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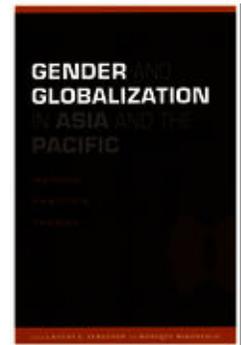
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CHAPTER 2

Telling Tales Out of School

Sia Figiel and Indigenous Knowledge in Pacific Islands Literature

JUDITH RAISKIN

Siniva, the village fool and madwoman prophet of Sia Figiel's 1996 novel, *where we once belonged*, having returned to Samoa with a BA and MA in history after ten years in New Zealand, sits in the marketplace yelling at the tourists: "Go back where you came from, you fucking ghosts! Gauguin is dead! There is no paradise!" Represented as the first student to leave Samoa on a scholarship, Siniva is expected by her family and village to use her *palagi* (white) education to secure a job in government or business. Instead, she returns, committed to reminding her village about Samoan cosmology and the traditions of the old religion, accusing the pastors and nuns of killing the Samoan gods. She is beaten by her father and brothers, ostracized by the women, and considered to suffer from ghost sickness. Siniva voices the fury of the intellectual who, educated by the colonial machine, sees beyond the advantages offered her as an administrator of that machine (as a teacher, bureaucrat, professional) and becomes instead a critic of colonialism on behalf of her people, who reject the criticism as madness. Siniva insists that the paradise the tourists seek is a dead fantasy of the last century, that they themselves are ghostly apparitions who do not belong in the world of contemporary Samoa. Inappropriate as the tourists may be, Figiel recognizes the atavistic elements of colonial mythmaking and the intransigence of the fantasies continuing to influence both the imaginations of Americans and Europeans and the lives of Pacific Islanders. The novel focuses not on the visitors to Samoa and their difficulty of belonging, but on the social discomforts of Samoans themselves, who live between traditional and modern performances of identity and community. This is, of course, an experience not unique to Pacific Island indigenous cultures since *all* social relations negotiate between historical and contemporary understandings of responsibility, behavior, obligation, and so on. But the thematic core of many contemporary Pacific Island novels is the tension among a number of competing interpretations of social place. Imported education systems compete with indigenous epistemologies, Christianity vies with local cosmologies, TV sit-

comes are as popular as traditional entertainment, and imported products of the global market replace native handicrafts and foods.

As the title *where we once belonged* (1996b) suggests, these tensions produce a local myth entailing a lost experience of belonging that is temporal, geographical, psychological, and social. What is Figiel's attitude to that "once" place or time, to the costs and rewards of belonging then and there, to belonging as part of a cultural "we"? Figiel's attention to the ironies of everyday life allows for an exploration of a number of perspectives simultaneously: the past in service to the present, putative traditional values as shaped by colonial and transnational pressures, diasporic modernity interpreted by local desire. This construct permits no idealism or claim of purity: *fa'a Samoa* (the Samoan way) is as much a product of the missionaries as it is of the traditional Samoan culture; migration is a potent metaphor for both precontact wisdom and postcolonial displacement; Gauguin may be dead, but there is always another sighting of Elvis, bedecked with leis, even in Samoa.

One of the most powerful aspects of Figiel's novel is its use of the tropes and symbols of traditional Samoan society to comment on the contemporary experiences of Samoans, particularly of girls, negotiating among a range of sometimes compatible and sometimes conflicting ideologies of *fa'a Samoa* (as it is interpreted and enforced by contemporary village leaders and parents), individualism as taught by American Peace Corps volunteers, the promises of corporate development schemes, and the moral injunctions of both Anglo-American and Samoan Christianity. In contrast to the education she receives in the village school and at the *fai feau's* (minister's) house, Alofa, the twelve-year-old protagonist and narrator of the novel, learns important lessons outside of school from Siniva, the village madwoman, and Sugar Shirley, the village *fa'afafine* (her transgender cousin), both of whom incorporate and adapt traditional Samoan epistemologies as they struggle to create a place of belonging in contemporary Samoa. Through Siniva and Sugar Shirley, Figiel challenges the colonial myths of Polynesian eroticism and horror and at the same time suggests new interpretations of the Samoan legends necessitated by her feminist sensibilities and the postcolonial realities of Samoan life.

