiet?

MILDRED SOPE

I'm not sure about the church now, but ...

CATHERINE MALOSU

For us [speaking up] is promoted very strongly. The subject we're talking about in church is how to become a strategic man and woman for nation-building. The pastor encourages us to

strengthen this political domain, women are equally powerful and they can get into that domain. I believe if women enter politics or Parliament, they are really going to tidy up.

MN

Sounds like you have a radical pastor.

CATHERINE MALOSU

He is very radical, in fact he has a strong ...

MILDRED SOPE

Is that pastor Nigel? He is my student. He is from Ambae!

CATHERINE MALOSU

From Ambae, and a military man. Before he begins his sermons he says, 'I don't give milk to my sons, I give solid food. You are here to swallow solid food, not milk.' We're in training!

MN

Many people think Christianity and the church have contributed to actually silencing women. But you [Mildred] went through missionary school that gave you education and a voice. And you [Catherine] have a radical pastor. What about the role of *kastom* then? How has *kastom* contributed to silencing women? And there's not just one *kastom*.

MILDRED SOPE

It varies from island to island, but mostly the women's role is to be in the house and look after the children, cook the food, look after the house and cook for the men when they arrive home. But no one has come out publicly to say that *kastom* has stopped you from doing this and that.

MN

In 1992, women's artefacts, mats, and women's handicrafts, traditions and cultural work were accepted as part of *kastom*. Until then it was officially only what men were doing. That's the Vanuatu Cultural Centre's policy on *kastom*.

CATHERINE MALOSU

You won't find a newspaper article about *kastom* undermining women's rights, it won't come like that, but in the form of reports or complaints to women's centres, where they advocate for women's rights. They will document gender-based or domestic violence. So you'll come across it that way, but not in the newspaper as information or education to the public, no. Only in reports. And always connected to violence, because the woman who was abused, *sh-sh-sh*, she didn't perform her role because of that and that ... And you know it's *kastom*-related. How men believe what women should do.

MN

Have you written about domestic violence, in your poetry?

CATHERINE MALOSU

No.

MN

You have recently started writing short fiction, focusing on relationships and changes to families, how it affects its members and society. You publish some on Facebook, but only in small snippets, and seldom poetry?

CATHERINE MALOSU

Yes, pieces of fiction. I sometimes post those on my timeline. I'm still writing poems, but I don't really post them. I keep them, in my drawer.

MN

You should publish them. Send them to journals.

CATHERINE MALOSU

I like that 'I remember' creative writing style, I just love it. And I shared the one I wrote with [Mildred].

MN

It's one of the things we talked about as a way to write manageable chunks. A writing prompt, if you get stuck. It can be really freeing to see where it leads.

MILDRED SOPE

Yes, she told me, so I've started writing some. I remember, I remember. I got heaps of them.

CATHERINE MALOSU

It's very powerful. It's a spiritual thing too, because there's nothing that will come in the way to say, watch out, grammatical error, you're not writing the right tense! There's nothing. It's like a free flow from the heart.

MN

What do you think needs to be put in place, besides education, to hear more women writers?

CATHERINE MALOSU

Someone has to get up and make a call: We'd like to meet you, if you're passionate about writing, or you've written so much ... Someone has to make, and I'm looking at Mummy Milly, an announcement: Let's all meet at this place, at this time.

I thought I'd start writing a short story, 'The sin of the heart,' secretly. It's a message to let people know how it feels when the home is being broken and how to build it back. A message to those who co-created the problem: this is how it feels. And this is how you overcome. I started to write and then I stopped. My siblings and I, we grew up in homes where principles were seriously taught. So I started writing about my mum and how she taught us respect. Respect comes in different forms – the way we dress, speak, our gestures, behaviour and everything. I started to write, and stopped. Because I thought it's almost fictional, but it has a real message.

MN

Fiction does have real messages, but [the narrator] is not identified as *you*. It's tricky in a small island nation, everyone will read whatever you write as Catherine said this and Catherine did that.

MILDRED SOPE

Give yourself a nickname.

CATHERINE MALOSU

Or set it somewhere different, on an island somewhere?

MN

Publish in a journal in Fiji or Hawai'i. You have important things to say, but it doesn't need to be non-fiction or confessional, you can still have a message. Would you call yourself a feminist?

CATHERINE MALOSU

No, I believe the same [as Mildred]. My father never criticised women. He never said, 'Don't pursue this career path because it's male-dominated.' He always said to us: determination and perseverance. So whenever I see a man, whether it's in public, in the newspaper or on radio, 'you women are like this this this,' I don't buy any of it. My partner and my father, especially, never said any of these things.

MN

You mentioned domestic violence, and women not allowed to work. You have both worked in salaried positions. You've had a privileged status compared to some women. What do you think is needed to ensure others can get the same privileges? [PAUSE] And I understand what you mean about feminism, it makes sense to ensure women and men work together.

CATHERINE MALOSU

My colleague and I met with a representative from the Department of Youth, younger than me. He said: 'Women, their voice, is very powerful. It's so powerful.' And to my male colleague, 'Brother, voice blo woman i powerful we.' ['Brother, women's voices are so powerful']. 'The problem is, they don't realise how powerful they are.' And I thought I'm going to write something to redefine the gender sphere. And he said, 'You don't need a place in Parliament for your voice to be heard. You're already powerful, you just don't realise.' I said, I agree. A woman is powerful, she's a leader wherever she is. Wherever she is she creates change. And they said, 'That's true!' It all starts in the home. The husband speaks to her. The children speak to her. She must know how to relate, must know relationship dynamics, first of all in the home, before she can launch, even enter Parliament. A woman must know her place during weddings, death ceremonies, professionally. She must know her place very well in terms of how to function. And for these rights to be understood and

respected by men, a woman must understand the value of herself. This is what I value, this is what I believe. Then men will start to see what she can do. She functions according to the place where she is, because it has to be appropriate. That way her rights as a woman can easily be accepted by men.

MN

How do we teach our sons to be responsible citizens, who see women as equals to men?

CATHERINE MALOSU

I talk to my son all the time. I dragged him to the women's soccer finals. I gave him a quick lecture and then we went. It was a great game. After, I said, 'Son,' [CLAPS] 'you're going to see more of this and it starts with me and your little sister. I want you to understand how a woman must be treated, first in this home. And you're going to hear me nag, but there's going to come a time when I'll stop talking, and you're going to understand.'

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

Rebecca Tobo Olul was born in 1982 on Tanna and belongs to the post-independence generation of emerging writers. She followed her brother to New Zealand in 2000 and spent two years at high school in Nelson and four years at Massey University in Palmerston North. Upon her return, she was coaxed into appearing in 'The Vagina Monologues' (a play by Eve Ensler). Her poems and non-fiction have appeared at the International Women's Day art exhibitions at the Fondation Suzanne Bastien in Port Vila. More recently she has begun to write fiction. She works for the United Nations in Port Vila, focusing on children's rights.

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

The one and only time 'The Vagina Monologues' were performed I was the only Ni-Vanuatu performer, little Coochie Snorcher. I had just started working and was seen as very radical. I was bored, I'd shaved my head, people thought I was gay. A Peace Corp volunteer approached me, 'We have this play, are you interested?' I don't think we had internet. I didn't know what I agreed to, but I enjoyed the experience. The Vanuatu Amateur Theatres was still running, that's where it was performed. I tried to get my mother to come but didn't have money for tickets so she could watch me perform a play which is, in a way, taboo.

MIKAELA NYMAN (MN)

How was it received?

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

Mostly expatriates came, very few Ni-Vanuatu, the cost factor was one thing. I wouldn't have liked for certain people to come because the topics covered are glaring and would be very uncomfortable for some. I forget how many monologues there are. I did this child who was sexually abused by her uncle. Witnessing her father shooting the uncle in front of her, all this blood, and associating that experience with her own sexuality. How she was able to overcome and see past that experience. I remember experimenting with reading it, listening to my voice, the implications of saying it in a certain way as opposed to another. And then performing it. We all wore red, the colour of the vagina – a very liberating experience!

MN

A very brave first performance. You never regretted performing it?

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

A very brave first performance, also in the sense that I went in ignorant and discovered, okay, glaring, but I can do this. This was in 2007-08. I had just completed university and come back to Vanuatu. I've gone back and listened to the monologues on YouTube and share it in conversations. I don't regret it at all. I wish I'd done a different monologue, like sexual violence in war. Mind-blowing experiences we don't hear about in the Pacific. Incest and rape, it's everywhere here, but other experiences we don't know how to relate to.

MN

How do you get across important messages to both women and men?

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

It was like, 'oh, this young Ni-Vanuatu woman just out of university, she's got these ideas and wants to change the world.' But what power do you have? I would love for my mother to come, she's very open, but not for my father and brother to come. In *kastom* it's the way you say something, and the person listening is so important – I can't have my brother sitting there. My father, maybe, but my brother listening to me talking about vaginas, that's definitely not the way to get the message across. When we're talking about wanting to change men's attitude and behaviour that would not be the appropriate way. Performance is an appropriate medium, but not that style.

What we did later, in 2009-2010, with 'Ol Woman Naoia: Tri Blong Handred,' ['All Women Now: Three For 100'], meaning three shells of kava for 100 vatu. The play raised the control women were under, needing your family's and husband's permission. You're working and supporting yourself, yet your husband takes your money, comes to the workplace and beats you up. This was just based on the experiences of these women in the workforce, in public service, in academia, who came together to write.

I'm drawn towards these [themes]. 'Ol Woman Naoia' was on the tame side but it was meant for a wider audience. Ni-Vanuatu families came and you wanted it to be suitable as your own family was going to be there.

MN

Did you read Grace Molisa and Mildred Sope at school?

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

I didn't, which is strange. Why did I read Robert Frost and not Grace Molisa and Mildred Sope? I read English poetry, not our own works. When I discovered them, I wondered why isn't there more? They should be available, and read in schools. That time we brought Ni-Vanuatu and expat women together, ['Ol Woman Naoia'], I was working in a non-governmental organisation. We organised half a day writing workshop, just started to write. Themes emerging were the level of violence and the lack of voice women have in Vanuatu. Also funny experiences, bridging the expat and Ni-Vanuatu women's experiences, questioning the different worlds. We wanted to bring in voices of women who are not here anymore. Grace had passed away, but we asked Mildred to read her poems. I actually never saw the play. I had a baby, I was doing work everywhere and travelling. I know Mildred read a poem at the beginning and end. A local woman composer sang her composition. Very uplifting experience.

While it is important to get women together – you feel empowered to express yourself, you don't feel alone – I wonder about involving men. Comments like, 'another group of women, they've put together this play.' We wanted to bring women together, but wanted to appeal to both women and men. Know that they're listening and the message is received. Engaging men in that creative process, rather than as audience, far removed, and they'll say, 'yeah, that happened to someone else's wife' and go home. Involving them and challenging the thinking. Because hearing the women's experiences ... You just cannot imagine that women can have those kinds of experiences, and they're your auntie, your mother, neighbour. You'd never know, until you sit down and start talking about it.

MN

When you talk about performance and theatre, I think about Wan Smolbag and 'Love patrol' [TV-series].

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

We approached Wan Smolbag about collaboration, but they were busy doing 'Love Patrol.' It appeals to a wider audience, it's so bright, it's a series, so funny. It's about life in local

communities, and then you get hit with a message and it's very subliminal, not in your face. Some it's in your face! There's somebody that's gay and all these issues. But it's not 'The Vagina Monologues,' it's not staring you in the face, it's engaging you. Wan Smolbag has done an amazing job to raise awareness about important issues.

MN

Is there space for more collaboration? It sounds like lots of things happening, but they only last for a short time. What is needed to sustain this output?

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

This is the thing that bothers me. Having one-off experiences is good at the individual level, but we need more systematic ways to encourage women and men, girls and boys to write. With exhibitions I make a point of asking: 'Do you accept creative writing?' It's not seen as an art form. A painting or poster, that's art. But this [writing] is also art. It has very little recognition. That's the first step: giving it recognition. I asked the Library Association, could you do an annual competition to encourage writing? Part of the reason is our culture, it's very oral. We tell lots of stories, pictorial as well, but in terms of writing ... Why? We tell good stories. We're not documenting, not putting it on paper. Oral tradition has its place, but over time, if it's not passed on, it's gone. Parts of our history we don't know. I know, because my grandparents told me stories, but now that they're gone, I can't repeat these stories, not as well. When I discovered Grace Molisa and Sope I thought: There needs to be more. And what happened? After them there's a vacuum when we didn't have anything.

MN

Why do you think that is? Molisa was prolific in so many areas. 25 years ago, Molisa wanted to ensure that women's voices were heard. Why isn't there a network that sustains creativity in writing?

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

Probably a few reasons, you touched on one. All the writing and what's been published, a lot came through the National Council of Women and other organised women's groups. But there's a time when that's not the place women feel they can bring their voice and be heard. For my generation, that support and togetherness has not been there. You did things on your

own. I once approached my auntie, Ketty Napwatt⁹, she writes. ‘Look, can we get together? Can we write?’ And she said: ‘I’m tired of these women’s organisations. They try to get us to do things, they take our ideas, and nothing ever comes back. I’m going to focus on my own writing.’ I approached women in the development sector, like Anna Naupa and Eslyn Kaltongga, I knew they wrote. We tried to get together regularly and write. But it was difficult to sustain. Everybody was working. We did this after hours, when we could find time between taking care of children and all the other things. Grace and Mildred, they were out there, very vocal, but they also had backing from their husbands. Their husbands were politicians and had backing from their wives as well. People say, the women’s’ organisations, all they do is fight! They don’t do things together. That’s not apportioning blame, but the support was not there. Maybe the time was not right.

MN

Grace Molisa and others have said the University of the South Pacific (USP) was important for sustaining creative writing. There was a school journal at Malapoa College once. What happened with these outlets that helped foster literary writing?

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

When I was at Malapoa I wrote for the school magazine. I have limited knowledge of what USP provides. I left high school and went to New Zealand, a lot of my friends didn’t have those opportunities. Only when a friend, Juliette Hakwa, gave me a journal with one of her stories, I thought, so they support this! I didn’t know. Over the years I’ve tried to submit stuff, but when you submit and nothing comes back, it becomes disheartening. So I just focus on my own writing, without looking to submit.

MN

Was this the USP journal in Vanuatu, or in Fiji, where a lot more creative writing is happening and supported?

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

Fiji, we were looking at publication outside of Vanuatu. At that time, we also wanted to access Grace Molisa’s library. We approached her husband [Sela Molisa] to see if we could

⁹ First female Secretary General for TAFEA province.

use her personal library for inspiration. Anna had just started working in Fiji. But then the conversations stopped. We didn't follow up, but her husband responded it was possible.

MN

So what keeps you engaged? What support systems do you have?

