

Island Lives: The Writing of Sia Figiel (Samoa) and Celestine Hitiura Vaite (Tahiti)

INTRODUCTION

I come from a very small island – it's closed in – in a sense that everyone knows everyone... it can be very confining.¹

The word *insular*, meaning “like an island,” is frequently used pejoratively by English speakers to imply narrow-mindedness and a lack of interest in or knowledge about others. But the word is also sometimes used to imply circumscription – people may be socially constrained by their age, gender and social status and, in many tradition-bound communities, by the requirements of custom; that is, they are duty-bound to behave in specific ways in particular contexts. I will be exploring some of the effects of insularity in both the geographical sense as well as the pejorative sense when discussing the works of Figiel and Vaite. I could focus on several other readings of their writing such as their depictions of gender relations, for in both Samoa and Tahiti, men are not always particularly estimable, while women have to be strong, and strong-willed, or they would not survive emotionally.

Another reading could be related to the lasting effect on the peoples of Samoa and of Tahiti of their experiences of colonisation, although their first foreign rulers were from different European countries. Samoa was governed by Germany for 16 years until 1914, and then by New Zealand until 1960, when the then Western Samoa achieved independence. In Tahiti, the French colonial presence, which began in 1847, is on-going. During the colonisation process of both island groups the local peoples were required to learn the languages of the incomers, with a concomitant subordination of the indigenous languages and of the oral transmission of extensive bodies of knowledge, including histories, mythologies and genealogies. “Historically ... the written word came to represent power and authority,”² but the written word was generally available only in the languages of the colonisers, with the exception of the Bible and hymnbooks.

The people living in Pacific island villages maintain boundaries in terms of land area and use, as well as in terms of people management, including rules about kin relationships. However,

in the villages there is constant daily face-to-face contact and members of households are very much aware of their neighbours' activities. This has both good and bad aspects, which is exemplified in the way gossip is a powerful element in people's social lives.

Gossip is an art form, used as a method of social control and to cause mischief. In two books, both published in 1996³ – neither of which are strictly written in the form of a novel, but mostly in a series of titled and linked narratives – Sia Figiel shows how Samoan children and teenagers, ever present, ever observant, try to make sense of their world by sharing information (i.e., gossip) about the adults who rule their lives.⁴ In her third book Figiel shows that the fear of being talked about by others, to be shamed, is very powerful. The power wielded by village gossips is also an important aspect of Celestine Vaite's writing.⁵ Another is the necessity for Vaite's heroine, Matarena, to be strong and imaginative, as she tries to care for her family on a low income in what is still the colonial, French-controlled environment of Tahiti.

In Figiel's depictions of life in Samoa, and in Vaite's depictions of Tahiti, people's sense of humour enables them to deal with the vicissitudes of their lives and with the social pressures. Interestingly the two writers rarely discuss the ocean that surrounds their islands, although it forms a clear boundary and the sea is both a source of sustenance and of danger. They only occasionally use beaches as a setting for their actors. The attention of their characters is mainly focused on their daily social interactions with family and neighbours. The stages on which they perform are the interiors of their houses, village churches, the village roads, sitting places under the shade of a mango or breadfruit tree and, from time to time, the port towns of Apia and Papeete.

The form of globalisation inherent in the nineteenth-century colonisation processes had serious on-going effects on the social and cultural lives of the peoples of both the Samoas, as well as on the peoples of French Polynesia. Perhaps the most telling effect was on the use of the indigenous languages by island peoples. The time frame in the books by Figiel is the early to mid-1980s, just prior to the period when the mass emigrations by Samoans to the United States and New Zealand paid for those at home in the islands.

THINKING ABOUT ISLANDS

There is a somewhat romantic myth that Oceanic peoples, including Polynesians, are very much at home with, and on, the sea. Certainly, the ancestors of the present-day Oceanic peoples, the ancient voyagers who settled the islands of the Pacific, had great navigational skills. But once the peoples had settled, access to the ocean beyond the reefs was limited to those with large canoes, and later, to those who could afford a motor for a dinghy. Fishing was, and is, an honourable occupation but, as elsewhere in the world, a hazardous one. Many people living on the coasts fish with nets and women glean shellfish within the reefs.