Figiel's novel demands and provides a sharp-eyed analysis of Pacific Island life that counters the erotic/exotic romanticization of the "South Seas" so familiar to literary and anthropological traditions. Making American anthropology a main butt of her humor, Figiel reclaims the terms of definition of Samoan culture, most pointedly rejecting the banal sexualization of Polynesian, particularly Samoan, girls. She reworks other stock images of the Pacific Islands and plays with the clichéd contrasts of scarcity and tropical abundance, labor and leisure, impotence and unlimited sexual fulfillment.¹

A number of critics have done excellent work unpacking English and American literary texts that have been influential in constructing and maintaining such

objectification (R. Wilson 2000; Edmonds 1997; Jolly 1997). More specifically, recent feminist theorists have examined what Margaret Jolly describes as the “sexually saturated figure of the Polynesian woman” (1997: 99), imagined and portrayed by Europeans and Americans for two and a half centuries. Through the metaphor of the bikini bathing suit, designed and named in 1946 for the Bikini atoll on which the United States dropped over twenty-five nuclear bombs, Teresia Teaiwa (1994) explores the way the sexualization of Polynesian women both sustains and obfuscates the military use and destruction of Pacific Islands and their inhabitants. This sexualization is also analyzed as a repeating colonial trope in *National Geographic Magazine* by Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins, who describe the way the magazine reinscribes “preexisting, culturally tutored notions about the Pacific,” often leaning heavily on the images of female sensuality and availability (1993: 133, 137; Nordström 1991: 272). Perhaps the most challenging deconstruction of those images and associations is taking place in contemporary literature by Pacific Islanders. Sia Figiel’s novel deftly undermines the classic representations of Polynesia while exploring the ways they nevertheless influence the self-understandings of Samoan girls and women. *where we once belonged* is a novel that challenges western hegemonic representations of civilization, globalism, progress, and modernity by using traditions of orality, adapting Samoan mythology, and remembering and redefining indigenous ways of knowing the world (Subramani 2001: 157).

Given her obvious delight in the raucous celebration of western popular culture in the villages of Samoa, Figiel does not idealize a notion of a static precontact Samoan way of life. She recognizes that 200 years of colonization and contemporary globalization have made impossible any return to a purely locally rooted cosmology. Not only is it impossible, but for Figiel and the children of the novel, there is a great deal of pleasure to be had in the music, fashion, food, and rerun sit-coms that are the enactment and by-products of globalization. While Figiel’s critique of colonization and globalization are expressed so clearly by Siniva, the novel does not allow the delights and desires of the children to be simply dismissed as false consciousness, as it is in a number of postcolonial novels. While we could read the children’s relentless desire to consume American goods as the destruction of valuable indigenous values and products (as Siniva does), Figiel’s description of the ubiquitous beat of rock and roll, the T-shirts and towels that express the characters’ sense of their own power, and the children’s creative reworking of TV sit-com plots all suggest a more playful and complicated understanding of how people react to and integrate the legacies of colonization and globalization. Both Siniva and Sugar Shirley attempt to offer Alofa and her friends ways of accessing powerful ideas from traditional Samoan culture and adapting them to contemporary pressures. Figiel, herself both a transnational intellectual and performer, creates these two characters, the angry university graduate and

the clown, the mythic heroes of this novel, who, while unable to successfully dispel the violence and poverty in their communities, suggest liberatory ways of exploiting both western and Samoan ways of thinking, strategies that may be useful in this era of cultural and economic globalization and migration.