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

All these bits and pieces, then nothing, and then bits of activity ... I never wrote for money, just for my own enjoyment. But having conversations, I realise you can use what you love to not only share a message but maybe make some money from it. So having this group of women that you've brought together, you've facilitated this conversation and that work, a few of us have kept in touch and tried to read work and provide feedback or encouragement so people write. That's really important, having a core group, even if you're not sharing stuff. I bump into them and we start having conversations about our writing. It's really good to have a group you've got support and back-up from. The other thing is being linked to people like yourself and with *Sista* magazine. I've talked to Yasmine [Bjornum], she knows what I write and wants to publish some. Seeing that there's interest in what you write, not sending it to an email and not getting response, and getting some feedback. Whether it's for money or not, it's getting your work out where it's appreciated for the work that it is.

MN

You have matured, you've done performance and poetry. What is your aim with your writing at this point in time?

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

I've recently submitted to an [overseas] journal a piece of writing I've been working on for years. I'd like to see that piece published. *Sista* said they'd publish it too. In the past I've submitted to *Stella*, a Papua New Guinean magazine. They were interested, but then nothing. I'd like to see it published and don't really care where, because everything goes online. A wider aim is to see more of what Grace and Mildred were able to do in terms of publishing coming out of Vanuatu, where other women writers can contribute. I don't know in what form, book or on-line, something that allows women to get their voices out.

MN

I first knew you as a colleague working for the UN. Then I came across you as a writer at the ‘Sista exhibition’ [Fondation Bastien, 2015], where you read your writing. Tell me about it.

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

I had been writing a series of ... thoughts, posting on my social media. Somebody picked it up and I was contacted to submit my writing for the International Women’s Day exhibition, just before cyclone Pam hit. The organisers said, ‘We really like it, could you read and record it?’ To not only see it on paper, but hear yourself reading your writing – some of it very raw, just gone from mind to paper, not really thinking, just putting it down. Hearing myself reading it was another experience in itself.

MN

I was in the audience, it was emotional, and you read very well. This is very personal writing, so how did you feel? That was your first reading in public?

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

It was my first reading in public. And yes, it’s based on personal experience, so it’s putting myself out there. Nerve-wracking, because I had never shared my writing, also to be recorded and hear myself reading, and have an audience not just listening, but providing feedback. It was really uplifting, very empowering. I had wondered, because it’s personal, you’re putting yourself out there, are you sure you want to do this? It was a release to be able to share my writing in that way.

It was based on experiences of domestic violence, over a number of years. At that point I had left a very violent relationship, and for me writing was a way for release, a bit of therapy, I guess, to distance myself from the experience. To leave it on paper.

MN

And did you leave it there, on paper?

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

I still took it with me, and putting it down on paper made it public. It was now available, also for other women. The responses I got, on social media, varied. Family members said: ‘We

had no idea.’ ‘We wish we knew.’ People reaching out from across the Pacific and beyond, saying: ‘I had a similar experience,’ or ‘I know somebody who had a similar experience,’ or ‘a worse experience.’ I was horrified people could have a worse experience! I guess it allowed people to talk about their own experience. There were some desensitised responses: ‘We feel sorry for this poor woman, but you know, she chose to have this life.’ Like that. I’ve had requests from people to share and gone, ‘Go ahead, share, if it’s going to help somebody else think through their experiences.’

MN

That was published on your social media, more as a blog, now you’re looking at refining it into something different.

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

Yes, very much like a blog, just putting it down and getting it out. So I was very interested in peoples’ responses [at the 2017 writing workshop], also suggestions on how to make it more available. Because the overwhelming feedback I received was that it’s very raw, it hits you, it’s emotional. And although I wanted that kind of response, I also wanted people to not put up a defence, but to open up and say, yes, this is happening to women. And it’s happening to women like myself. Women in good positions. I’ve worked for the UN for eight years now. I should know better, right? I should be able to get myself out of these situations. To be stuck like that, for so many years, and finally have the courage and support to be able to get out.

MN

You said it was ‘raw’ and that people felt sorry for ‘this woman,’ which leads me to believe that it was read as personal, confessional writing. So what you are saying is that you would like it to be more literary, and read in a different way, not as someone’s private confession or diary?

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

Yes, that’s exactly what I wanted, for it to have a wider appeal. And for people not to be put off by it, but to read it for the good piece of writing that it is. Relate to it and see someone, see themselves, in situations like that.

MN

Do you see that kind of writing in Vanuatu? Are women able to read themselves, their own lives, in some way?

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

Yes, from my circle of people. But I know that's something that's also lacking. Women need to be encouraged and given space to express themselves. And for there not to be repercussions for putting a piece of themselves out there. Or for people to then turn around and say some very nasty things.

That happened to me. People, family members, who said, 'What were you thinking?' 'You should have known better, you should have ...' And I know all those things, but when you're in a situation it's hard to see a way out.

MN

So what attracted you to express your creativity this way? How come writing, poetry and performance?

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

I've always had a journal. I've been writing ever since I can remember. Every time there's an experience, words come into my head. Collections of diaries that go back before the days of internet and computers.

Serious things happened. When I went back to my diaries it was like everything had dried up and I had stopped writing for some time. I was in Vanuatu and I had had my boys. It's not that I didn't find the time, there was no drive to write. I was in an abusive relationship, that was part of the reason. When I came out of the relationship I started to write monologues. I called them 'The Untold Stories,' in five parts. I shared them on Facebook. And I remember the first face-to-face feedback ... it made me go, why did I even want to share this? 'It goes down down down down and it's really depressing. Does it ever come up?' And I said, 'It comes up at the end doesn't it?'

MN

What role do you think *kastom* plays in relation to women's freedom of expression in Vanuatu?

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

Kastom plays an important role. In many customs in Vanuatu women don't have a voice, women don't speak. Women have voice in certain places, but not all, especially not where decisions are made in the village *nakamal* on important community matters. Their voice can be carried by male family members, but they cannot bring that voice themselves. And like any story, like our oral stories, when your voice is passed through others it loses the essence of what you want to convey. Women have a voice in the kitchen, but is that the only place? Women aspire to make a difference in the community. On land issues, in custom courts, rulings in domestic violence cases, women should have a voice, and that's where they're not given that voice. And that translates into everything we do. When you're writing personal stories around experiences of violence it's 'What are you trying to do?' 'What story do you have to tell? It's not such an important story.' You're banging your head against a brick wall. And you're going against the grain of what society says is the role of women: you listen, you don't tell. You don't tell your stories, you don't have that voice to be able to do it. So *kastom* plays a very strong role.

MN

So your ultimate aim is to achieve some change?

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

I know change is not going to happen right now, probably not in my lifetime, but to keep working away. To challenge and find a way to get your voice out there. It's so hard in our society. You're told you're just a woman, get to the back! You just have to find ways to overcome.

MN

Thinking about the status, wealth and political backing that Molisa and Sope enjoyed – both active in the Vanua'aku party – what kind of platform do young women have today? What do they want to see?

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

That's a very interesting question. With the independence struggle people got together around common issues important for nation-building. We have moved away from that, also from national councils that play an important role, like the National Council of Women, in bringing women together. There's a generational [gap], a real lack of support, lack of mechanism or platform to be able to express ourselves. Maybe involvement in political parties is one way, but also the rise of social media groups. Like Yumi Toktok Stret, with over 80,000 followers. Lots of fake profiles, but it's a platform where people, most of them younger, can express themselves. These groups can turn very poisonous about the issues I've tried to address in my writing. I see *Sista* and the *Vanuatu Daily Post* as platforms younger women can tap into.

MN

Do you see yourself as a feminist?

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

I wouldn't define myself as a feminist, but I can identify with thoughts in feminist literature. So a little bit. I know that in my family, among my friends, I'm seen as having very radical ideas that Vanuatu may not ready for. It's good to challenge the norm.

MN

Do you think feminism is a concept that's widely known? Is there a Pacific kind of feminism?

REBECCA TOBO OLUL

It's not widely known. Maybe people have certain beliefs that are feminist, but they don't realise it's feminist ideas. The thinking around feminism has evolved, a movement of 'let's bring men on board.' I think it's a movement globally. You can't achieve things on your own, you have to work with men who are the powerholders and key decision-makers. And you have to work with boys, because change begins at a young age. The younger generation will be the ones making change, but they need to get the right support.

YASMINE BJORNUM

Yasmine Bjornum was born in Port Vila in 1989 to a Swedish father and a Filipino mother. She attended Port Vila Central school before pursuing secondary and tertiary education in Brisbane and Sydney. Upon her return, Yasmine started *Sista*, Vanuatu's first feminist online magazine in 2016. She is in the process of registering *Sista* as a non-governmental organisation. She also delivers girl empowerment courses through ActionAid. In August 2018 she produced the 'Gel pawa' ('Girl power') special edition of *Vanuatu Life and Style magazine* featuring Grace Molisa.

YASMINE BJORNUM

When you grow up in the islands you want to see what else is out there. Finishing school, I travelled across Europe and Australia. I was always writing, I've kept all my diaries since I was six. I enjoy re-reading my diaries and seeing how much you can manifest your reality by what you write. I did a few short creative writing courses in Sydney and found a Bachelor's degree at the University of Technology. I did it for fun, in 2012 to 2014, didn't think I'd make anything of it.

If you're serious about writing, you have to create that space. You can write in a silo, which is what I do, but it's also important to look at it, not 'intellectually,' but studying it. It's an art form. People think writing is easy, but it's not. It's something that needs to be valued more.

I want to write a novel one day. I've also thought of memoir, given that I'm born here, but an immigrant. My father is European, my mother Asian. I think that would give an interesting perspective of this country. There are many half-castes like me, with interesting stories. We've got French families that brought in Vietnamese slaves, those Vietnamese families are now among the wealthiest and strongest families in Vanuatu. To tell those stories through the memories I have.

I definitely feel Ni-Vanuatu, but I'm very aware of my privilege, being able to access education overseas and all that. My heart is here, even though my blood is completely different.

MIKAELA NYMAN (MN)

You have established a feminist online magazine with quite a phenomenal presence. What brought you to this?

YASMINE BJORNUM

I established *Sista* in 2016. When I couldn't finish my degree in Australia, I moved to my mum in New Zealand to raise my daughter, as it was an unwanted – sorry, *unplanned* – pregnancy. My daughter was born in 2015. I was at a crossroads. I could finish my degree in New Zealand or come to Vanuatu. And if I came back, what would I do? I felt I could not contribute anything. When I came here I could see how privileged I was. I had an Australian passport. I didn't pay for my child's birth, I didn't pay any healthcare, I got support from the [New Zealand] government. These services were not in place for anyone here. There's a huge stigma being a single mum. As a woman you're expected to raise this child, the father is not held to that standard. It's unfair. My mission was to ensure there's a space where women could speak about their issues, a platform to raise their concerns. If there isn't a space, we need to make one for ourselves.

MN

This is the first magazine for women. *Sista* is many things, what is it to you?

YASMINE BJORNUM

Sista is a platform that strives to empower and celebrate Ni-Vanuatu women. It's a space to inform women, to encourage them to make choices that are right for them. A space to not be judged. A space to be heard. My ultimate goal is for more perspectives. It's still a struggle for Ni-Vanuatu women to speak. In this culture even the most confident, educated Ni-Vanuatu woman, if she's put in a situation where her voice is critical for making change, it's difficult for her to speak up. We have so many social issues. Women message me: 'Thank you Yasmine for bringing that up.' Instead of privately messaging, why not share it, or comment? Don't be ashamed to show solidarity! We need to unite if we want change.

MN

Why do women feel they can't speak up?

YASMINE BJORNUM

They know in this culture they'll be perceived as causing trouble or unnecessary tensions. Any time you challenge the status quo, it's a bit uncomfortable, and no one wants to make anyone feel uncomfortable.

MN

You mentioned making women feel good about themselves, which you're good at. You dress the way you want, use make-up and long earrings, you don't hide yourself.

YASMINE BJORNUM

I got pregnant and wanted to feel good, because I felt so awful inside. My pregnancy was this road to womanhood, I guess. To look good made me feel good. If you feel good, you feel confident. A feature in *Sista*, called 'Sista gat style' ['Sister has style'], celebrates diverse women – young, old, thin, big, transwomen – getting women to claim themselves and not be ashamed. At this year's independence celebrations in Seaside they banned girls and women from wearing shorts because it would be embarrassing – no, *tempting* for men to *cause rape*!

This dictating what women wear and putting responsibility on women – why do we have to continuously change ourselves to accommodate men's ego? We should be able to do and wear what we want. It's in the constitution: freedom of movement, freedom of expression. Using the platform of 'Sista gat style' is an opportunity to show that women can look good *and* be smart. Many Ni-Vanuatu women, when they start to wear make-up and look sexy – and do it for themselves – people shame them. Especially when with a white man, you're 'showing off.' We had our first transgender activist, Gigi Baxter, featured, speaking about fashion as power. Without women's clothing Gigi wouldn't be able to claim who she really is.

MN

Gigi came to fame through 'Love Patrol' and the [transgender] character Andy, who became a favourite in the Cook Islands and Fiji. But your article received a lot of nasty comments directed at Gigi, questioning who she is. Transgender is clearly not mainstream.

YASMINE BJORNUM

No, definitely not mainstream, not acceptable, apparently. But we were prepared and Gigi didn't care. The important thing was that the conversation was happening – negative, positive, whatever – just talk! And that's one of the goals for *Sista*, just talk!

MN

What kind of support networks do you draw on?

YASMINE BJORNUM

One of the feminist principles is self-care, and that means taking time out, because there isn't a support network here. There isn't that kind of solidarity amongst women. We don't have a women's movement, not like Fiji.

MN

Why do you think that is? The women's organisations used to be strong around the time of independence, but they seem to have fragmented, there isn't one united movement.

YASMINE BJORNUM

No. When you see a woman who could represent women, there's always another group that criticises her and brings her down, when that's an opportunity for solidarity. I don't know what it is. Post-independence something happened. The older generation of women don't recognise young women, don't think collectively. We're still excluded.

MN

When you say self-care, given extended family and the village has a say in what women do, does that come from being privileged, or is it your upbringing that shaped you?

YASMINE BJORNUM

Certainly my upbringing has contributed to my independent thinking. When I think of Vanuatu, I don't think of my wantok, my village or Port Vila. There's so many different customs, so much diversity within, but Vanuatu is Vanuatu. That gives me opportunity to step back when custom or Christian values are used to oppress women. It's definitely privilege, but also being a non-indigenous Ni-Vanuatu girl. Feminist talk about it all the time: self-care, self-care. You *have to* look after yourself. Women always look after everyone else.

In Ni-Vanuatu culture, even educated women who are the breadwinners – they're still expected to care for their family, to cook and clean, looking after everyone. If I don't want to cook tonight, I don't.

MN

Many mention equality and that women's voices should be heard publicly. But they don't call themselves feminists. You had the likes of Grace Molisa working for independence. Fabulous advocates who wrote creatively, poetry and other things. Then a big gap and silence. What is the platform for young women today? Where do they come together, and on what issues?