From the 1950s there was considerable in-migration to port towns from outlying islands and also out-migration by people from island nations in the South Pacific to live and work in countries such as New Zealand, Australia, and island (Hawaii) and mainland United States. There have been strict quotas in place in New Zealand and Australia since the mid-1970s for would-be migrants from island groups such as Samoa and Tonga, who have to meet specific criteria relating to education levels achieved and finances to gain entry, and thus movement

is much less easy. Migrant family members began gifting, not just cash remittances, but also television sets and appliances such as refrigerators and stoves to their island families.⁶ Vaite locates her narratives in much the same time period, that is, in the years when global communication technologies such as the telephone and (black and white) television sets were just becoming accessible to relatively poor people in French Polynesia.⁷

PACIFIC WRITING

For the past 40 years or so many people living in the islands of the South Pacific have responded to the way they were depicted in the mythologising and exoticising constructions found in the 300 years of the published depictions by Europeans. These include accounts of explorers' journeys,⁸ histories, colonial reports, missionary reports, art (in paintings such as those of Paul Gauguin), novels in English and French, and films set in the "South Seas." A group of Australian academics, who specialise in discussions of post-colonial literature,⁹ have said of the extensive and world-wide community of indigenous writers that they (the writers) are "writing back"¹⁰ to the metropolitan centres (the home bases of the colonisers) in the languages of those centres, particularly in English and in French. It can be argued that this process involves more than these writers wanting to be published and becoming known beyond their own countries. The Samoan scholar, Sina Vaai,¹¹ has said of the reasons for her study of Pacific writers that their work is important because "'the Pacific other', the coloniser, is allowed to see the inside view, the emotional and cultural terrain/s of the decolonised writer and his/her experiences, to enter imaginatively into previously silenced/silent cultural spaces and stories."

Albert Wendt has said: "The only valid culture worth having is the one being lived out now," although he does concede that "Knowledge of our past cultures is a precious source of inspiration for living out the present. [However]...what at first may have been considered 'foreign' are now authentic pillars of cultures: Christianity and the Rule of Law. The present is all that we have and we should live it out as creatively as possible."¹²

There are numerous published poets, particularly from Vanuatu, Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa. There are fewer novelists, short story writers, playwrights and filmmakers. Most of these writers have written and published in English, but claim an authentic islander voice. The poets, in particular, often reflect on issues of identity. All write about their communities and societies from "within" and so aim to be truthful and avoid caricaturing their subjects. (As we will see, this honesty and truthfulness does not always please the "home" audience.)

Sia Figiel (Samoa, b.1966) and Celestine Hitiura Vaite (Tahiti, French Polynesia, b.1967) are two of the most recently published writers from the South Pacific. In her first two books, Figiel depicts problematic aspects of Samoan life which, to some extent, was contemporaneous with her own childhood – parent-child relations, male-female relations, and the role of girls and women in a strongly patriarchal system. Vaite also addresses similar themes, but writes with a lighter touch. While the topics are universal, both the Samoan and Tahitian island locations affect people's interactions and local processes.

SIA FIGIEL

Sia Figiel was born in the village of Matautu Tai, (Western) Samoa, in 1966 to a Samoan mother and a Polish-American father. She spent her childhood and early adolescence in Samoa. She completed high school in Auckland, New Zealand, and earned a BA-degree in History from a college in the United States. She has lived in Germany, Fiji, and currently lives in Pago Pago in American Samoa. Her writing is very much in the Samoan idiom and style. In an interview with Subramani, a teacher of Pacific Literature at the University of the South Pacific, she said: "Like every Samoan or Pacific Islander, I grew up on the Bible (parables) as well as fagogo/ myths/legends. I've always been intrigued however by legends, adding to it poetry (solo) and faleaitu (theatre). The imagery and music of the fagogo and the solo continues to shape and form the way I write in English."¹³

Both *where we once belonged* and *The Girl in the Moon Circle* were written as performance pieces. She says of the characters in *The Girl in the Moon Circle* that "because the characters were young girls, the language had to have that energy that is characteristic of the way young people speak. Before I wrote *The Girl* I spent nine months listening to the way 10 year old girls talk."¹⁴

Figiel writes about the way the children gossip (*fai talatala*) about what they see and what they believe they know about the sexual behaviour of people in the village, including their friends. Their gossiping is the junior version of that done by the adults in the village, although not as critical. She says that her main character in *The Girl in the Moon Circle*, Ana,

reflects a universal character that is found in every society... Ana is typical of the 10-year-old girl that is questioning her surroundings – everything she was raised to believe in – in an honest/open/natural way even. I think children are more honest about their feelings and about their experiences, and they are very quick to admit it or to say so without censorship.¹⁵