Siniva's incisive critique of colonialism in the 1970s, when she returns from New Zealand, is considered mad and, even worse, shameful by Siniva's village and family, and she is banished from her community, deprived of any mutual communication, any human connections, until she takes her own life. Like the self-destructive Nyasha of Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* who, while starving herself, tears with her teeth the pages of the colonial history texts she distrusts, Siniva wrestles with the history she and her people have been taught.² Her studies in New Zealand, although part of the colonial education project that selects only the brightest and most promising students for university education in the "mother country," have, ironically, revealed to her the biases and inaccuracies of the education dispensed in the villages. In vain she tries to contest the missionary-colonial tale of Europeans and Americans bringing light to the benighted savages of the Pacific, a tale that continues to hold wide currency among both visitors and islanders:

"We are *not* living in Lightness," she would say. "We are not. Lightness is dead. Lightness died that first day in 1830 when the breakers of the sky entered these shores, forcing us all to forget . . . to forget . . . to burn our gods . . . to kill our gods . . . to re-define everything, recording history in reverse.

"Now," says Siniva. "Is our turn to re-evaluate, re-define, re-member . . . if we dare. For *this* is Darkness." (Fiegel 1996b: 236–237)

While the villagers are vying for goods from their families living abroad, while the children memorize and reenact American television shows and collect American clothing, Siniva unsuccessfully challenges the paradigm that values colonial products and epistemologies over indigenous ones. But like Epeli Hau'ofa's anti-development spokesman Malu in *Tales of the Tikongs*, Siniva delivers a message that not only goes unheeded, but is ridiculed. Although the villagers dismiss Siniva and her message, Fiegel presents her as a prophet anointed by a legendary bird, who feeds her the stories and legends of the Samoan gods and orders her to share them with her people, who are benighted, not by native cosmologies, but by Christianity and the values of modernity. Yet before Siniva is sent back to share her vision, the bird blinds her. Like seers in many cultures who are blinded before they can see and are compensated for their blindness by being given supernatural understanding, Siniva spends her life on the edge of the village, sharing wisdom that is generally ignored. Her suicide note is to her niece, Alofa:

Suicide—it is the only way. For isn't that what we're all slowly doing anyway? Each time a child cries for coca-cola instead of coconut-juice the waves close into our lungs. Each time we choose one car, two cars, three cars over canoes and our own feet, the waves close in further. Further and further each time we open supa-keli [canned spaghetti] . . . pisupo [canned pea soup] . . . elegi [canned sardines] instead of fishing nets . . . raising pigs . . . growing taro . . . plantations . . . taamu [a tuber] . . . breadfruit. Each time we prefer apples to mangoes . . . pears to mangoes . . . strawberries to mangoes. Each time we prefer tin and louvres to thatched roofs. Each time we order fast-fast food we hurry the waves into our lungs. We suffocate ourselves—suffocate our babies and our reefs with each plastic diaper . . . formula milk . . . baby powder . . . bottled baby food and a nuclear bomb, too, once in a while. Drowning our children with each mushroom cloud, *Love Boat*. . . *Fantasy Island*. . . *Rambo*. . . video games . . . polyester shoes, socks—everything polyester.

We kill ourselves slowly. Every day. Every Sunday. Each prayer to Jesus means a nail in our own coffin. Each time we switch something ON (radio, lamps, TV, ignitions . . .) means a nail in our coffin. . . .

And agaga [soul] as we once knew it dies in our still biologically functional bodies, full of junk food . . . darkness food . . . white-food . . . death food. For *that* is what we consume on a daily basis. We eat Death and we are eaten by Death, too. (238)