YASMINE BJORNUM

That's a great question. It's true, there was a collective goal of gaining independence which brought women together. Whereas now it's a bit flimsy. The older women formed this party [in May] advocating for 50% representation in Parliament. Completely unrealistic! We're getting aid from China, Australia, New Zealand. The impact of climate change is upon us. We're developing rapidly, the past five years incredibly so, and a lot of us *want* to have a say. Many young women have travelled overseas, indigenous and non-indigenous, and seen what's out there. It's exciting what we could do with our own country. But the men would rather get help from China, Australia, New Zealand, whatever foreign aid, instead of drawing on resources we have, which is us women! And that's where we are: we'd like to have a say. But it's getting into the system, when we don't have solidarity, and are scared to speak up. And we, especially younger indigenous women, have to be very respectful, the older generation expect us to remember the sacrifices they made. For the women's movement there's something honourable about sacrifice. It's a power thing. It's difficult for young women, they have to respect their elders, including older women.

MN

How can young women make their voices heard? *Sista* is one avenue. What else would be needed?

YASMINE BJORNUM

We need a physical space, a safe space, where we can come together. We're still old school here, convening together is a methodology of moving forward. And there isn't a safe space

for girls. We have our online platform, but I'd like to have a space for girls where they can access any books, resources, policies to inform and educate themselves.

MN

Why can't existing structures be repurposed, like the Women's Centre?

YASMINE BJORNUM

Many people think feminism is a dirty word. They don't realise we don't hate men, we hate male behaviours that oppress women. Feminism is for everybody. Slowly some women are saying, 'I'm a feminist,' 'I'm demanding something else.' To have this women-only space is controversial. Even with ActionAid, when we say we're a women's rights NGO focusing on women's leadership, everyone says: 'What about the men?'

MN

Despite the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration [2012] explicitly stating that women work alongside men?

YASMINE BJORNUM

Despite that. Even last year at the Triennial in Fiji¹⁰, we re-endorsed the Platform for Action¹¹ which has all our commitments to gender equality. But it's having this women-only space. They say we're excluding men.

ActionAid came to Vanuatu in 2015 after cyclone Pam as a relief response, but ended up staying after seeing the need. They created blue tents specifically for women to be able to talk about their issues and disaster risk management. Often in a disaster, like a cyclone, it's the men talking to NDMO [National Disaster Management Office] about how to manage the disaster, women's voices are not heard.

MN

The women were actually key for food and water distribution.

¹⁰ 13th Triennial Conference of Pacific Women.

¹¹ Pacific Platform for Action on Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights 2017.

YASMINE BJORNUM

Yes, totally, shelter, everything! Child care, elderly care, they're at the forefront and they're not participating in these discussions. Vanuatu is ranked number one in the world for disasters, so it's odd that women are not represented.

I'm the part-time advocacy and communications coordinator. We work through women's forums, directly with our beneficiaries, it's challenging. If you really want sustainable change, you shift the power to them. ActionAid is driven by feminist principles. This year I rolled out the Girl Power program at Malapoa College and Vila Central School, which was wonderful. Building girls' awareness about their rights, building capacity, exploring women's leadership, letting them talk about their issues.

It took us ages to work out how to speak with year 10 girls, they're 15-16, without being like a sledgehammer, 'What's your rights? What's your base?' I would give them a quote: 'A woman has the power to create life and she has the power to create the life she wants.' I'd go, 'Okay, what do you think about it?' Being very informal was a way of starting to unlock their thinking. I gave them notebooks to document what they'd learnt and homework. For example, find out who Grace Molisa was. We looked at the building healthy relationships component in the national health and physical education curriculum, reviewed it with the Curriculum Development Unit's permission to see how sexist it is. It said: 'What the students will be coming away knowing is how to negotiate against violence when they experience it.' We dissected the language. The girls didn't get it first. 'Okay, tell me what steps you take to make sure you don't face violence.' The girls wrote: When I get on a bus I make sure I check the plate number, I don't wear this, I don't wear that. 'Tell me, what do boys do?' And everyone goes, 'What boys do? What do you mean, Miss Yasmine?' And I'm like, 'This is what I'm talking about.' We don't know until we start to look at texts and language and ask: who is this written for?

MN

What you're teaching them is critical thinking, which doesn't seem to be taught much.

YASMINE BJORNUM

Yeah. For example, relationships are taught in religious class, sex in biology. No linkage. They're not allowed to have relationships in school. So if anyone faces violence there's no referral system to address that. So we explored that.

MN

These documents were written with certain assumptions in mind, perpetuating the thinking that every girl will face violence. We will all be assaulted. What are your hopes for these girls? How long was the course?

YASMINE BJORNUM

About three months, five sessions per school. Our last session I brought women leaders, like singer Vanessa Quai, Marie Louise Milne, Florence Lengkon, the activist who won this year's US Woman of Courage awards, and the Director of Women's Affairs. I got the girls to ask them personal questions, like, 'What do you value in a friendship?' Not 'What are your policies blah blah?' People assume leadership means politics. And I say no, a leader is someone who can speak up and make decisions and is respected. And women are not seen as that here. It was amazing! Marie Louise Milne spoke openly about her partner, the ex-Deputy Prime Minister [and ex-Prime Minister], Moana Carcasses, how he went to jail: 'All of a sudden he was in jail and I had two young kids and no money. And I built up the Rarru Rentapau waterfalls. I just got in the truck, picked up the stones and started to make it.' And everyone in the room went, 'Wow!' 'Powerful!' What I hope for these girls is: connect with yourself, don't be ashamed of your story, because story can be transformative. And when you start to own and claim your story, that's so powerful, because you don't have shame attached. No one else is telling your narrative. When you speak up you can literally write where you want to go. That's why I gave them notebooks and said: start writing guys. Look at what you're thinking! What are your consistent thoughts? What do you want to change? What do you want to challenge about yourself? My hope is for these girls to be able to stand strong and have a voice. A lot of women here define themselves by their husbands. Very colonial thinking.

MN

Is there a role for those who return from overseas?

YASMINE BJORNUM

If you come back, you generally end up with a good job and don't want to rock the boat. So it's difficult. That's why you often find women in senior positions quite difficult to share information and resources with. I'm more forgiving now. Women in senior positions fought tooth and nail to get there. They suffered. So they don't want to pass on knowledge.

MN

Where do you think Vanuatu women will be in five years' time?

YASMINE BJORNUM

There's a rise of young girls who are not afraid to shine, to look good, to speak up, be themselves. I'm not even thinking political representation. I definitely think our voices, collectively, will start to get heard. I say: 'Claim your voice, claim your space!' That alone challenges the status quo. Like the ban on women wearing shorts, one day we'll have young girls saying: 'I'm not going to listen to you.'

MN

I read your poem on *Sista*, published in June 2017 as an opinion piece. A beautiful poem in Bislama, where you talk about the right for your girl to be met with respect, that this is a wanted baby, even if the father was not keen. How was it received?

YASMINE BJORNUM

Women came up to me, crying, 'Your story is my story.' It's why I truly believe in telling stories as a way to create social change, if you speak from your heart you *can* influence. Recognising my privileges, what I could have been, was the catalyst to share. I have a duty to help people if I know. I transformed my pain into power. One girl just held me, 'Thank you for sharing. I read that and my girlfriends read that.' It seems to be a normal story when a girl falls pregnant, the child is her responsibility. Unfortunately it's taboo to talk about abortion. I wrote an article, saying, if a woman doesn't have the option to access sexual reproductive choices, including abortion, then a man cannot opt out of pregnancy either. Creative writing, poetry, story-telling is a soft way to say, here's a story, let's now talk about policies. Let's talk about systematic ways. You've got my story, now I'm serious. Let's talk about child maintenance, why is that not being voiced? I get that abortion is taboo and, if I'm honest, I'm a feminist but don't think, spiritually, I'd be able to do it. My daughter was born the day after

my brother had died. So I *do* consider her my child from God. I feel a duty beyond myself. Some people don't have that privilege of talking about spirituality, they're thinking survival. They don't get to indulge and make it all romantic and beautiful. At the Vanuatu Family Health Association you hear how women are doing backyard abortions. It's frequent, it's scary, and putting girls' lives at risk.

MN

You mention spirituality, not necessarily religion or church.

YASMINE BJORNUM

Yes, religion is institution. Come on, the Bible, where is the woman's perspective? Where's Mary Magdalene when Jesus was holding that cross? Where's His story with Her story? It's all male dominated, sorry, I can't believe in that, even though I was raised Catholic, the hypocrisy ...

MN

How do you navigate that? Church plays such an important role. Church, in some ways, has been the safe space for women, especially in rural areas.

YASMINE BJORNUM

I do believe in a god, but I'm not affiliated with a church, we're all looking at that same light. Think, critically think! Another feminist principle. I went to Port Vila Land Association authority for a story about why we don't have female bus drivers. Apparently the solution to stopping men raping women is that women shouldn't take buses at night. Why not have women drivers? He told me we don't have women drivers in case they get raped too. And he said, 'Yu no foget se yu woman, yu kam from rib blong mi.' ['Don't forget that you're a woman, you came from my rib']. And I said to him, 'Buddy, I didn't come from your rib, you came from my vagina. I made you.' He's like 'So ...' 'Please, don't. If you're trying to do this "we're equal now," no, we're not equal. I'm going to flip it around on you. I'm actually more powerful than you.' Every time I tell that story the women look at me like 'Oh my gosh!' But something clicks in them.

MN

In a poem for International Women's Day 2018¹², you're using religious images and traditional concepts to reflect on what it means to be a woman. Turning it around, you say: 'woman hemi gat power blong makem laef,' so 'a woman has the power to make life.' It's from a poetry collection you're working on, *Art Blong Mi, Heart Blong Mi* [*My art, my heart*].

YASMINE BJORNUM

I've just started to explore, a few pieces about changing the narrative, which is what I'm trying to do. When I'm promoting women in leadership or equality, I always get this, 'Man is made in god's image', 'Man is the head of house' and blah blah rib and all. Let me show you a different narrative, a different perspective and let's go from there. Because I don't think you can challenge me when I'm telling you that I didn't come from your rib, that's a fact! Show me a Bible verse written by a woman! We have our own stories. This collection I'm working on is to trigger people to start thinking.

MN

You mentioned the need for young women to have role models. Who are they today?

YASMINE BJORNUM

Grace Molisa has come up lately, it's nice to see her words getting out. I'm promoting her because her words were very forward. You read them and think, was that really written thirty years ago? That's so relevant for what's happening today!

MN

When did you come across Molisa?

YASMINE BJORNUM

Only two years ago. Our Amazing Grace, I hadn't heard of her. The girls from my school had no idea who she was. Even teachers who knew what she did, when they read her writing, they went, 'Wow!' She can be quite brutal with her language. As for role models, I'm hoping with *Sista* they can see themselves or someone that might inspire them.

¹² Yasmine's first public reading at Alliance Française.

MN

How many would identify as feminists publicly?

YASMINE BJORNUM

I would say three, three more off the top of my head. We've all got that feminist theories' perspective and are ready.

MN

I sense there are women who'd be happy to support, but might have church affiliations and not want to be called feminists. They believe in women being treated as equals with men and being respected. But they're hard to define until they speak up.

YASMINE BJORNUM

Exactly. But who's to say you can't be one thing and not [another]? We are all these layers. You can be Christian and still speak out. You have to do the critical thinking for yourself to be able to do that. That's why I'm encouraging creative writing – start exploring your words, your thoughts and how you're going to present yourself. Because these things will come at you, and if you're not ready ... There are women who don't say anything. It's disappointing, I feel we have a duty, particularly if you're privileged and have the knowledge and are aware of what is going on. Speak. Speak!

JOANNE (JO) DORRAS

Scriptwriter Joanne (Jo) Dorras was born in 1954 in London. In 1989, Jo Dorras and Peter Walker came to Vanuatu from Zimbabwe and set up Wan Smolbag theatre company and youth centre. She taught at Malapoa College and has written over 100 scripts, in addition to 80 episodes of the popular Vanuatu TV-series 'Love Patrol' that has screened in Australia, New Zealand and across the Pacific region since 2007.

JO DORRAS

We were teaching in a school near Mozambique's border in 1984, that's where I started writing. We were teaching difficult texts, Shakespeare and some African writers. For many students English wasn't their first language. We thought, let's write about *this* place. Peter was desperate to direct, going nuts with boredom. We wrote a half-hour play based on the students' script and that was the first one. They were brilliant actors! It was called 'She can't even cook sadza,' about a lass who gets married very young and murders her baby because her life is horrible.

MIKAELA NYMAN (MN)

Those themes have come through in your productions later.

JO DORRAS

I've seen lots of young girls have babies they don't want. There's little future for a girl once she gets pregnant. Often she's forced into being with a guy who beats her up and she gets more and more angry and loses the energy she once had. Yes, it's a constant theme. Not always murder, but quite often the difficulties you face. Having a child isn't a panacea, it won't solve marriage problems, make the boy yours. I suppose it's a minor cry for abortion – please, stop!

MN

Malapoa school had a school journal, so there was [creative] writing?

JO DORRAS

Yes, amazing *kastom* stories that I no longer hear. I taught for a year or two, had lots of students writing poetry, but then students go off somewhere. One of the issues in the Pacific is that writing fiction has no status attached. If you say 'I'm a writer' people look at you and think you're bonkers. It's not paid work! We are lucky that aid [funding] allows us to do something creative and not endless workshops on disasters.

MN

You have cast your net wide. You have a nutrition house and sports, music, film and theatre, and the clinic.

JO DORRAS

And the Youth Centre, which is wonderfully creative. The hip-hop is astonishing. I know it sounds out of the culture, but it isn't now. And sewing, nutrition and sport is creativity. There's a good arts teacher and music.

MN

Do you remember the first play you wrote here? There isn't a good overview of how many plays you've written. Do you know?

JO DORRAS

I can't remember. I normally write a big play and at least three little plays a year. Big plays are around two hours, little ones about 30 minutes. 'Kalabus' ['Prison'] is a big play, normally around 40 pages. Up to 16-17 for longer little ones and as few as nine for the little ones. Rainbow [Theatre] would do a shorter script. They got one or two 30-minute pieces, but it's a long time for them to sit on stage, like Alex, who's in a wheelchair. He gets very sore hips.

[Rainbow Theatre] is a group of disabled people – whatever disabled means – who came together in 2011, most of them were sitting at home bored. Like Alistaire who has no eyes. I think bad things happened to her, she never said, but I think they did. She just adores coming out, it's so important to her. She was involved in disability sports, but for most of the year she didn't get out. The VDSP [Vanuatu Society for Disabled Persons] told people about this theatre group. Someone reads the lines to her and she learns it. Her voice was this screech,

with no tone or intonation, and now her voice has intonation. Shows how isolated she used to be.