Her stories are tinged with humour and with sadness. Her narrators reflect on the constant pressure to conform: "People see surfaces only..."¹⁶ The children know what goes on behind the apparently respectable façades. But the children are also under constant scrutiny, particularly in church. In both books she reveals the harshness with which children and adolescents are treated if they, in the opinion of their families, go astray or are likely to go astray, particularly sexually. Girls would be singled out, beaten and even have their heads shaved. They would also have been punished if the adults overheard any of their discussions as the children sit in the dark under the breadfruit or mango trees, after church choir practice.

A Tongan academic and friend, Professor Futa Helu, in a conversation with me described many of the young children who live in island groups such as Tonga and Samoa as "household taxis." They are frequently sent on errands – to the neighbours or to the local general store. This means they are out and about a great deal with opportunities to observe what is going on around them. Children miss very little about what is going on in the village or neighbourhood and have their own ways of using the information. The children in the first two books by Figiel have their own secretive *fagogo* culture – a mixture of the telling of tall tales, recounting of superstitions, gossip, and their own observation reports. Their tales are not told in their homes but while sitting by day and by night under the widespread branches of the breadfruit

and mango trees, far away from adults. "At nights we sit on the grass. Whether it is wet or dry. Whether it rained or not. And talk about other girls. People's relatives. Boys. And food."¹⁷

In *The Girl in the Moon Circle*, Ana talks about hanging out with a group of older girls, a circle which was much more interesting than ours. Because they talked about boys in high school and about taboos and all the things girls our age were not supposed to talk about. And swear bad time. And steal cigarettes from their fathers. They're bad those girls. B-A-D! And I wanted to be just like them. And all the mothers of Malaefou warn their daughters not to go near those girls.¹⁸

Unlike the conversations of the adults in Figiel's stories the children's observations and story-telling are not shared outside their conversational circles. However, the children do repeat their own versions of the Samoan mythological stories which they have heard retold in their homes. They also have to work hard: "Washing dishes. Wiping babies. Carrying our sisters on our hips. Carrying our brothers on our hips. Our cousins. Nephews. Nieces."¹⁹

Figiel's village life is dynamic and full of tensions and daily excitements. There is little that escapes her narrators' observant eyes: the way people smoke and what brand of cigarettes they smoke; the quarrels between adults, relations between husbands and wives. When people lived in the oval, traditional houses (*fale*) it was particularly difficult to avoid the scrutiny of others. All a family's daily activities were on display until the palm blinds were dropped in the evening to form a screen, against which the people were silhouetted. Few people live in traditional houses these days – Western-style wooden bungalows are preferred, although a family may also have built an open-sided *fale* in which to relax and catch the cool breezes. Nevertheless, many activities still take place in the open.

By early evening, every member of a village household is expected to be home and listening to the father or mother reading the Bible, then to sing a hymn, before eating the evening meal. Excitements for Figiel's characters are provided by church meetings, choir practices, and Bingo games, but also taking the bus to the capital, Apia. Her characters go to the market in Apia, and we read her detailed descriptions of smells, sights, and sounds. Her characters go to church and again not just appearances are described, but hypocrisies are exemplified in the way in which people present themselves and in the nuances of the social dynamics which are observed.

Both in her novel, *where we once belonged*, and in her short narratives in *The Girl in the Moon Circle*, Figiel informs us about the effects of modernisation. She describes the material benefits of the out-migration of relatives for some households and villages. One family is sent a television set, another is sent a gas stove, another a refrigerator – all shipped by relatives living in New Zealand or in the United States. These goods are objects of envy.²⁰ While listening to the local radio was still important, television was beginning to make an impact. Regular local television broadcasts began in Western Samoa in 1990; prior to that time those families who owned television sets had been able to watch transmissions from Pago Pago in American Samoa, where television broadcasting began in 1964.²¹