Alofa is frightened of Siniva, especially when she learns that Siniva is her aunt, her father's sister. Although Siniva's brother, Alofa's father, wields power as the village disciplinarian, Siniva is the hereditary talking chief, and she offers Alofa the wisdom of genealogy and her critique of modernity. Alofa listens to Siniva's legends carefully and as an abused girl in a village where girls are subject to harsh disciplinary and sexual violence, she finds through these Samoan tales a place in the world for a separate soul, her own *agaga*. She can find her place in this series of legendary tales, perhaps because Siniva has modified them, shifting the focus of central Samoan myths. In her (and Figiel's) rendition, Pili, the trickster lizard god, tries to take advantage of Aolele, the beautiful daughter of Lauelele, the earth god, only to be overcome by Aolele's strength and her seven brothers' devoted defense of her safety and purity. Caroline Sinavaiana-Gabbard, a Samoan critic well versed in the versions of Pili's legendary cycle, finds it "problematic" that Figiel demotes Pili to a villain and "defeated" god when she seemingly values the power of mythology and Samoan tradition (1998). Indeed, Figiel describes this novel as modeled on *su'ifefiloi*, the traditional Samoan form of storytelling that strings many different songs and myths together in the form of an *'ula*, or garland of flowers (Subramani 1996: 126). That Figiel changes the traditional stories to emphasize embedded female strength and authorize gender relations that value and protect girls and women need not be read as a threat to tradi-

tion but as an adaptation that may allow for the preservation of Samoan culture and of Samoans themselves.

A similar debate surrounded Maxine Hong Kingston's 1976 *The Woman Warrior*, in which Kingston reworks the Chinese tale of Fa Mu Lan, creating a superheroic swordswoman who avenges her village against a misogynist baron and tyrannous emperor. In response to accusations by some Asian-American critics that she was misrepresenting Chinese culture and writing "fake" Chinese legends to underscore American racist stereotypes of Chinese misogyny, Kingston responded, as Figiel might, that she was writing a memoir, not sociology or history. Literary works often offer the most nuanced cultural understandings, enriching and complicating ethnographic representations and providing their own theoretical perspectives. Additionally, the formal structures of Figiel's and Kingston's works provide richly textured analyses of cultural fragmentation and creative responses to rapidly changing cultural environments. Kingston's revisions of classic legends and the interweaving of their themes with the stories of the narrator's childhood reveal how Chinese culture becomes refracted through the experience of a girl growing up in Stockton, California. The memoir is *her* experience of the cultural history, *her* need for a sustaining tradition. Kingston has responded to the charge of transcribing myths inaccurately that "myths have to change, be useful or forgotten. Like the people who carry them across the oceans, the myths become American. The myths I write are new, American" (1991: 23–25). One can anticipate similar criticisms of Figiel's novel, which, as a written document (in English, no less), revises the traditions of orality and fidelity to traditional legends. Yet Figiel composed both *where we once belonged* and *The Girl in the Moon Circle* (written nine months later) as performance pieces and says her goal is for "the reader to be able to experience the music of oral tradition in the way I write in English" (1996a: 122). The fact that the children in both works sing both the myth cycles and TV commercials "is a sign that culture is perpetually changing and that people adjust and adapt to the changes—and continue" (128).

In Figiel's Pili story, Aolele is also a superhero, one whose strength and discernment is described in wholly Polynesian metaphors:

Aolele was incarnate beauty—her eyes darker than lama juice, her lips thick like oars from a war canoe, her breasts firm like the heart of a tanoa, her teeth whiter than virgin siapo, her nose noble, experienced, pre-conditioned for greeting . . . and to take in all of a stranger's agaga . . . and to release it only if the stranger had honourable intentions. (1996b: 145)

The story is told to Alofa by Siniva, but Alofa has also heard this tale (Figiel's version) when she was in the womb; it is this version that motivates Alofa as a fetus to will herself, against her mother's efforts, to become female. In expressing her love of

Samoa culture, Figiel does not simply juxtapose the colonial stories about Samoa and the damaging lessons of colonial education with “authentic” precontact Samoan legends to prove their cultural superiority. Far more subtly, she suggests that the originary legends, *as they have been preserved*, contribute to the degradation and misery of Samoan women and girls today. By changing the emphasis of these tales, remembering them differently, Figiel suggests a positive strategy for valuing Samoan culture as part of a contemporary feminist critique of both western colonialism and Samoan patriarchy, a patriarchy enforced by women as well as by men.