MN

I would hazard to guess that you have over a hundred plays, plus the film scripts for ‘Love Patrol.’

JO DORRAS

Yes, easily, with the film scripts. We do one 70-page [script], similar word length to big plays, for one ‘Love Patrol’ feature. Thank god ‘Love Patrol’ is finished! The aid funding ran out, thank heavens! That was such a bugger, being faced with 50,000 words to fill the pages. It was ridiculous, a killer for me, the crew and the actors. We were filming from end of July till December; 5 am to 5 pm. The stress was pretty high. It wasn’t exactly character-driven, it was just getting the words on the page.

MN

What drives you, what do you think about when you write? Are you writing on themes or how do you get your ideas?

JO DORRAS

I think I’m stuck on population growth and family planning. Various stories take that in, not necessarily as the whole story. I see places getting more packed and people getting more stressed with issues that come from having so many kids. It’s this enormous puzzle in your head and then you got to figure out where it fits in, if it fits at all.

You try interior debates in characters, or they’re faced with something that makes them feel it’s wrong. Whatever they’ve desperately wanted becomes problematic. In ‘Yumi go Kale’ a political advisor is desperate for a job and gets it by ass-licking the Minister. He finds himself in this office where nothing happens, not knowing what to do, and this begins to weigh on him. That’s loosely based on this actor who became a political advisor for a Minister, he kept coming around, saying ‘None of the computers work, we’re just sitting here!’

MN

How was it received? It sounds like you’re critical of the system?

JO DORRAS

It was well received. Whatever you say, you can't change the fact that people are incredibly poor, there aren't many jobs, you stay with the party because you know you're going to get something out of it. I don't think it changed anything, but it put it out there.

MN

People talk about 'Mi harem se' ['I heard that']¹³ and your plays. You have never felt censored?

JO DORRAS

Either the politicians don't understand they could, or they don't see us as being dangerous to them – which is true, sadly. I wish many plays and films had had an effect. I wish Michael Moore had effected gun control with his 'Columbine,' or that the films on climate change made it stop. You can affect people individually, they can get a lot from watching, but actually changing anything is hard.

MN

The first play I watched was a play for schools about bullying. You could read some schoolgirls' faces; what happened on stage was what they'd experienced. Girls being kept at home to help out.

JO DORRAS

They try to be different things in life and they get smashed down. We ran workshops in the youth centre and got [kids] to say what they wanted to do with their lives, what they enjoyed, and whether they could do it. We took them through the process and I scripted it.

MN

That sounds very collaborative.

JO DORRAS

It's a great way to work, but rare. Now there are so many groups and we've tried to get the actors to write, but actors aren't always writers. Writing is about doing it. You've got to

¹³ A popular newspaper column.

produce something, even if you know it's shit. I know I produce endless shit and you've got to be able to see that and be willing to accept criticism. I get wonderful criticism from Peter. Sometimes I want to kill him.

MN

Have you always written in Bislama? 'Love Patrol' is in English, but I thought that had to do with the distribution.

JO DORRAS

It was, totally. In the 1990s we were going around the Pacific and I wrote in English and in Bislama. Hopefully my Bislama was worse then. It would never keep up with all the changes and wonderful things the actors are able to add.

MN

How much freedom do they have? I've asked why they don't write and everyone says Mama Jo does it so well. What happens when you've finished the script?

JO DORRAS

If that's the reason then I should probably stop! But I think they're not happy sitting endlessly at a computer. Some plays are quite technical. Like this one on plastic, how mass production changed plastic from being this wonderful invention to something that's everywhere and therefore a problem. Masses of amazing song! And chorus has a rhythm, you can't just change everything. They may have cut lines, but to keep meaning you had to keep the ideas about what plastic did. Other plays, like 'Heartproblem,' also has chorus, but it's the community commenting. They took that and made it their own in a way they haven't done with other plays.

MN

You have a few musicals too. I saw 'Laef i Swit' ['Life is Sweet'], magnificent singing. You have quite a lot of music in your plays.

JO DORRAS

['Laef i Swit'] was brilliant, the tunes are magical, they've done such great things. We've got it on film as well. Just about everything has song in it. In 'Kalabus' most of that chorus is song.

MN

Tell me about 'Kalabus' ['Prison']. How did that come about?

JO DORRAS

We've run workshops for detainees for Corrections over the years and were asked by a New Zealand Corrections officer to run workshops with 15 sexual offenders in Santo. A seriously confronting workshop. We asked: 'Why do men rape women?' We put cards around, 'Because they hate them', 'Because they don't know it's a crime,' all these options, and one guy went directly to 'Hate women.' The older men, some of the things they said ... They were given crimes, like raping a woman in the garden, raping an 11-year-old, raping a 5-year-old, a woman who kills her baby, and asked to give them sentences, as a judge, forget law – that's where that speech about Western law [in 'Kalabus'] comes from. Some gave raping a woman in the garden zero years in prison 'because she's old, she's already had sex.' And then, raping a 5-year-old child: 'shouldn't go to prison because that child won't remember' ... And talked about how you rape a 5-year-old! Before that they'd talked about their experiences of violence, and they'd remember something terrible that happened to them – one of the stories ended up in 'Kalabus' – and I said: 'No, they don't forget. You haven't forgotten.' Some got quite upset then and told me to stop.

This young man, a Christian, had raped his own mother at knifepoint. Said he'd been selling marijuana and that's how he got into prison, such a blatant lie. Many claim they don't realise rape is a crime, a common excuse. Of course they know it's a crime! Like when people say they don't know incest is a crime, when it is a complete taboo.

MN

How did you transform the prison material into the 'Kalabus' script and performance?

JO DORRAS

I wrote an awful lot of rubbish for a long time and had great trouble with the second half. I had no idea what to do.

MN

At the beginning a pastor comes to the prison. Immediately they say, no that can't be the pastor, because it's a woman. It's funny. You have a lot of humour in your plays. How much is scripted and how much is the actors taking it to the next level? Sometimes the crowd roars so you can hardly hear.

JO DORRAS

You need it for people to not get so distressed they turn off. Or at least I can't handle endless misery. I enjoy writing bits that are not so miserable.

MN

Where do you draw the line that it's not taken as belittling the subject?

JO DORRAS

That's a difficult one. I like to hear the opposition's voices. Showing the pastor talking about women and their hanging titties you can see that he's a licentious bastard. If you don't make him say that, maybe it's less clear.

I wanted to bring into the open the way men think about women, and not only prisoners. The way men can feel so angry about women, not all men, but how men can turn the fact that the law is there to protect people into women are using the law to get them. And that you never know what someone is capable of. How people hide from themselves, the denial. So scary. They can't bring themselves to look at what they've done. I think that's true for all of us, we slide around the horrible things we've done.

MN

Did they get to see the play? Was it filmed?

JO DORRAS

It's too difficult to let out a group of serious sexual offenders. We didn't think of [filming]. It's quite hard to set up. It's an interesting thought. We have made a couple of films that we use in workshops. One about rape, called 'Talemaot' ['Telling'] and another called 'I No Bisnis blo Yumi' ['It's not our business'], about domestic violence.

MN

And domestic violence is the business of those affected, not for neighbours and others to meddle.

JO DORRAS

Exactly. With 'Talemaot' people were crying and made wonderful comments. The next day they went back to how they were before! 'I No Bisnis blo Yumi' was written with the help of judge Judith Fleming. She wanted it for the Magistrates and to go as far as getting temporary and permanent protection orders. The violence was ours, but she was really helpful with what Magistrates do and how she wanted them to act. A lovely collaboration.

MN

Very few protection orders are taken out and many victims go back to their violent partners.

JO DORRAS

Yes, because they have absolutely no choice! An acquaintance' husband smashed her up and then abused her 11-year old daughter. He went to prison, and she's desperate for the case to be dropped because they have no money and she's got six kids to feed and can't pay the rent.

MN

These are quite taboo subjects. How are they received when performed?

JO DORRAS

When it's in a play or film people find it much easier. If you go into a community and say, 'Let's talk about rape,' it's not going to get you anywhere. People watch anything. Film is a double-edged sword. With plays, people enjoy watching people acting and being characters.

MN

Is it important to see Ni-Vanuatu perform?

JO DORRAS

Most definitely. And stories from here. Because otherwise everyone watches French and Filipino soaps – a society you’ve got nothing to do with, about incredibly rich people. Nothing like you’d see in life.

MN

How do you get more Ni-Vanuatu stories?

JO DORRAS

It has to be a paid job. My father loved theatre. He was not rich, a taxi driver in London, had no education, but there were books everywhere. There are no books here! All your plots come from something you’ve read, that you’ve assimilated. But without having read, I don’t think your mind can come up with it out of nowhere. I imagine most writers are readers. So you need cheap readable books. Kids are faced with almost no books, and the books people send from overseas are too difficult, so there’s this massive gap. I wish they had just English or French, because it’s so expensive, funding two sets of education in a country this size and with no money. Bislama should be the language of expression, all the way through school. I’ve heard some schools are already throwing it out. Posh schools don’t want it, it’s maddening.

MN

You said a lot of *kastom* stories are gone. Why?

JO DORRAS

People don’t tell *kastom* stories to their kids because of Facebook or TV, or they go off to the *nakamal* [for kava]. They have no value. Some kids know them. I got told lovely *kastom* stories yesterday by a little girl. She was surprised I didn’t know about the two devils on Efate.

[JO asks the two staff in the Wan Smolbag office in Bislama if they tell *kastom* stories to their children. One female staff says she used to know some, but not anymore.]

MN

So the older generation are the story keepers and people feel they can't tell the stories like their mothers and grandmothers.

JO DORRAS

Or people don't remember them well, they're so long and complicated, so many twists. And they say it's the films and phones, yeah.

MN

Back to 'Kalabus,' is it a happy enough ending? You have a lot of church material and choir and conversion. Were some of them truly repentant?

JO DORRAS

No, none of them! Which is what the pastor says, 'Yu no save mekem wan kiaman excuse.' ['You can't even tell a fib.'] And Bobby lies outright at the end when, in his dream, he tells what he's done and finds a reason for why it wasn't his fault. So he can't face it, and Jessica can't forgive him. Not very happy. I think this is why: at the end of the workshop we asked 'How can you tell someone has really changed?' They've become true Christians, they say they've changed, they've met their sexual offender, all these options. This nice young man – god knows what he's done – was touching two cards. When we asked him why, he said you never know someone has changed until they're in the field. It made me cry. I felt it was positive, and actually true.

MN

Of your plays, which one would you rate the highest? Are they all your children, equally?

JO DORRAS

No, some of them I've forgotten, thank heavens. I would never admit to having written them, many of the films too. You tend to like the latest, like 'Heartproblem.' It depends on the last performance too, the play is like a creature, it changes. I enjoyed 'Hotel California' in its latest revival. I'm always amazed by what the actors do, how they make words into a character – and not necessarily one you've seen in your head.

MN

So, with all the discussions about family planning and women's role in society, would you call yourself a feminist?

JO DORRAS

Oh, I would. I believe women are equal to men in intelligence, if not in bodily strength. Women are constantly made to feel they can't do stuff, or that they should do certain things and not other things. Yes yes yes!

MN

What about the role of the church?

JO DORRAS

The church can say wonderful things and terrible things. I hate its homophobia. Religion is what you make it, whether it's something beautiful or absolutely revolting. This is what 'Abomination,' the film opening on Tuesday, is about.

MN

Yet you have religious elements in several of your plays?

JO DORRAS

Because you can't ignore the important part it plays. And you've got caring pastors and completely obscene ones.

MN

I hope you'll continue writing for a long time and get other writers on board. Maybe a scriptwriting workshop?

JO DORRAS

No, I ran many, it's a while back now. The actors improvise their own plays every year. It's long pieces that are difficult. I never know if I'm going to finish. I never outline, never have a plot in my head, before I start. I can tell some of the writing is rubbish. Peter tells me when I got no action in it. But initially I cannot see it and I go away and read it and see that he's right – not every time, I occasionally fight back. It's hard initially to accept criticism and not walk

out the door. Rarely does he criticise the concept, more that it doesn't work. That happened with 'Heartproblem.' I'd finished the full script and they started rehearsals. And he goes, 'You've got to come and see this.' I watched the first 45 minutes. It was horrible. I thought, oh stuff it, we'll just do 'Kalabus.' When I came back from shopping, he said 'I've got it! You've got to do lots of walk-ins, the community and chorus. You've really overwritten.' And it was so true, all this boring, unnecessary conversation. Once I had that concept, it took me two weeks to rewrite what had taken months.

MN

Fantastic to get that kind of feedback! I know students who do short films. There's Namatan [short film festival] and music videos with storylines, maybe some nascent storytelling there? From what I hear it's feedback they're craving.

JO DORRAS

Oh, I'd love to! The trouble is people can react so badly to feedback. With Namatan they've never asked for scriptwriting training and stopped training completely. I've been a judge for years, not the last two. The actors are massively talented, but I'm not sure they're writers, or want to be. If they wanted to, they'd write.

MN

I'm asking similar kinds of questions in literature, poetry, this gap that seems to exist ...

JO DORRAS

Since Grace [Molisa] died.

MN

Yes. Is it that there are no opportunities to get [writing] out there? Or is it the time and money you mentioned? There does seem to be a vacuum. Did you ever meet Grace?

JO DORRAS

There's lots of music, which is poetry, that's lovely. But they want to be musicians.

Yes, I knew her quite well, I taught her daughter, Viran, for some years. And Viran is amazing. Grace was brought up in a time when there were books and schools were better.

She was wonderful but scary, Grace was. Poetry is an incredibly hard form to do well, possibly in a way the hardest. Because it's so easy to write lines, but to write something that shocks people, like Grace did, and stays in your head and makes you think differently, that is an incredible, wonderful thing. It is a gift.

CHAPTER THREE: THE VANUATU CONTEXT

This chapter explores the cultural and political settings and norms that have contributed to limiting the public space for Ni-Vanuatu women's voices to be heard and given due recognition, weaving in findings from the interviews.

Considering the power structures detrimental to women that Molisa identified in 1981 (McCallum) and in *Colonised People* in 1987—i.e. colonialism, dual education systems, the church, national political systems, patriarchy, and aspects of traditional society—the material is clustered under five sub-headings in order to organise the interlinking themes emerging from the interviews and connecting them back to the literary nature of this project. The sub-headings are: *kastom*, feminism and the women's movement, language and feminist critique of language, the literary scene and publishing, and the Ambae poets. The latter addresses Grace Molisa's prominence. The role of the church is raised under *kastom* and feminism, while the impact of colonialism is discussed in relation to *kastom* and language. Political and cultural aspects are addressed throughout this chapter.