While both books have a sense of timelessness, in *where we once belonged* there are explicit references to 1970s popular culture, such as the US-made television series *Charlie's Angels* (1976-82) and *The Love Boat* (1977-86). The children knew about these and other series

even before they had access to a television set at home. Samoana Pili, the young narrator of *The Girl in the Moon Circle*, reports having enjoyed watching American programmes such as the soap opera *Days of our Lives* (1965-) at her neighbour's house.²² She had also seen advertisements for Kit Kat chocolate bars and for "Mr. Sheen"²³ which had probably been shown in company with programmes from New Zealand. She also reports listening to radio programmes and, together with her friends, memorising some of the advertisements (both in English and in Samoan) that they had heard – "the ones we think are the best and have the best melodies."²⁴

The effects of colonisation and the imposition of a foreign education system can be seen in the way that the children are expected to learn poems in school in English about flowers they have never seen – such as daffodils.²⁵ Added to this are the rather distorted ideas, based on the content of television advertisements, about what life is like in countries like New Zealand. In *The Girl* Figiel shares with the reader her ideas about New Zealand: "In New Zealand everyone's lucky. Everyone's rich and has no problems. Same as America and Australia. And we dream about ways of going there. Where we'll live. Like Cinderella. Happily ever after."

In both books Figiel describes the children's and adolescents' almost obsessive preoccupation with sexual behaviour, including incest: In *The Girl in the Moon Circle*, the narrator, Ana, says: "We don't talk about Feala's miscarriage. We don't talk about it because we all know who the father is. Which makes her sisters with her own baby."²⁶

Alofa, the 16-year-old narrator of *where we once belonged* is caught with the pastor's son in a compromising position. Her head is shaved and she is severely beaten. She comments: "Being beaten up is alofa – love, real love. Real love is when children are beaten up bad by their parents."²⁷ Many Samoans do not approve of this type of punishment being publicised because the beating of children is still condoned both in the home and in migrant communities. Hence, many opposed a bill, recently passed by the Parliament of New Zealand in 2007, which made it an offence to do anything but lightly smack a child, and only if he or she was in danger.

In an interview with Figiel, Subramani, an Indo-Fijian literary scholar, asked her about the level of violence in her depiction of village life. He commented: "There's considerable violence all around: children are beaten up by parents, children scratch each other's face, urged on by elders like Aunt Lupe. Violence is condoned if it protects family honour."²⁸ In response, Figiel commented: "[E]ach piece of violence...happens because particular circumstances prompt it to happen."²⁹ Subramani: "Every society projects a self-image, how it wants to be represented, repressing unpleasant truths, making up a desirable fiction about itself. And here writing has a function – to bring to the surface repressed or tabooed subjects, for instance, child abuse and suicide in your prose and poetry – so that the society can re-examine itself."³⁰

Figiel responded:

Writing is a foreign tool...and I am 'exposing us'...This is certainly a sensitive issue with any society, and Samoa is no exception. Censorship is an issue any writer from the Pacific islands is confronted with. I come from a very small island – it's closed in – in a sense that everyone knows everyone. This means... that anything you do as an individual is in some ways 'reflective of the family or of the village you're from or even your country'. It can be very confining.

Suffocating even...There will always be defenders of conventionality – people who don't want to hear unpleasant truths or anything alternative that directly stabs at the status quo.³¹

The problem with Figiel's emphasis on the dysfunction and the violence inherent in the family relationships which she depicts, particularly in her third book, *They who do not grieve* (1999),³² is that this supports the stereotyping of Pacific Island peoples in New Zealand as church-going, and therefore hypocritical, child abusers. "Getting the bash," that is, being beaten by a parent, is a running joke among Pacific (and New Zealand Māori) youth. This satirising of parent-child relationships has also featured in skits performed by New Zealand-Samoan actors, such as those written for stage performances by the Naked Samoans.³³ A variation of this "joke" has also been depicted on T-shirts sold at "Polynesian" markets such as at Otara in South Auckland – "My mother can bash harder than your mother." There is also a T-shirt for sale which has a red *Ghostbusters*-style line placed diagonally across a stick. This is obviously intended as an anti-violence statement.