Some Samoan educators are not as concerned with Figiel’s revision of the Samoan legend cycles as they are with her colloquial use of both English and Samoan; they would prefer her to write in standard forms of English to support what they and foreign educators are teaching in the schools. Figiel’s attention to sexuality (the desire of girls and the abuse they suffer) and her use of vernacular “K” Samoan (as opposed to the formal “T” Samoan) as well as her use of swear words and candid references to genitalia and breasts repel devout Christian Samoans, and she is often asked to censor her performances and readings from her novels when she is at home (Subramani 1996: 131). This local devotion to imported curricula and educational standards, as well as rigid ideas about true *fa’aSamoa*, are at the heart of Figiel’s exploration of the formal shaping of Samoan girls’ worlds and the alternative perspectives they are offered outside of school.

Colonial Education in the Pacific

Siniva’s critique of western education easily finds its place with those presented for the past fifty years by postcolonial theorists and writers the world over. Writers from Africa, Asia, the Americas, and the Caribbean have written movingly about the psychological and intellectual costs of colonial education; they understand the “colonization of the mind” as the goal and effect of an imported education system that teaches the racial, moral, and economic superiority of the colonizing settler population. The more recent attention to the colonization and missionization of the Pacific shifts the focus from European to American colonialism, with American culture identified as the central subject of critique, ambivalence, ridicule, and desire.

Even as the recent scholarship in Pacific Island Cultural Studies seeks a non-western paradigm for understanding the Pacific (Borofsky 2000; Diaz and Kauanui 2001), scholars of economic globalization make it increasingly clear that the suggestion that newly independent Pacific nations such as Samoa are “post” colonial is easily refuted, given their ever-increasing dependence on multinational corporations as well as on the governments of former colonial powers. This situation is particularly clear in the Pacific for those nations that have been wholly annexed by the

colonial power (for example, Hawai‘i), for those that remain as U.S. trust territories or whose economies depend on U.S. aid and military bases (for example, Guam, the Marshall Islands, Belau), for those whose national economies depend on remittances from family members working in the United States (for example, Samoa, Tonga, the Philippines, the Cook Islands), and the rest that are deeply invested in development, tourism, or multinational corporate commerce.

Sia Figiel’s examination of American cultural colonialism is as harsh as that by any cultural critic from the more recognized former colonial regions, but it is also deeply nuanced by an exploration into the shame and desire elicited by globalization. Her characters love television, revere Elvis Presley, and count their status by how many family members live in Australia, New Zealand, and America. *where we once belonged*, like so many postcolonial novels, is about place, about belonging, about distinguishing the center from the periphery and showing their interconnectedness. What is the center of the village, the narrator asks. Of Apia? Of Samoa? Of the World? Is Samoa the middle, the navel of the world?—or is it the exoticized paradise of the anthropologists or the eroticized horror of the missionaries? Alofa, whose refrain throughout the novel is “What’s *that* supposed to mean?” is trying to figure it all out—without much help from the Samoan and American teachers. Their highest hope is to prepare their students to win scholarships to New Zealand and begin the journey of migrations that Alofa compares to “someone running to and fro from a serious diarrhoea attack” (Figiel 1996b: 33).

In the last several years, a number of contemporary Pacific Island writers have juxtaposed what Vilsoni Hereniko (2000) calls “indigenous knowledge” with “academic imperialism.” Given the history of western education in the Pacific—generated by colonial, missionary, and military powers—these writers see clear connections between the structure and the implementation of English, European, and American education systems and the material, spiritual, and intellectual impoverishment of Pacific Islanders. Like many other postcolonial writers who were successful students, Hereniko expresses ambivalence about his western education, while recognizing the degradation of his native Rotuman history and knowledge-base:

When I reached secondary school and later went to university, I found myself having to study history, largely the history of the British Empire, and had a difficult time remembering historical information that did not seem to have any relevance to me whatsoever. . . . When I went to school and learned to read and write, I came to value English fairy tales, Greek mythology, and biblical narratives more than my father’s *hanuju* [Rotuman-based stories]. (2000: 78, 83)

He recognizes that much Rotuman history and knowledge is contained in the traditions of genealogy, performance, dance, and oral narratives that are

barred from the classroom. Rich in such local expressions, Hereniko's film *The Land Has Eyes* (the first indigenous film from Rotuma or Fiji) juxtaposes indigenous and colonial systems of justice and wisdom. The marginalization by school and church institutions of native ways of knowing is primary and intentional, in Hereniko's view, to the process of colonization.