Reflecting on the writing workshop and the interviews, I discuss the experiences of three generations of Ni-Vanuatu women and the ways in which they attempt to push the boundaries: the pre-independence writers (Mildred Sope and Grace Molisa), women coming of age around independence (Helen Tamtam and Carol Aru; Nancy Gaselona Palmer also belongs to this group), and the post-independence generation (Catherine Malosu, Rebecca Tobo Olul and Yasmine Bjornum; Jane Kanas and Telstar Jimmy also belong to this group). Additional insights provided by Jo Dorras and Viran Molisa Trief complement the picture.

The aim here is not so much to be comprehensive, or to offer solutions, but to explore sites where gendered norms, policies, customary traditions and behaviour that use the male position as a default become visible and limit women's expressions. The creative component shows the impact on women when these dominating structures and behaviours become articulated together. In conclusion, some areas for future research are identified.

1 Kastom – 'the outrigger to my canoe'

In 2017, Prime Minister Charlot Salwai stated that by placing culture and *kastom* at its heart, Vanuatu intended to counteract the negative influences of globalisation. In launching a new national sustainable development plan, he likened its structure to a *nakamal*, a meeting place

where the important discussions occur, with the three development pillars – society, environment and economy – holding up Vanuatu’s culture and *kastom*, its roof and foundation (Joshua).

What does this mean for women, if a patriarchal interpretation of *kastom* implies women are still barred from speaking on the *nakamal* in some areas, as Rebecca Tobo Olul attests? What does it mean for a nation if women’s potential to contribute to society and economy is not recognised or fully realised, as Helen Tamtam and Mildred Sope state; or if they are simply ignored when they speak up, even within their own political party, as Sope experienced? Young women, like Yasmin Bjornum, experience that their priorities for Vanuatu’s future are simply dismissed by the decision-makers, who are predominantly older men. Whose development, culture and *kastom* are we talking about here?

Anthropologist Lissant Bolton has worked collaboratively with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre for decades. She credits red mats from Ambae and women’s weaving skills for contributing to changing the official view and national policy of what constitutes *kastom* from purely men’s knowledge to include women’s knowledge too. The format of Bolton’s imaginative ethnographic account *Unfolding the Moon* replicates the way the mats are woven, in two parts, sewn together with a visible seam. The acknowledgement that women have *kastom* represented a significant alteration in women’s status. In the national ideology *kastom* is depicted as cultural knowledge and practice that has emanated from within Vanuatu, undiluted by outside influences (*Unfolding the Moon* xiii, xiv).

Vanuatu’s coat of arms, replicated in Molisa’s poem ‘Colonised people,’ pairs a Melanesian warrior and a Chief’s pig’s tusk with the inscription ‘Long God yumi stanap’ (‘In God we stand’), reflecting the traditional Melanesian values and Christian principles of Vanuatu’s Constitution. Molisa states that ‘Christianity and colonialism tended to reinforce the anti-women aspects of traditional society,’ while a combination of ‘politics and the churches, with their power structures, reinforced the oppression of women’ (McCallum 30). In ‘Colonised people’ Molisa attempted to explain the way in which *kastom*, Christianity, colonialism and patriarchy have been articulated together to create a seemingly insurmountable system of male domination. Because of the way the oppressive elements and structures are interlinked, it becomes an arduous task to change anything, let alone attempt to dismantle the system. Molisa later left the church, disillusioned, according to Viran Molisa Trief, sentiments that can already be discerned in the poem, where preachers, Chiefs, political leaders and custodians of culture are among the men Molisa accuses of turning a blind eye to the oppression of women (Annex 1).

The church continues to be a divisive force. Yasmine Bjornum and Jo Dorras are both critical of the way the church controls women and women's narratives, including women's right to leave violent partners, access family planning and abortion. Dorras addresses the role of the church—how it condones, or does not strongly object to, gender-based violence and societal norms depicted as *kastom* that disadvantage women and become de facto policy-settings—in plays like 'Abomination', 'I No Bisnis Blo Yumi' and 'Kalabus.' Bjornum provides examples from the curriculum and public transport sector of how gender-based violence is condoned and normalised—with all the onus to evade it placed on women—and the way aspects of *kastom* and Christianity, viewed through a male lens, are used to justify oppressive behaviour. Others, like Mildred Sope, Helen Tamtam and Catherine Malosu, credit the church for educating and empowering women.

Jolly explicitly points to the 'gendered agendas' of Christian missions and the central role Christianity played in the formation of women's groups ('Epilogue' 134, 137). In 'Woman Ikat Raet' Jolly addresses the competing dynamics of *kastom* and Christianity in the context of universal human rights and cultural relativism. Bolton suggests colonial and missionary ideas about women's position, specific kinship-based constructions of gender, and feminist discourse on women's rights has resulted in the contemporary view on women's position. During fieldwork on Ambae she was gifted a new metaphor: 'Women's *kastom* is to men's *kastom* as an outrigger is to a canoe – absolutely necessary, balancing, enabling. The status of women in Vanuatu can be altered by the recognition that women's contribution has always provided the essential balance to what men do' ('Bifo Yumi' 160).

The metaphor becomes even more powerful when recognising it as an extension of Vanuatu's founding father Walter Lini's rhetoric to unify the new nation-state: 'We are moving into a period of rapid change rather like a canoe entering a patch of rough water: God and custom must be the sail and the steering-paddle of our canoe' (Lini 62).

In comparing the interpretation of custom in Vanuatu and Fiji, Jolly sees *kastom* in Vanuatu 'portrayed as ancestral ways, which were disrupted by the colonial presence and which are being consciously revived in the present. In Fiji, *vakavanua*, is portrayed rather in terms of a continuity of practices, flowing ceaselessly from past to present' ('Custom and the Way' 340). Elaborating on the rupture in Vanuatu, Jolly states, '*kastom* tends more thoroughly to expunge European elements and is associated not just with a moral criticism of European ways but with more trenchant opposition towards foreigners in general and whites in particular' (330). Jolly ('Woman Ikat Raet') and Molisa (*CEDAW; Human Raets Toksave*)

have addressed the fact that women's rights and empowerment are not reconcilable with some interpretations of *kastom*, which is likewise highlighted by Sope, Olul and Bjornum.

There are entire theses on *kastom*, the majority from an anthropological or ethnographic perspective, in addition to research on customary land tribunals, customary law and hybrid justice (see Rosseau; Goddard and Otto; Forsyth). Of interest for my project was the portability of *kastom* rooted in a place, the disconnect that occurs when local *kastom* is transferred (routed) into another environment (e.g. a settlement on another island), and the impact this has on women, in particular, when the Chiefs and decision-makers are predominantly men. The difficulties of navigating a complex hybrid justice system, where both customary and Western law apply – compounding the challenges women face – is a key concern of my novel. In this context, what constitutes justice and conflict resolution in a specific local community are often socially constructed concepts that tend to use the dominant male position as default. The novel explicates the value of an apology and the sharing of food and kava, in addition to the Court's formal ruling (Supreme Court of Vanuatu VUSC 19; Policing and Justice Support Program Vanuatu 29).

In the Port Vila workshop, the Chief's statement from my novel in progress sparked animated discussion about what constitutes *kastom* and to whom it applies. Most communities have local bylaws – social norms rather than formal law or policy – that cover minor and serious issues ranging from religious choice, gossip and theft, to rape and murder. Some communities in Malekula compensate for the death of a person with a child, generally a girl (98–101). Juliette Pita's art work *Nomurep Marima (Life today)* exhibited at Fondation Bastien in August 2017 depicts a similar customary practice in Erromango, in TAFEA province. In the accompanying description, Pita uses child compensation as an example of the difficult decisions Chiefs have to make to maintain peace. She does not elaborate on the impact on parents and children.

An example of social norm depicted as *kastom* and promoted by the church is restrictive dress code for women. In the novel, nonconformity with a conservative dress code becomes an issue during a discussion about water with the Blacksands community. When some older men decide the discussion is unproductive, the fact that the women are dressed in shorts for practical reasons is depicted as disrespect for chiefs, elders and, by extension, for *kastom*. The shaming of women who flout dress codes and wear make-up is mentioned by Yasmine Bjornum as feminist issues *Sista* attempts to address. For the workshop and

interviews, the two older generations dressed in loose Mother Hubbard dresses¹⁴, while the majority of the younger writers appeared in jeans, denim shorts or tight dresses.

The ability of *kastom* to both unify and divide was the principal concern of anthropologists around independence (Rosseau 116). Focusing on rape, ‘stealing women,’ and dress code, Rosseau devotes a chapter in her thesis to practices that can and cannot exist within *kastom* (Ch. 7). Far from simple and clear-cut, the customary practices are many and open to interpretation, as the interviewees acknowledge. In her poem ‘Custom’ (*Black Stone* 24), Molisa deliberately uses the English word to draw attention to how *kastom* has been misused by the colonisers and patriarchy alike. By selecting and applying aspects of *kastom* that serve the dominant group, women are kept in a subordinate position. Using the English word in a generalised sense—thereby failing to understand the nuances and complexities involved in local expressions of *kastom*—subverts the original intention and purpose of *kastom*. Yet even in its bastardised form it can still be used against women:

Inadvertently
misappropriating
“Custom”
misapplied
bastardised
murdered
a frankenstein
corpse
conveniently
recalled
to intimidate
women

Forthcoming doctoral research by Vanuatu-based Heidi Tyedmers (Australian National University) considers how different social actors in Vanuatu understand, navigate and express culture, and how culture – particularly when mobilised by and within the state – may take on regulatory dimensions and functions. This dimension is what Viran Molisa Trief

¹⁴ Introduced by Presbyterian missionaries, adopted post-independence as *kastom dres blong yumi*, ‘our traditional dress’ (Cummings 33–34).

alludes to in saying *kastom*, when construed as *the* authoritative voice, can amount to abuse of power. At community-level, it can easily become the de facto policy-setting. Tyedmers aims for a more nuanced understanding of how ‘culture as regulation’ influences behaviour in daily life and its impact on gender and human rights.

Kastom in art

Several interviewees note that literary writing is an art form and deserves to be recognised as such. Teaiwa (‘What Remains’) and Kihleng draw attention to the visual roots of Pacific literature, which is relevant for Vanuatu, where traditional sand-drawing offers a unique form of story-telling that is simultaneously visual and oral performance. Performance is a valued form of story-telling, as Olul and Dorras assert.

During her fieldwork, Lisa McDonald was repeatedly reminded that there is *kastom* inside contemporary art (190). Art as *kastom*, as social commentary on women’s roles—albeit not from a particularly critical or feminist perspective—is visible in Juliette Pita’s art that plays with motifs and stories that are the exclusive intellectual property of Pita’s Erromango clan, who make up the Nainao art association. McDonald uses the term *kastom* copyright for this kind of collective intellectual property (190). There are three established art associations that are vehicles for collective agency – Nainao, Nawita and Red Wave. Nainao uses art as social and political commentary to juxtapose past and present and articulate the relationship between them. Hau’ofa’s Oceania Centre inspired the Red Wave Collective, established in 2005 by Jean Claude Touré, a francophone painter from Ambae (Geismar 50). Nawita, founded in 1989, is the oldest. Geismar (47–48) describes Nawita’s members as urbane and diverse, reacting ‘against local *kastom* to create new national forms,’ keen to involve expatriates and develop ‘intellectual discourse around their work.’

In comparison to writers, artists appear to enjoy enviable opportunities for international exchange and engagement that allow them to further their practice and contribute to a distinct national body of art. Molisa has written about the artist’s role as thinker, catalyst, activist, the community’s spirit and soul (‘Local Global’ 30). For me, this applies equally to writers, as Molisa so ably demonstrated. In 2019 three of the workshop writers successfully explored art exhibitions as an opportunity to showcase their poetry and raise women’s concerns about workload, giving birth, natural disasters, climate change, sexual predators and social media exploitation (Olul; Palmer; Kanas). This included two collaborative poems where Rebecca Tobo Olul and I talk to and past each other in alternating

stanzas, each voice retaining its integrity, while at the same time creating something new, practising rhetorical sovereignty and alliance (Olul and Nyman).

2 *Feminism and the women's movement*

Feminism, as writer Marie Sheer remarked in 1986, “is the radical notion that women are people,” a notion not universally accepted but spreading nonetheless. The changing conversation is encouraging. As is the growing engagement of men. There were always male supporters. (Solnit 123)

In the preface to *Colonised People*, three men (two Chiefs and one poet), express their hope that ‘through reading it, both Ni-Vanuatu women and men will be liberated to a better understanding of women as human beings and respect them for what they have done, what they are doing and what they can do for Vanuatu’ (5).

When Pacific leaders signed the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration in 2012, they committed to empower women to become active participants in their islands’ economic, social and political life and to lift the status of women (Secretariat of the Pacific Community). Vanuatu has all the rights-based scaffolding in place. Equal rights for women and men are enshrined in the Constitution. Vanuatu has signed up to the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and reports on progress against its human rights record to the UN Human Rights Council in regular Universal Periodic Reviews. In January 2019 New Zealand and Vanuatu underwent their third Universal Periodic Reviews as part of the 32nd session. New Zealand was recommended to improve the human rights of LGBTIQI communities, whereas Vanuatu was called upon to improve its treatment of women, including taking measures against domestic violence and enabling women’s participation in the 2020 elections (Murphy; UPR Info).

The National Gender Equality Policy 2015–19 states that the Government of Vanuatu will take proactive steps to embed gender equality into legislation, policies, programmes and organisational structures. Yet, despite formal structures that speak of equality and respect, women are still paddling against the tide, as the interviews confirm. Post-colonial literary theorist and feminist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states that women in post-colonial societies are doubly disadvantaged compared to men; not only are they silenced and disempowered on the basis of race and class, they have the added burden of an ideological construction of gender that silences their voices (82–83, 104). This is a point Molisa likewise makes in

Colonised People (7). Bjornum's feminist magazine *Sista* is possibly the only public forum where a discussion on Spivak, Molisa and feminism could be held in the same breath in a way that would highlight their relevance for younger Ni-Vanuatu women.

Currently, there are no women in Parliament and only a few in senior positions in the public service. In contesting the 2016 general elections, Mary Jack Kaviamu speaks of the discrimination she faced in a male-dominated political campaign – notwithstanding ten years in provincial politics – including from her community leaders, and 'emotional violence' from other women. She did not suffer physical violence as some candidates did. Women were targeted based on age, marital status, education level and economic status (Kaviamu). Sope, Molisa Trief and Bjornum point to women's struggle to be heard in politics, the need for reserved seats, and express doubts about the viability of the new women's party, established in 2018. As part of regional policy consultations in 2018, Hilda Lini, on behalf of the Vanuatu National Council of Women, urged Pacific leaders to commit to at least 30% representation in Parliament to allow women to participate in national governance, law-making and budget allocations (Lini).

In an unprecedented move, seven women were appointed as Directors across the public sector in 2019. Within a week the Minister for Internal Affairs had to urge the public to respect the new appointees (Willie; Napwatt). In July 2019 Viran Molisa Trief became the first Ni-Vanuatu woman to be appointed a Judge of the Supreme Court (Judiciary of the Republic of Vanuatu).