In 2008 *where we once belonged* was adapted for the theatre and was performed in major cities in New Zealand.³⁴ Performed "in the round" on a clear Perspex rectangular stage below a suspended clear Perspex *fale* roof designed by the Samoan-New Zealand artist Michel Tuffery, the play was extremely effective but also disturbing. There were comedic moments but during the performance the actors, playing multiple roles, maintained a state of high emotional tension to which the audiences (many of whom were high school students) responded with loud and lengthy applause. This play reinforced my ambivalence about whether Figiel's intention to shock her readers by exposing the less-pleasant aspects of the lives of some Samoan families, past or present, and thereby encouraging behavioural change, is a successful approach. Worryingly, one critic commented: "Some of the material – especially the domestic violence and casual sexual exploitation of women – seems familiar now, to an audience used to a recent rich diet of plays from the Polynesian diaspora."³⁵

CELESTINE VAITE

Tahitian-born Vaite's first novel was published in 2000 in Australia where she now lives. The Tahiti which she depicts in her three novels *Breadfruit*, *Frangipani* and *Tiare* is a very different social milieu from that of Samoa. Unfortunately Vaite's publicist has begun to compare her work to Alexander McCall Smith's nine novels about Madam Ramotswe and her "No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency," set in Botswana.³⁶ In my opinion Vaite's work is not comparable to the Eurocentric cuteness of McCall Smith's depictions of African men and women. She is writing as a local, sharing the local point of view of everyday life.

The Tahitian people's strong sense of fun and their use of humour to deal with life's difficulties are strongly in evidence in Vaite's work. In contrast to the Samoans depicted by Figiel, the expression of sexuality is much more openly celebrated by the Tahitians. Families are much less ashamed than are Samoans if young women have sex before marriage and have children out of wedlock.³⁷ However, the Christian Church (Catholic in the case of Vaite's fictional families) strongly influences people's ideas about, and response to, sexual matters. Ideally, the parents of children should be married.

The on-going effects of French influence on the local culture – particularly on the maintenance of the indigenous Ma’ohi language – has been the chief topic of interest for a number of other women writers in French Polynesia. Their works are mainly published in French, including those of Louise Peltzer, whose *Lettre à Poutaveri* (Letter to Poutaveri) was published in Papeete, Tahiti, in 1995.³⁸ Peltzer is a famous linguist who has particularly focused on the maintenance of Ma’ohi.³⁹ Chantal Spitz was the first Ma’ohi woman writer to be published. Her novel *Au vent des Iles* was first published in 1991, and was translated from the French and published in New Zealand in 2007 as *Island of Shattered Dreams*.⁴⁰ This book is more overtly political than the novels written by Vaite, in that Spitz’s focus is on the life-changing effects on the protagonists of the Second World War and, particularly, the impact of the French nuclear tests (1966-96) on Mururoa atoll in the Tuamotu archipelago. She also draws on pre-Christian mythologies to emphasise the psychological losses experienced by the people of French Polynesia due to their ancestors’ acceptance of Christianity and the changes in people’s daily lives brought about by French colonisation. In contrast, both Christianity and colonisation are, for the most part, simply philosophically accepted facts of life in Vaite’s work.

Each of the 48 chapters in *Breadfruit* is a self-contained narrative of the main character’s adventures. The basis of the plot is the scheming by Matarena, the heroine, to get her de facto husband Pito to marry her. Pito says that “[m]arriage is a rope around the neck,” while expecting Matarena to wait on him hand and foot.⁴¹ Matarena works as a house cleaner and is always struggling to keep her family fed. She sometimes plots to get hold of Pito’s pay before he spends it on drinking beer with his mates. Pito is lazy, but does, in his careless fashion, love Matarena and his three children. He is a man who has not grown into his adult responsibilities.

The picture is not a grim, sad one. The weather is warm, the island environment of sea and mountains is beautiful, and men and women take pleasure in each other and in their children. Vaite does somewhat skate over the impact which their poverty has on many Tahitian women and their children. The impact of poverty is described in the nonfiction book *Tahiti: The Other Side*, published in 1985, which contains the life stories of three Tahitian women who were weighed down by their poverty, but lacked Matarena’s optimistic outlook.⁴²

Matarena is once again a central character in the second novel, *Frangipani*. She takes a job as a house cleaner for a French woman so she can pay the convent school fees for Leilani, her super-intelligent daughter. Leilani has to carry a heavy load of expectation from her mother regarding her possible future. Time in this novel initially runs parallel to the events in *Breadfruit* and then quickly advances. Matarena and Pito’s eldest son, Tamatoa, goes to France for two years’ compulsory military service. Among her other responses to this event, Matarena gets a telephone installed. Her youngest son becomes a chef. Leilani falls in love, lives with her dentist boyfriend but eventually chooses to take up a scholarship and go to medical school in France. Matarena becomes a host of a talkback radio show, whose respondents are mainly other women.

As in Samoa – or anywhere in the world, for that matter – gossip is the stuff of life for many people young and old. In Tahiti it is an essential part of everyday life, particularly for idle old ladies: “Mama George and Mama Loma by the side of the road, outside the Chinese store... on Saturdays, confession day, Mama George and Loma talk about each relative who was in

the confessional box for more than ten minutes...Loma is in charge of timing. The second the sinner walks into the confessional box she checks her watch."⁴³

Matarena reflects on how quickly gossip is circulated. Her cousin Loma saw Leilani, Matarena's daughter, meeting her boyfriend at the bus stop. Matarena thinks about how busy Loma will be: "no doubt [she] has been running all over the neighbourhood informing the population and the coconut radio [the networks of gossips]." In *Tiare*, Vaite's third novel, Pito, Matarena's husband, reflects on women: "[T]hey're always talking...they never shut up. 'My husband did this, my husband did that' ...They talk in the truck, outside the Chinese store, inside the Chinese store, over hedges, under trees, by the side of the road, on the steps of the church."⁴⁴

One of the two main narrative threads in *Tiare* is Pito's redemption as he learns to care for a grandson, in a way he was not able to do for his own children. The second is Matarena's wish to meet her French father whom her mother met and loved when he did his army national service in Tahiti.

Vaite depicts the lively aspects of Tahitian life as well as the difficulties of being poor and under the control of a metropolitan state. For example, Matarena, while collecting mussels, has a confrontation on a beach with a French *gendarme*. Access to the beach and sea is forbidden because the area is close to the airport, but it is an area in which people would customarily gather shellfish.⁴⁵ Vaite's depiction of Matarena is repeated in other literature on Tahiti in which women, young and old, are shown as being the dynamos of their communities. In contrast, men are depicted as having a tendency to be passive, to be drinkers, to have little ambition. They frequently get their girlfriends pregnant, but do not marry them, preferring *de facto* arrangements. Robert Levy comments that "like the poor everywhere, their men have become peripheral. The women have the responsibility and the reality of the care of the home and the children, which develops and encourages their skill and their strength."⁴⁶

However, there are compensations, mainly in the pleasure men and women take in each other, in their children, in food, in outings, and in aspects of the natural world. As with many others living in French Polynesia, Matarena is philosophical but also sad about the social stigma inherent in being half-European, half-Ma'ohi. She feels herself to be a true Tahitian, and elaborates on her talkback radio show what she means by the "Tahitian Way."⁴⁷

It means not eating in front of people if she can't share; showing respect to old people, to all people; remembering and honouring the dead; not whistling at night and not marrying a cousin. It means helping the family; planting the child's placenta in the earth, along with a tree; singing; nurturing the soil and the ocean; doing your best by your children. It means *belonging* to a family.

It also means being strong and getting up after each fall. And loving the broom, all Tahitian people – especially women – love their broom. With the broom a woman can get rid of unwanted guests without hurting their feelings by sweeping under their feet ...

And being Tahitian means...being diplomatic with the relatives because you're going to bump into your relatives day after day after day until you die, so it's important to get along. Then of course, there is the respect for the mother.

CONTRASTS

Figiel's depiction of Samoan gossip illustrates one method of social control of both adults and children. The judgements made on people who are the subjects of gossip are derived from a severe version of Christianity. Responses by family members to gossip about teenage girls are usually punitive, i.e. beating and public shaming (shaving of a girl's head). In Vaite's Tahiti gossip is also used to control people's social behavior; as in Samoa, people make judgements about the behaviour and lives of others, but the responses are less consequential. As in the books discussed, people living in island communities and in migrant communities today still try to avoid attracting malicious gossip by avoiding direct conflict with their neighbours, and also try to avoid any likelihood of the family being shamed by the misdemeanours of their children.

Both Figiel and Vaite have adopted an acceptable role in Polynesian terms, that of story-tellers. In the case of Figiel, both her subject matter and the manner of its telling have caused her writing to be regarded somewhat askance by many of her compatriots who can read her work, but she has been incorporated into the Pacific literary canon by academics. Both writers give the lie to the tourist promoters who advertise "Edens" or a "Paradise" under the palm trees. Vaite perhaps conveys more of the *joie de vivre*, the pleasure in life, which does exist in Pacific island communities in spite of the imposition of the adapted notions of conservative Christian gentility in Samoa and, in French Polynesia, the overwhelming fact of the island peoples being considered citizens of "Greater France."