The statistics of domestic and sexual violence against women and girls – with the majority of detainees imprisoned for sexual offending – are likewise sobering (Vanuatu Correctional Services). The Vanuatu Women's Centre 2011 national survey details the consequences of partner violence on women's work, financial autonomy, children, as well as women's physical and mental health. Jo Dorras has mined sexual offender statistics in the film 'Talemaot' and the play 'Kalabus,' while Rebecca Tobo Olul has drawn attention to it in her unpublished, but publicly read, non-fiction and fiction. Dorras's and Olul's creative work offer important counterpoints to everyday media accounts and, by giving insight into gendered experiences other than the perpetrator's, they provide a rare opportunity to engage emotionally with the impact and long-term effects of misogyny and violence against women. For these reasons films like 'Talemaot' have attracted aid funding and international attention (Pacific Women Shaping Pacific). Similarly, Bjornum's poetry takes a stand for pregnant girls abandoned by their partners ('Mi Toktok Tumas'). The work of Dorras, Olul and Bjornum forges ahead on the path Molisa paved. Viran Molisa Trief talks about the

emotional impact of reading her mother's poetry in public for the first time – and realising how little has changed in thirty years.

The threat against women is not limited to what is captured in crime statistics. For outspoken women—who dare to put their thoughts and outrage on paper or on social media for a wider audience—the repercussions can be severe. Molisa had *Wea Rod?*, her criticism of the government, removed from the shelves and suffered an arson attack, causing her family great distress as Viran Molisa Trief acknowledges (van Trease 109). Rebecca Tobo Olul is candid about the fall-out in response to her 'Untold Stories' of domestic violence, and the lack of solidarity and support from the older generation within the women's movement, something Yasmine Bjornum likewise raises. In what appears to be a rare case of solidarity, Bjornum mentions mentally preparing with actor Gigi Baxter for anticipated social media attacks in response to Gigi's account of being a transgender woman.

The generational divide is raised by Jolly in relation to feminism. She finds the older generation, shaped by an amalgam of Christian morals and *kastom* values, tends to reject Western feminism ('Epilogue' 141-42). While this was not true for Molisa, it certainly applies to Sope. The diversity within Melanesian women's movements and the improbability of solidarity—if it entails wide-ranging compromise—is likewise discussed by Jolly, referencing an unpublished conference paper from 2001 by Teresia Teaiwa that coined the term 'fluidarity.' Fluidarity implies a broader collective concept than solidarity to cater for 'the transforming and transformative character' of Melanesia's diversity ('Epilogue' 143-44).

Of the five Pacific women poets Selina Tusitala Marsh researched, Marsh states only Molisa would 'possibly' have claimed to represent the views of other women in society (*Ancient Banyans* 17). From Griffen's interview with Molisa, and from Viran Molisa Trief's account, it seems evident Molisa was content to speak on behalf of Ni-Vanuatu women:

I believe that everything I say for women I say on behalf of *that* group, so the things that I say in *Colonised People* are not for them to hear – they already know their situation; they live it every day. On their behalf, I am telling anybody else who doesn't know and needs to know [...] Really I am talking to our decision makers who are mostly men. (qtd. in A. Griffen, 'Interviews' 76)

Colonised People is dedicated to the women of Vanuatu. In the introduction, Molisa turns her gaze away from the colonisers and challenges men, political leaders, husbands and patriarchal practices that hold women back, saying, 'Vanuatu is now free of foreign colonial

domination but Ni-Vanuatu women are still colonised' (7). Three of the poems are based on occupational statistics that bear witness to gender inequality in the workforce and society; one is based on hospital statistics of gender-based violence (Annex 1). Towards the end, even Molisa seems despondent. In the poem 'We of the never never' she wonders if women's potential will ever be realised: 'We are never ever ready / not ready / before Independence / at Independence / since Independence / we are never never ready' (25).

Molisa expresses herself in terms that come across as decidedly feminist. The political importance of this collection as an advocacy tool in the campaign for securing seats for the first two Ni-Vanuatu women in Parliament should not be forgotten (Donald et al.). 'Hilda Lini' is the closing poem. Viran Molisa Trief shares her vivid childhood memory of selling the collection at a political rally in 1987 by drawing attention to this poem.

Based on her personal experience of Pacific island women, Marsh (*Ancient Banyans* 118) states that a real 'suspicion of feminism' still exists, regardless of social and educational background. Feminism has tended to be rejected as 'too Western' and 'irrelevant' for the Pacific, which can be read as too white, too middle-class. This echoes criticism by black women in the United States (hooks; Smith 43). Marsh concludes that feminism needs to change and adapt to a Pacific context in order to be viable and relevant.

There have been several attempts to make feminism relevant over the years. The 1987 'Women, Development and Empowerment' workshop in Fiji agreed on a feminist perspective relevant to Pacific women's lives and named it 'Our Vision' (V. Griffen). Molisa's poem 'Integration of Women,' from *Colonised People*, was reproduced in the conference proceedings. In the collection's introduction Molisa addresses her fellow sisters, saying Ni-Vanuatu women need to be honest with themselves and 'Free themselves from the Mentality of the slave,' and be more supportive of one another (7–8). In the poem's second stanza Molisa repeats her introductory words, telling her sisters to take some responsibility for a situation where men's oppression of women is allowed to continue unchallenged:

Women
are teachers
of Society,
As such,
Women
cannot lay blame
on anyone

for their nonentity
because
Women
are party to
the maintenance
of an oppressive
macho status quo.

Molisa's words would in all likelihood have been interpreted as an attack on her peers, when her intention appears to have been to emphasise the importance of mutual support and unity for the sake of progressing the status of women. Viran Molisa Trief acknowledges as much, when she addresses the dearth of Ni-Vanuatu literature and the shortcomings of the women's movement—alluding to the 'tall poppy syndrome' and the hypocrisy of some of Molisa's supporters, who were her most avid critics while she was still alive.

In her attempt at 'pacificising feminism,' Marsh built on the Māori concept of *Mana Wāhine* that accuses 'white feminists of perpetuating imperialism. Any call for a gender-based sisterhood that disregards colonial history, culture, class, and religion, can never realise any global community' (*Ancient Banyans* 135–37). Marsh named her version of a 'pan-Pacific feminist framework based on cultural metaphors as opposed to imported models' *Mana Tama'ita'i*. Principles of relationships and communal obligations underpin it, as well as the complementary rather than competitive gender roles of many island societies, where women work alongside men (139–41). It sounds like the kind of feminism the majority of the interviewees would be willing to embrace, with Sope and Malosu unequivocally stating that men and women should work together, while Olul reflects on the potential benefits of involving men in performances on women's issues. Bjornum, meanwhile, finds her unapologetic focus on educating girls and women keeps being questioned.

Feminism has made advances regionally. In 2016 the Charter of Feminist Principles for Pacific Feminists was agreed at the inaugural Pacific Feminist Forum in Suva. Full of mutual respect, *aroha* and Pacific metaphors, acknowledging men and boys as participants and allies, the Charter extends beyond women and girls to the diaspora, migrants, people of non-binary gender identities and those identifying as LGBTQI. In addition to its 'Principles as Feminists,' the 'Principles as a Collective' include promoting women's leadership in small island states, social and economic justice, sustainable livelihoods, universal protection, access

to information and technology, fair and decent work, with the environmental and climate change challenges earning a separate statement.

Linking feminism and literature, thinking about everyday experiences in a different, more critical way that encourages thought and debate about neglected or forgotten aspects, is the feminist challenge as Marsh sees it (*Ancient Banyans* 20). This is exactly the kind of critical thinking Yasmine Bjornum promotes in *Sista*, in her ‘Girl Power’ training, through textual analysis of policies that impact on girls’ lives – which is a similar lens to what Molisa and Sope would have applied when laws and policies for the newly independent republic were being drafted and debated – and likewise in her poems, where she challenges Biblical and traditional narratives. Bjornum’s approach aligns with the two key ideas that informed Marsh’s critical approach: ‘that Pacific literature demands to be read in the context of colonialism; and that Pacific women’s literature, as a vital part of women’s literatures globally, can be enlightened by feminism’ (24). This conviction is likewise evident in Jo Dorras’s work that through the medium of performance and TV reaches a wide local and international audience (see also Tupou).

Drawing on Molisa and Marsh, I raised the relevance of feminism in the interviews to find out whether Ni-Vanuatu women, consciously or unconsciously, take what could be perceived as a feminist stance. Many of the interviewees do so in their writing, even though few identify as feminists.

3 *Language and feminist critique of language*

Pacific Islanders, with their wide kinship networks and history of colonisation, rarely speak only one language. Writing, however, is a product of their education, as Molisa (qtd. in A. Griffen), Wendt (*Lali* xviii) and Marsh (*Ancient Banyans* 17) emphasise. The interviewees acknowledge the influence of colonial education policies and their privilege in accessing overseas education. For an in-depth analysis of the importance of education in one’s own culture and language, see McKinley and Smith who draw on New Zealand evidence, while Early et al. apply it to Vanuatu.

With regards to language, there is a discrepancy between the assumption that people prefer to read Bislama and vernacular, while at the same time not considering Bislama an appropriate vehicle for literary writing. This is particularly the case for the pre-independence generation, although Sope acknowledges her poems in Bislama speak to something deeper

within. English or French has been the medium for writing, teaching and influencing. An example of Molisa's drive to educate her fellow citizens is *Woman ikat raet long human raet o no?* that explains women's rights as human rights in English, Bislama and French. Molisa wanted to reach a wide readership, hence she chose English 'to express what the silent bulk of womanhood has not found voice to express before,' reasoning that:

with the Vanua'aku Pati being in power, the Vanua'aku Pati people mostly had been educated through the English-medium system. Therefore, that is the reading population and that is the population to convey messages to. (qtd. in A. Griffen 76)

Molisa maintained that she was an accidental poet, who found poetry to be a useful tool to disseminate messages of concern regarding the nation's development, environmental issues and the status of women (75). Sope voices similar sentiments, evident also in *The Questioning Mind*. Marsh concludes that Griffen considered Molisa's use of powerful 'message poetry' an effective appropriation of English for feminist purposes (*Ancient Banyans* 240). This preference for creative writing to carry a message, to be in service of a greater cause – albeit not necessarily a feminist cause – came through strongly in the workshop and in the interviews. Catherine Malosu questioned whether fiction can even carry a message. No one appears to doubt the power of poetry in this regard, which points to Molisa's success in harnessing both the poetic form as well as the coloniser's language in an act of rhetorical sovereignty (King 212–13, 219).

Looking at the metaphors used, Sope frequently refers to 'mother' as a shorthand for motherland, for *mama graon* that nurtures its children, for Vanuatu. Her 1987 poem 'Brave Mother' celebrates the bravery of a mother who is no longer held 'prisoner / by two stepfathers'. For Molisa the strength and colour of the black stone, the lava that forms Vanuatu's bedrock, provided her with a powerful metaphor. She named her imprint Black Stone Publications. It is in metaphors and language that hidden meanings flourish, as Molisa attests:

Vatu being short for Vanuatu, *vatu* being the term in a number of our Melanesian languages meaning 'rock'. Vanuatu, of course is not a simple name. It has lots of meanings that don't have any quick equivalents in English, but it is all those things that we believe make us what we are, especially our relationship to the land and its origins. (qtd. in A. Griffen 77)

In his introduction to *Lali* (xix), Wendt expressed the hope of witnessing a steady growth of literature in vernacular. This is difficult to achieve in a country with over a hundred

indigenous languages. Bislama is the national language as per Vanuatu's Constitution, while the official languages are Bislama, English and French. The principal languages of education, however, were English and French. Only with the introduction of a new language policy in 2010 has it been possible to start preparing for primary school children to be taught in their own first languages (Early et al.). Helen Tamtam provides insight into the amalgamation of the English and French systems, and the controversial move to elevate Bislama and vernacular to the language of instruction in schools. Her vision for the next generation of graduates is quite extraordinary, yet it is aligned with McKinley and Smith's thinking on indigenous well-being grounded in an education system based on indigenous cultures, languages and knowledge (3, 6). The policy change likewise opens up opportunities for literature by Ni-Vanuatu writers to be taught in schools. None of the interviewees had read Molisa or Sope at school.

Cameron dissects why language is a feminist issue, and a complex one at that, stating that 'the silence of women is above all an absence of women's voices from high culture. If we look at a society's most valued linguistic registers – religious ceremonial, political rhetoric, legal discourse, science, poetry – we find women for the most part silent and in many cases silenced' (3). On the theme of silence and exclusion Cameron discusses how women find an authentic voice, both spoken and written; how they censor themselves for fear of being ignored or ridiculed, or being perceived to outsmart their husbands, brothers and fathers; and how silencing by men is enacted through obscene language or power language. Quoting anthropological linguist Susan Gal, Cameron reminds us: 'the fact that social science has neglected women makes women of the past and other cultures *seem* silent, when in fact the silence is that of current western scholarship' (4).

Rebecca Tobo Olul mentions the tendency to shut down and belittle women who speak up. Helen Tamtam speaks about the fear of drawing attention to oneself. Yasmin Bjornum reflects on the difficulty in encouraging women to come forward, show solidarity and speak out. During the interviews I experienced a few instances of self-censoring and a tendency to agree with the interviewer. As Bjornum asserts: 'no one wants to make anyone feel uncomfortable, it's not the culture.'

Anderson and Jack suggest that oral history interviews can generate new insights about 'women's experiences of themselves in their worlds.' This is particularly useful when the narrative tries to navigate a combination of separate, often conflicting, perspectives that reflect women's reality and experience versus men's dominant position in a culture:

Hence, inadvertently, women often mute their own thoughts and feelings when they try to describe their lives in the familiar and publicly acceptable terms of prevailing concepts and conventions. To hear women's perspectives accurately, we have to learn to listen in stereo receiving both the dominant and muted channels clearly and tuning into them carefully to understand the relationship between them. (Anderson and Jack 11)

4 *The literary scene and publishing*

The interviews highlight that creative writing, particularly fiction, is not sufficiently valued in Vanuatu. This contributes to the invisibility of writers, to the extent where writers are not aware of one another's existence. Jo Dorras points to the lack of age-appropriate, affordable books to foster reading and writing. Besides the USP and the Alliance française, each with their own limited publishing focus, there are no publishers and bookshops in Vanuatu.