Figiel's writing has met with some criticism from Samoan readers, but has a wide acceptance by non-Samoans, due to her regular appearances as a performer at festivals world-wide. *Where we once belonged* has also been recommended as a text for high-school English literature classes in New Zealand. Vaite's work is mainly read by a non-Tahitian audience and, as I have noted, is in danger of being relegated to a category of fiction depicting amusing "natives." Her writing and, to some extent, that of Figiel typifies the subversive humour which is always present even on the most solemn of occasions in Pacific communities. It is humour that makes difficulties and oppressiveness bearable. Humour is an acceptable outlet for dissent when other forms of dissension, either within the family or the wider society, are discouraged if not forbidden.

Not only are these two authors "writing back" to the metropolitan centres of the colonial powers, but they are also writing to what is, as yet, a small local audience. They have certainly fulfilled Albert Wendt's prescription that the present should be "lived out (and depicted) as creatively as possible."⁴⁸

1 Sia Figiel, *where we once belonged* (Auckland: Pasifika Press, 1996), 131.

2 Peggy Fairbairn-Dunlop, "Samoan Writing: Searching for the Written Fagogo," *Pacific Islands Communication Journal*, 14:1 (1985), 4.

3 Figiel, *where we once belonged*; Sia Figiel, *The Girl in the Moon Circle* (Suva: Mana Publications, 1996).

4 The Samoan term for gossip is *fai talatala*, "making stories."

- 5 Celestine Hitiura Vaite, *Breadfruit* (Auckland: Random House, 2000); *Frangipani* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2004); *Tiare* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2006). The Tahitian Ma'ohi term for gossip is *ohimu*, equivalent to the French *médire*, meaning "to murmur" or "badmouth."
- 6 Figiel, *The Girl in the Moon Circle*, 21, 23, and Figiel, *where we once belonged*, 27.
- 7 Radio broadcasting is a very important aspect of communication in the Tahitian community described by Vaite. Television programmes are never mentioned in her books although television broadcasts (beamed direct from Paris) began in French Polynesia in 1962, the same year the French government decided to plan for atomic bomb testing at Mururoa atoll. See D Denoon et al., "A Nuclear Pacific," in *The Cambridge History of the Pacific Islands* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press), 342.
- 8 For example, Joseph Banks, *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks: 1768-1777*, ed. JC Beaglehole (Sydney: The Trustees of the Public Library of New South Wales in association with Angus and Robertson, 1962). British satirists, including poets and playwrights, were quick to react to Banks' descriptions of his sexual adventures in Tahiti.
- 9 See Stephen Slemon, "The Scramble for Post-colonialism," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 45-52. See also Dennis Walder, "Introducing the Post-Colonial," in *Post-colonial Literatures in English: History, Language, Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 1-18.
- 10 *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature*, eds Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).
- 11 Sina Vaai, *Literary Representations in Western Polynesia: Colonialism and Indigeneity* (Apia: National University of Samoa, 1999), 30.
- 12 Albert Wendt, "Towards a New Oceania," in *The Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*, ed. John Thieme (London and New York: Arnold, 1996), 645.
- 13 Subramani and Sia Figiel, "Interview," in Figiel, *The Girl in the Moon Circle*, 121.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 125.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 127.
- 16 Figiel, *where we once belonged*, 15.
- 17 Figiel, *The Girl in the Moon Circle*, 4.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 86.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 30.
- 20 Cluny Macpherson has commented: "As goods from abroad fuelled competition between families and villages in Samoa, the demands for support from family and village escalated and more and more migrants were sent abroad to meet them." (C Macpherson, "Transnationalism and Transformation in Samoan Society," in *Globalization and Culture Change in the Pacific Islands*, ed. Victoria Lockwood (New Jersey: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2004), 170).
- 21 F Mangubhai, "The Impact of Technology on the Development of Literacy in the South Pacific," in *Literacy Online* (Proceedings of the 1996 World Conference on Literacy, 1996), <http://www.literacy.org/products/ili/pdf/ilprocfmpdf>, last accessed on 12 March 2009.
- 22 Figiel, *The Girl in the Moon Circle*, 13.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 22, 23.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 29.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 51.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 27 Figiel, *where we once belonged*, 219.
- 28 Subramani and Figiel, "Interview," 131.
- 29 *Ibid.*

- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 *They who do not grieve* (Auckland: Random House, 1999).
- 33 Harshness by parents towards children was also regularly featured in *bro'Town*, a television series (eventually three were screened), written and performed by the Naked Samoans. In "Sionerella," one of the six episodes in the first series, Sione's mother, waving a jandal, threatens to beat her son, Sione, who has gone to the St Sylvester's annual school ball without her permission. When a teacher (Michael Jones, an ex-All Black, who is of Samoan descent) advises her not to do so, she misconstrues his advice, thinking that he is telling her not to beat her child in public, and says: "Good idea, I'll wait until I get home." *bro'Town*, Series 1, Firehorse Films and the Naked Samoans, Auckland, 2004.
- 34 The adaptation was done by New Zealand playwright David Armstrong, with the approval of Sia Figiel, and was produced by the Auckland Theatre Company. The first season was presented in Auckland, 27 March-19 April 2008. In December 2008 the play won the Chapman Tripp award for the best new New Zealand play for that year. See <http://www.pacificstarmap.com/2008/12/>, last accessed on 4 February 2009.
- 35 Renee Liang, "Where we Once Belonged," adapted by David Armstrong. Review, "The Arts Reader," supplement to *The Lumiere Reader*, 4 April 2008, <http://www.lumiere.net.nz/reader/item/1613>, last accessed on 4 February 2009.
- 36 Alexander McCall Smith is a prolific author of both fiction and non-fiction. Brought up in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), he taught law at the University of Botswana for some years. The first novel in the series, *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, was published in 1998.
- 37 Robert Levy interviewed a number of men during his field research in Tahiti in the early 1960s. Most reported that their first experience of sexual intercourse was in their early to mid-teens (R Levy, *Tahitians: Mind and Experience in the Society Islands* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 43, 72-73).
- 38 Louise Peltzer, *Lettre à Poutaveri* (Papeete: Scoop, 1995).
- 39 I have tried to obtain information regarding the sales in French Polynesia, and in Europe generally, of Figiel's works, the first of which was translated into French, and similarly information for the publication histories of Vaite's works. For a comprehensive discussion of writers in French Polynesia see Kareva Mateata-Allain, "Ma'ohi Women Writers of Colonial French Polynesia: Passive Resistance toward a Post(-)colonial Literature," *Jouvert*, 7:2 (2003), 1-20. Also available online at <http://social.chass.ncsu/jouvert/v7i2/mateat.htm>
- 40 Chantal T Spitz, *Island of Shattered Dreams*, trans. Jean Anderson (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2007).
- 41 Douglas Oliver, in his book *Two Tahitian Villages: A Study in Comparisons* (Honolulu: The Institute for Polynesian Studies, 1981) described seven types of "marital unions" (most of which would be regarded elsewhere as *de facto*) in the two villages he studied. These included a village on the island of Moorea, which is located a short boat ride from and opposite Papeete, the port town of Tahiti. "There are many...couples residing together without sanction of a civil ceremony who were nevertheless considered by their neighbours as well and truly 'married' for all but certain legal and religious purposes" (p. 275).
- 42 *Tahiti: The Other Side*, eds Ron Crocombe and Pat Hereniko, trans. from the French by Kushnan Patel (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific in association with Editions Hare Po No Tahiti, 1986).
- 43 Vaite, *Frangipani*, 157. Robert Levy writes: "Although gossip is an important part of 'shame control', the words designating gossip have a pejorative tone, and gossiping is said to be a bad thing to do" (*Tahitians: Mind and Experience*, 340).
- 40 Cowling – Island Lives – *Junctures*, 12, Jun 2009

- 44 Vaite, *Tiare*, 3.
45 Vaite, *Breadfruit*, 87-89.
46 Levy, *Tahitians: Mind and Experience*, 105-6.
47 Vaite, *Tiare*, 23.
48 Albert Wendt, "Towards a New Oceania," in *The Arnold Anthology of Post-colonial Literatures in English*, ed. John Thieme (London and New York: Arnold, 1996), 641.

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