Molisa assessed the English readership as limited, with the majority preferring to read in Bislama or vernacular. She identified barriers for printing, marketing and distribution, with finances being the greatest constraint. 'If I had money to publish, there are many volumes I could make public. But, while that is a constraint, there are lots of pieces lying around gathering dust' (qtd. in Griffen 79, 81). *Black Stone* was published by Mana Publications with assistance from the South Pacific Creative Arts Society (SPCAS), active from 1973 until the late 1990s. By 2001 SPCAS seems to have ceased to exist. Financing and avenues for publishing short pieces, let alone books, are singled out by several interviewees as the main obstacles. Literature is nevertheless associated with printed matter, and to see one's writing in print remains the ultimate goal for many writers. Dorras acknowledges the importance of aid funding for turning scripts into theatre performances and films. Viran Molisa Trief has likewise secured aid funding for reprinting Grace's books. She acknowledges funding as the main impediment for Black Stone Publications to publish more Ni-Vanuatu writers.

Apart from anthologies, self-publishing is the most common avenue for Pacific writers, including Molisa and Sope. Telstar Jimmy, who was invited to the workshop but declined due to studies in Fiji, self-published her first poetry collection in July 2018 with her family's support (Selmen). In an e-mail exchange she mentions the difficulty of finding a publisher in Vanuatu and for creative writing to be taken seriously (Jimmy). Nancy Gaselona Palmer credits feedback from the workshop for self-publishing her first poetry collection, *Rock of Strength*, in June 2019 after working on it for twenty years. Her lament for Ambae,

published in 2017 in the *Vanuatu Daily Post*, was inspired by workshop discussions about writing commemorative poems.

In discussing Papua New Guinea, where a comparatively vibrant writing scene exists, Crowl ('Carrying the Bag' 92) asserts that indigenous women do indeed write, but their writing does not reach readers due to a lack of editors and publishers who could help finalise manuscripts, outlets for distribution, and a market that is willing to pay for books and journals. Because literary writing is not a viable business, women's contributions remain hidden, with their work often published in non-literary form. Crowl's points align with my own assessment of the Vanuatu writing scene. Without publishing outlets, there is no editorial support; without editorial support there is no feedback; without feedback there is limited understanding of what is required to produce a polished piece of writing – which would enable writers to grow. And without all of the above, there is little prospect for a national body of literature to emerge. Craig Santos Perez and Daniel Heath Justice argue convincingly for why indigenous literatures matter.

Wendt has expressed similar sentiments about non-fiction being the vehicle for many Pacific writers (*Lali* 5). Grace Molisa is a prime example. Her output spans three poetry collections, numerous pamphlets, reports, chapters on history and politics (e.g. 'A Crisis of Leadership'), in addition to contributions on the position of women in international fora, such as the 1995 UN Conference on Women and the UN Convention on Elimination of Violence Against Women (CEDAW). Molisa was also active in UNIFEM's regional Women in Politics programme. Crowl (97) speculates organisational calendars and newsletters may hide a goldmine of poetry and stories waiting to be discovered.

Mildred Sope's writing oeuvre likewise spans editorials, political speeches and poems, keynote speeches, reports, material for her husband's presidential candidature, and numerous poems and speeches written for the wider community upon request. Sope's poetry and non-fiction have been published over four decades in the Vanua'aku Pati newsletters, often anonymously, which makes identification problematic, even if the newsletters are found.

Not everyone is as prolific a writer as Molisa and Sope. The ebb and flow of writing is one of the curiosities of Pacific literature, as Wendt explains: 'you can't earn a living from it! ... One of the main features of our writing is the large number of writers who publish a few pieces and then disappear, perhaps quite appropriately, into the civil service, politics, the professions and business' (*Nuanua* 8).

The vast majority of Ni-Vanuatu writers I have come across, men and women, have followed this trajectory, prioritising a career—or in women’s case, the need to provide for their families and shouldering the bulk of unpaid domestic work—ahead of their own writing ambitions. Ambitions further stifled by limited opportunities for publication, locally and regionally.

The importance of anthologies

To date Pacific literature in English, outside of Hawai’i and New Zealand, has been dominated by writers from, and literature about, the island nations known as Polynesia (i.e. the Cook Islands, Tonga, Samoa and, in this context, Fiji), and Papua New Guinea as the only Melanesian representative.¹⁵ Marsh outlines three waves of Pacific literature, with the first two waves introduced and covered by Wendt’s 1976 essay and his anthologies *Lali* (1980) and *Nuanua* (1995). Two later anthologies, *Whetū moana* and *Mauri ola*, focus on contemporary Polynesian poems in English and do not include Melanesian writers. Winduo draws on Wendt’s 1976 essay for his survey of the first wave of Pacific novels written in English, reaching back into pre-colonial times. For the first wave in 1960, marked by Cook Islanders Tom and Lydia Davis’ novel *Makutu*, the expectations and hopes were high and the writing confrontational. ‘First wave writing tended to react against “the coloniser,” challenging racist stereotypes and a history of domination that worked to silence indigenous voices’ (Marsh, *Ancient Banyans* 46).

The 1970s saw less writing, with a steady increase from 1980 onwards. Second wave themes remained the effects of colonialism, racism, modernisation, as well as loss of self-esteem, pride and traditional skills, while addressing the integration of indigenous and foreign cultures (*Ancient Banyans* 49, 52). The third wave includes young Pasifika writers who were born offshore or emigrated as children. Marsh names Teresia Teaiwa and Sia Figiel as third wave writers who explore ‘multi-cultural identities and pan-Pacific nationalities as mobility increases throughout the Pacific, and as the Pacific emerges in world affairs. Mediums of storytelling expand as far as the technology and imagination allow’ (24, 51–52). Pacific literary movements were generated out of the USP in Suva and the University of Papua New Guinea (Diaz and Kauanui 318; Wendt, *Lali* xviii). Both Sope and Molisa were

¹⁵ The settler colonies of Hawai’i and New Zealand produce significantly more writing that includes indigenous voices. Marsh refers to the emergence of Māori literature, mentioning authors Witi Ihimaera and Patricia Grace, as instrumental for encouraging Pacific writers (*Ancient Banyans* 46).

politically and creatively influenced by their time at USP in Suva, as Sope and Viran Molisa Trief acknowledge. Unfortunately, the USP's support for creative writing courses and publications, such as *Mana*, appears to have diminished in recent times, as the interviewees confirm.

In his introduction to *Some modern poetry from Vanuatu*, Wendt notes: 'Most of the literature written by Pacific writers was barely three years old when this collection was written in 1974. It then contained nearly all the poetry which had been written by young Vanuatu poets.' Of the twelve poets, three are women, Mildred Sope among them. She recalls writing the poems in Wendt's class. Wendt included lines from her poem 'Motherland' in his 1976 essay (51).

When *Lali* appeared in 1980 it was the first anthology of new Pacific literature in English and the first of Wendt's four anthologies of Pacific writing. In the introduction, Wendt mentions the paucity of written literature in the Pacific, apart from Papua New Guinea. The only woman among the four New Hebridean poets is Mildred Sope and her poems are, again, 'Motherland' and 'Chusum/Choice.' *Nuanua: Pacific writing in English since 1980* includes only two Ni-Vanuatu contributors: Grace Molisa and Sampson Ngwele, who later endorsed *Colonised People*. The titles of Grace Molisa's four poems are politically charged: 'Custom,' 'Neo-Colonialism' and 'Status Costs' from *Black Stone*, and 'Ni-Vanuatu Women in Development' from *Colonised People*. Wendt cautions that '*Lali* and *Nuanua* may create the impression that the strongest and most extensive literature in our region is represented by fiction and poetry. That is not so. Like writers everywhere, more Pacific writers write non-fiction than fiction or poetry or drama' (*Nuanua* 5).

Alice Te Punga Somerville highlights the importance of Wendt's contribution in anthologising Pacific literature and nurturing connections between writers, thereby turning ad-hoc writing into a body of literature and helping to shape a Pacific region by anthologising it (254). Pacific anthologies have become archives of writing, repositories of texts that would otherwise have gone unpublished, thus becoming sites of contestation and articulations of a region. 'In the Pacific, a far greater number of writers than we might expect are represented solely in anthologies and do not publish single-author publications,' she notes (256).

Having spent two years looking for publishing opportunities for emerging Ni-Vanuatu writers¹⁶, I fully agree on the importance of anthologies, not only to build the credentials of

¹⁶ See, for example, Victor Rodger and Lani Wendt Young on Pasifika writers and literary 'gatekeepers' in New Zealand.

emerging and established writers alike, but to encourage writers to keep writing. Yasmine Bjornum and Rebecca Tobo Olul harbour hopes for a future Ni-Vanuatu women's anthology, as does Telstar Jimmy. The main obstacles identified concern financing for publication and distribution, the time commitment, and the editorial responsibility involved. Whereas Jo Dorras acknowledges the debt she owes to Peter Walker for his critical eye, her feedback to aspiring scriptwriters is not always welcomed. Catherine Malosu and Mildred Sope are not even open to editorial suggestions, exercising their rhetorical sovereignty.

Literature in French

Alliance française is a strong supporter of Vanuatu's cultural scene, with musical talent nights, the international music festival Fest'Napuan, limited publishing, and a francophone library. Before the Fondation Suzanne Bastien opened, the French Embassy's Espace Culturel was Port Vila's only art exhibition space.

Only three Ni-Vanuatu authors, published by Alliance française, are listed on its website: Grace Molisa, Marcel Melthérorong and Tavo Paul. Born in New Caledonia to Ni-Vanuatu parents, Melthérorong returned to Vanuatu in 1994 in search of his roots. *Tôghàn*, published in 2007, is his literary debut and the first novel by a Ni-Vanuatu author. The level of support extended to francophone authors is evident in that the slim novel brought Melthérorong to the Paris book fair in 2007. The 2009 edition includes a foreword by Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio, (awarded the 2008 Nobel prize in literature), that celebrates a 'new and original voice' in francophone literature. No such support exists for anglophone writers.

Tavo Paul's 2011 poetry collection, *L'Ame du kava* celebrates kava. His first novel *Quand le cannibale ricane* (*When the cannibal sneers*, my translation) was published in 2015. None of these publications have been translated into English or Bislama.

Alliance has sponsored storybooks in partnership with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and published a French-Bislama dictionary. A literary event, 'Pirogue – Salon du Livre,' was held for the first time in 2017. Apart from Melthérorong and Paul, all invited authors were from New Caledonia or further abroad.

For those writing in Bislama, Alliance nevertheless offers opportunities to reach an audience. Yasmine Bjornum held her first public reading at Alliance française on International Women's Day 2018, reading her poem 'Woman Hemi Gat Power Blong Makem Laef.' In 2019, Telstar Jimmy and Yasmine Bjornum were invited to read their poems in Bislama and English at 'Pirogue 2019 – Salon du Livre'.

5 *The Ambae poets*

The parallel trajectories of Grace Molisa's and Mildred Sope's life stories intrigued me from the beginning. Born in matrilineal Ambae and related, they had similar educational backgrounds with an appetite for learning and started writing poetry at the height of decolonisation. Their poems deal with the political as well as the personal: colonisation, independence, faith, love, betrayal, teaching, work, inequality, the motherland and women's position in society. Both were published in English, French and Bislama. They travelled together overseas, represented their country, and were vocal about the need for education, equal rights for women, and independence (see V. Griffen, *Women speak out!*). Both were active in the national movement for independence and the Vanua'aku Pati. Molisa was the Second Secretary to Walter Lini, the first Prime Minister from independence until 1991, when the Vanua'aku Pati split (see van Trease). Sope married Barak Sope, Vanuatu's Prime Minister from 1999 to 2001.

Grace Molisa's untimely passing in 2002 sparked a flood of tributes that were edited and launched on the anniversary of Molisa's death (Randell, *Pacific Creative Writing*). At the launch, Sela Molisa spoke of Grace as a 'woman of great passions':

One of the greatest of these was creative writing. Grace would wake up in the early hours of the morning to write, and was always encouraging others to write. She had a great desire to see ni-Vanuatu giving voice to their own experiences and building up a body of literature that was truly theirs. (qtd in Randell, *Vanuatu Creative Writers* 23)

Prime Minister Edward Natapei, meanwhile, spoke to the challenges:

Speeches given at Grace's funeral paid tribute to her amazing life. Many showed that she had been misunderstood, as Ministers and Parliamentarians asked her belatedly on that day to forgive them for their failure to support her more strongly. (qtd in *Vanuatu Creative Writers* 24–25)

Grace Molisa recognised writers' need for a supportive community and established the Vanuatu Creative Writers' Association (VCWA) after a first writing workshop in September 2001. Tragically, she died four months later and the VCWA folded after the launch of the tribute collection and Molisa's final work¹⁷ (4–5, 19).

¹⁷ Molisa's *Women and Good Governance* and *Ni-Vanuatu Role Models*, edited by Randell.

Helen Tamtam and Carol Aru, both connected to the USP in Port Vila, recall the VCWA. Aru was the interim secretary. ‘VCWA does not exist anymore because no one was there to drive it. Secondly, people who write will prefer to have their writings published but they do not know how to do that and the motivation is lost. They need guidance in this’ (Aru, ‘RE: Creative Writing’). Incidentally, Aru hails from Ambae, too, and is working on a collection of stories and children’s traditional games from West Ambae. A recording of her poem ‘Where is the Ni-Vanuatu girl?’ is available online, with her introduction concerning the loss of tradition and identity (*Poetry Postcards*).

In 2015 the first *kastom* stories from Malekula were published in Chinese. *The Story of the Eel*, published in 2002 in English and Uripiv, were translated by a resident Chinese diplomat and re-published in English, Bislama, Uripiv and Chinese, with illustrations by Ralph Regenvanu. At the launch, Port Vila Central School principal, anthropologist Alexander Paul, encouraged students to start recording and translating the stories of their elders for future generations before it is too late (Makin).

In considering the social and political context for three generations of Ni-Vanuatu writers—with the first and the current generation comparatively more focused on political issues, social justice and gender equality than the second generation, who came of age around independence—Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s account of Frantz Fanon’s work on indigenous intellectuals in a colonised Algeria offers interesting parallels and differences. Recognising that leaders and intellectuals were educated by, and steeped into, the colonising culture, Fanon outlines a process for intellectuals to reconnect with their own culture and people. Initially, the assimilation of intellectuals into the colonising culture has to be proven. The second phase is about identity and reconnecting with the past, remembering ‘who they actually are.’ The third phase is about realignment, awakening the people, and producing ‘a revolutionary and national literature’ that sees the writer progressively addressing their own people (Smith 70).

In Vanuatu’s case, Fanon’s first phase appears somewhat redundant for the first generation of writers. While it is true that Sope and Molisa, unlike most of their peers, left their homeland to study overseas – and that an English-language university environment could be said to ‘colonise the mind’, to paraphrase Ngugi Wa Thiong’o – the USP in Fiji nevertheless afforded a hotbed of national activism away from the French and British colonisers back home, as Mildred Sope and Viran Molisa Trief highlight. At this particular juncture in history, heightened nationalism dismantled gender barriers and outspoken, literate

women were welcomed. Sope's and Molisa's formal education started with missionary school in Ambae in an education system where only the colonisers' languages were permitted. In what is indisputably an act of rhetorical sovereignty, they chose to harness the coloniser's language for their own purposes (King 212–13, 219). There were two reasons for this: they wanted to reach a wider audience, nationally and regionally; and they considered English the language of literary writing. Hence, I would argue that their time at the USP in Fiji served to radicalise them, rather than further assimilate them into the colonising culture. Sope and Molisa were intrinsically part of the struggle for independence, politically involved in the Vanua'aku party, and grounded in their own culture. What is beyond doubt is that their time at USP was also formative for them *as writers*. Molisa quickly progressed to Fanon's third phase, exercising her rhetorical sovereignty, addressing her own people and beginning to produce a body of national literature, leaving others trailing behind.

The second generation of writers (Aru and Tamtam), now joined by the first generation in retirement (Sope), seem content to remain in Fanon's second phase of documenting history and traditions through poetry, non-fiction and *kastom* stories. Like Molisa and Sope, they have a strong commitment to education and no wish for their writing to be absolved of its social and pedagogical mission. Important to note is that, unlike Molisa, they do not seek an overseas audience—their efforts are aimed at a Ni-Vanuatu audience. This aligns with Wendt's observations in 1980 about the new post-colonial Pacific literature: 'like writers elsewhere our writers are explaining us to ourselves and to one another' (*Lali* xvi).

The post-independence emerging writers, in comparison, appear to have a clean slate with regards to topics, themes and, more importantly, society's expectations of them. However, their passion for social justice and addressing gender equality places them on par with the first generation of writers in terms of their interest in contributing to shaping their nation's future, and for women to have a greater say in decision-making. Grounding themselves in the autobiographical, they are nevertheless aiming for literary writing that appeals to a wider audience, to borrow Rebecca Tobo Olul's words. The majority are interested in seeking publishing opportunities regionally as well as locally. Apart from the wider social and political constraints, their writing ambitions are hampered by the limitations of the existing local writing and publishing scene, as discussed.¹⁸ In seeking publication opportunities overseas, particularly in Australia and New Zealand, emerging Ni-Vanuatu

¹⁸ See also Crowl, Linda. 'Book Publishing in the Pacific Islands.'

writers with no formal publishing record come up against the literary ‘gatekeepers’ Lani Wendt Young identifies (37), and face the challenge of having to locate themselves within a writing tradition and a limited body of literature that to a large extent remains defined by Grace Molisa.

Molisa remains the most published writer in Vanuatu, apart from journalists and Jo Dorras. The shortage of published literature does not, however, reflect the number of men and women who write creatively. In 2017 and 2018, the *Vanuatu Daily Post* called for more literary writing ‘in the vein of Molisa’. Beyond the structural impediments of publishing and financing for self-publishing – paired with the need to make a living – it may well be that invoking Grace Molisa’s formidable legacy makes it an even more daunting prospect for new talent to emerge in her shadow. Those familiar with Molisa’s work would likewise be aware of the challenges she came up against as an outspoken Ni-Vanuatu woman and a writer.

CONCLUSION

My approach throughout this research project has been concerned with rhetorical alliance and rhetorical sovereignty – from novel writing, to the writing workshop, oral history interviews, poetry collaboration, the clearance of interview excerpts, and the deposition of a copy of my thesis with the Vanuatu Cultural Centre for local access. Adopting a self-reflexive approach, I have been mindful of how I present myself, how I interact with participants, and the way my background and socially constructed identity may colour my assessment of participants' writing and the selection of interview material. It is for others to judge how successful I have been.

It was essential for this research to be based on a mutually beneficial relationship. In opting for participatory methods and face-to-face encounters that would allow me to understand the local context and reality for Ni-Vanuatu women writers, my greatest concern was inadvertent exploitation, of any kind. Pursuing alliance and avoiding exploitation has meant paying close attention to the power dynamics of the evolving research relationship, to what is said outright and what is merely implied, including the silences that could indicate passive resistance to my ideas or the manner in which I was pursuing them. For my project, it was important to create space for participants' interests and to listen to how they contextualise their own lives and the challenges Ni-Vanuatu women face. Respecting the integrity and right of Ni-Vanuatu established and emerging writers to chart their own course and determine for themselves how they wish to collaborate and communicate with the world, I attempted to find ways to bridge the physical distance between New Zealand and Vanuatu in the spirit of solidarity, mutual learning and support, and to encourage more creative writing by Ni-Vanuatu women writers to emerge.

Māori colleagues often state the principle of 'nothing about us without us,' which has been the ethos for this project. Another ethical consideration relates to holding the space for Ni-Vanuatu writers to tell their own stories, while ensuring my voice does not inadvertently drown out their voices. My novel stages the moral and ethical dilemmas with regards to representation, women's place in society, and multiple interpretations of *kastom*. It is the holding space, not the solution. Looking at these issues through the dual lens of creative and critical inquiry is my original contribution to current knowledge and scholarship in creative writing, Pacific Studies, Pacific literature and feminism.

Rhetorical alliance, while still asking us to be critical, narrows the distance between the researcher and those she interacts with. In respecting rhetorical sovereignty and trying to locate myself responsibly in the writing classroom, I found myself leaning towards being an ally, friend and fellow writer, which complicated my position as a critical researcher. For this project, I believe the benefits of alliance outweigh the gains of maintaining a critical distance.

Only through the interviews, in year two, did I learn that editorial comments were not acceptable to everyone. My assumption was that attending a writing workshop indicated a wish for feedback. Those who had submitted writing, but for various reasons could not attend the workshop, nevertheless appreciated the comments provided and several writers have since sought further feedback on new work, from me as well as from the workshop group. The interviews made me realise that I had overprepared for the writing workshop, a reflection of my own insecurities and desire to not be found wanting, when it may have sufficed to just turn up and write. Yet I doubt anyone would have heeded my call at that point. I believe the effort I put into the workshop was noted and appreciated, and that it paved the way for deeper and more genuine collaboration, as I kept turning up three years in a row rather than merely facilitating one workshop.

The value of long-term commitment and alliance is evident in the networking that has occurred since the workshop, in the recent public poetry readings, and the poetry that has been exhibited and published over the past two years. It is likewise evident in participants' enthusiastic response to suggestions for collaboration in other forms, including joint poetry events, and submitting individual and collaborative pieces of writing to literary journals in New Zealand and further abroad.

Through the generosity and interaction with established and emerging Ni-Vanuatu writers, and by not limiting myself to published literature, I have learnt more than I could ever have hoped for. I am fortunate in that the collaboration does not need to end with this thesis.

This thesis finds, firstly, that gendered norms, certain policies and customary traditions that use the male position as the default have contributed to limiting the public space for Ni-Vanuatu women's voices to be heard and given due recognition. It furthermore finds that colonial language policies, particularly in education, have contributed to a reluctance to consider Bislama an appropriate literary vehicle. The effects of the new language policy remain to be seen. The hope is that it will enable systematic ways of nurturing story-telling and creative writing grounded in a local and indigenous context from a young age, which may see literary writing valued more in the future. It should at the very

least entail making the work of published Ni-Vanuatu writers required reading in schools and university curricula, in original form and in translation. Finally, the thesis finds a direct correlation between the lack of supportive institutions to nurture local talent and the perceived silence of Ni-Vanuatu women writers. Literary efforts in Vanuatu continue to be hampered by the absence of a community of writers, supportive institutions, publishing outlets, editorial support and limited funds for self-publishing for those who wish to see their creative writing in print.

Some of the obstacles Ni-Vanuatu women writers face were not entirely unexpected, yet the number of Ni-Vanuatu women who write creatively, albeit unacknowledged, and their passion to pursue creative writing and search for ways to become published writers, came as a surprise. Alice Te Punga Somerville's insights on the importance of the anthology made me re-evaluate anthologies, not only as a means to be published, but as a repository of texts that become sites of contestation and articulations of a region, writing that would otherwise have gone unpublished, thereby turning ad-hoc writing into a body of Pacific literature over time. Anthologies and their editors also nurture connections between writers, making writers visible to each other, and in doing so, they help create a writing community.

The findings of this thesis suggest that there is a small critical mass of established and emerging Ni-Vanuatu women writers who wish to communicate their creative writing to a local and regional audience. The number of men and women who write creatively is greater than the sample presented in this thesis. The value and support of a local writing community and a virtual network of writers plays a vital role in making writers visible, thereby furthering writerly development and generating much needed momentum that enables more writing to emerge. The dominance of published women writers from Ambae shows the importance of a community and a local culture that values women who write, thereby providing a permissive environment in which women's creativity can thrive.

In the spirit of rhetorical alliance, work that could usefully be taken forward in order to grow Vanuatu's body of literature include: collating and publishing Molisa's and Sope's previously published poems scattered throughout various conference proceedings, reports and newsletters; collating and publishing a selection of Molisa's and Sope's unpublished poems and short fiction; supporting the writing of Ni-Vanuatu women's non-fiction and life stories; providing financial or editorial support for anthologies of Ni-Vanuatu women's writing, and sponsoring annual writing competitions or writing in schools. I leave the final words to Grace Mera Molisa: 'you set the right environment and people will develop in it' (McCallum).

ANNEX 1 Second page of the Introduction and the poem 'Colonised people' in full, pp. 9–13, from *Colonised People* (1987), by Grace Mera Molisa.
Reproduced with the permission of the Molisa family.

Ni-Vanuatu Women cannot be Free until they learn to Internalise and realise the difference between destructive criticism and constructive criticism and actively apply in practice only constructive criticism of each other and support one another in the exercise of their professional functions and responsibilities.

Ni-Vanuatu women cannot be Free until they learn to rejoice with and for the success of other women, experience vicarious pleasure in the success of other women, take courage from such experience themselves, to strive to rise above their own oppressed status.

Ni-Vanuatu Women cannot be Free until the more advantaged Ni-Vanuatu Women are willing, prepared, and do, share their knowledge, skills and experience to promote and uplift those who are less advantaged.

Ni-Vanuatu Women cannot be Free until Vanuatu Leaders, especially the Traditional, Religious and Political Leaders display concern for the people they lead as they do for their own personal interest and promotion.

Ni-Vanuatu Women cannot be Free until Political Leaders and their spouses begin to be Honest in their Thoughts, Words and Deeds to implement and fulfill the Democratic principles. Husbands are so good at parroting from Political Platforms for the consumption of an UNQUESTIONING electorate.

In this book, I invite the Minds, Hearts and Goodwill of Ni-Vanuatu Men and Women and all who read this book to focus their attention on the Condition of Women in Vanuatu and to work together to redress the injustice existing in our society and to strive to create and build a truly egalitarian, democratic, just, peace-loving and Christian Vanuatu.

Grace Mera Molisa

God I stap wetem yumi yet.
Long God yumi stanap.

COLONISED PEOPLE

Vanuatu
Supports
Liberation
Movements
for
the Liberation
of
Colonised people

Clear
articulations
of support
for
freedom fighters
in East Timor
West Papua
French Polynesia
and Kanaky

Vanuatu
Womenfolk
half
the population
remain
colonised
by
the Free men
of Vanuatu

Womenfolk
Cook, Sew,
feed, clothe
housekeep
homemake
childbear

healthcare
passively
following
orders
instructions
commands

Women
are treated
as if
having no brain
as if
having no thought
as if
having no feeling
as if
Incompetent
and Incapable

Man's
colonial
domination
of Woman
is exemplified
in the submissive
subservient
obedience
to Man's rule
and authority
which takes
Woman Vanuatu
for granted
as
a beast of burden.

Nineteen eighty-six
statistics
at Vila Central
show
that Women
are treated
worse
than cats,
dogs and pigs.

When a pig
a domestic
animal
is brutalised
there is
a hue and cry
and plenty toktok.

When a Man
husband
lover
boyfriend
betrothed
intended groom
de facto husband
bashes
batters
brutalises
kills
a woman
It is accepted
taken for granted
as the Man's right
therefore
hami
bisnes
blong

tufala nomo
therefore
it becomes
confirmed
legitimised
entrenched
accepted practice
therefore
Vanuatu women
remain
colonised people.

From 10.01.'86
to 3.6.'86
Seventy-three cases,
a sample reads:-
struck
on the head
lost consciousness.

Six months pregnant
Kicked
in the abdomen
punched
on the head
perforated eardrum
scalp lacerations
require suturing
Kicked in the chest.
Semi conscious
scalp lacerations
severe haemorrhage
operation performed.
struck with wood
both sides of head
punched
on the mouth and nose

haematoma
deep penetrating wound,
fingers chopped off
epistaxis
orbital
haematoma.
whipped with stirrup
on back and buttocks
punched over truck
ruptured spleen
and (R) Kidney
2 major operations.
Pushed to ground
striking head
against table
haematoma
(L) eye,
ear and cheek
punched
on face and mouth
suturing
facial laceration.
bruising on hands
legs, buttocks,
laceration
back of head.
punched in face
struck
on (R) forearm
kicked abdomen
(R) shoulder
and (R) hip
struck by stone
abrasions
and haematoma
on forehead.
scratches

limbs and back
kicked in axilla
punched
(L) shoulder and arm
bruising on back
fractured ribs

At least
ten women a month
in Port Vila
alone
mostly
bashed
on the head
and kicked
in the abdomen
and thorax
while pregnant
are admitted
because
their battered bodies
require suturing
re-structuring
re-construction
for the next
onslaught
and slaughter
because
Man is BOSS
Man i Kat Raot
therefore
in Vanuatu
IT IS RIGHT
according to
the THINKING
and PRACTICE
of Vanuatu

Leaders
Preachers
Chieftains
Policymakers
custodians
of culture
and refinement
in politics
in church
in custom
according to
the Melanesian
values
of our extended
family system
according to
our Christian
principles
according to
our democracy
Man's freedom



These practices
typify
as well as
exemplify
Man's
attitudes
and covert
colonising
behaviour
towards
Vanuatu women.

Women
are
prevented
from
developing
their
potential
to utilise
their own
brains
exercise
their own
minds
think
their own
thoughts
express
their own
feelings
by
Man's
brute force
which
suppresses
oppresses

exploits
and dictates
Woman's
fearful
submission
to Man's
Insensitivity
and Inhumanity
to Ni-Vanuatu
Womankind.

Colonialism
is violence.
Colonialism
violates
the spirit
the mind
the body.
Colonialism
violates
the collective Right
all Women
Colonialism
violates
Individual right
Colonialism
violates
the Human Right
of Women
to Human Dignity.

Vanuatu
preaches
and supports
the Liberation
of Colonised people
Overseas

but at home
is not prepared
to consider
that
women too
are human
women too
are people
women too
have minds
women too
think
women too
have feelings
women too
have a right
to be counted
women too
have a right
to be recognised
women too
have a right
to be respected
women too
have a right
to Human dignity
Women too
have a right
to be Free.

Free to think
Free to express
Free to choose
Free to love
And be loved
as Woman Vanuatu.

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