As these comments make clear, the history of colonial education in the Pacific shares much with the British and French colonial education systems elsewhere, yet it also has its own peculiarities. Most Pacific education systems began when missionaries created orthographies for Pacific Island languages in order to translate and teach the Bible. Rather than banning the local language or teaching only in the language of the colonizing country, the missionaries set up a system of biblical education taught in the local languages. In the nineteenth century the Christian day-schools were often conducted either in the church or the pastor's home, often by a native village pastor trained by missionaries. Colonial administrators who followed the missionaries often kept the religious schools in place, since they tended to support the colonial regimes; chiefs and high-status leaders were often rewarded for their support of the missionary schools with elite educational opportunities for their children both at home and abroad. In Western Samoa the only educational change the Germans made to the missionary schools under their administration from 1900 to 1914 was to add German language to the religious curriculum (Thomas 1984: 220).

After World War I, when New Zealand was awarded a trusteeship over Western Samoa, colonial authorities assumed the obligation of establishing a publicly supported, secular education system. This new curriculum was patterned closely after the syllabi from New Zealand (which were, in turn, patterned after the English curriculum), and after World War II the New Zealand scholarship scheme sent Samoan students to New Zealand for advanced education. Even after Samoan independence in 1962, education continued in the same vein, and by the end of the 1960s only 1 percent of the entire school-age population entered higher education. Figiel's character Siniva (and Figiel herself) is one of the few "lucky" students to be sent to New Zealand for high school or college. New Zealand examinations continued to be used as criteria for determining the success of students through the 1980s (*ibid.*: 221).

Mark Bray describes the way this colonial education system parallels that across the Pacific. While curriculum development units "may devise new textbooks, prepare teaching guides and distribute visual aids . . . the overall structure and orientation of schools remains strongly Western" (1993: 338). All of the curricula of these countries are dominated by examinations designed for international recognition. In addition, all nonsovereign territories continue to use examinations from the "mother countries":

Students in New Caledonia, French Polynesia, and Wallis & Futuna sit the Baccalaureat and other examinations set in France and their counterparts on American Samoa sit standardised achievement tests from the USA. Secondary school students in Niue and Cook Islands sit New Zealand examinations, though Tokelau now operates its own form 5 examinations. (339)

Over the past twenty years, independent nations have moved to create their own regional exams, yet none were created until 1988. Bray argues that while there is little left of Japanese and German influence in Pacific Island education, “the impact of American, Australian, British, French and New Zealand colonialism is very clear” (344).

Unlike Britain and New Zealand, the United States did not take its role as colonial administrator seriously. Given America’s economic and military use of the islands since World War II, the lack of financial and material investment in its trust territories is striking. Murray Thomas describes the shortcomings of leaving educational policy in American Samoa to the U.S. Naval Administration. The stated goals of the administration were identical to those of the missionaries: to Americanize the islanders and to teach them “a few simple truths” and English as a “world language” (Thomas 1984: 214, quoting Gray 1960). Thomas contends that until 1932, the curriculum was American “with only a slight island flavor in the form of plantation work in the upper grades” (1984: 215). By 1962, when Western Samoa won independence, the United States had done very little to further develop educational systems in American Samoa. Most of the curriculum there in the 1960s was delivered by educational television shows produced in the United States; by the end of the 1960s there were 180 hours of lessons telecast each week, with virtually no mention of Samoan culture or values.

Konai Helu Thaman, a Tongan education specialist and poet, argues that there is very little qualitative difference between the education offered by Christian missionaries, colonial administrators, or contemporary overseas-trained indigenous educators and foreign consultants. In her poetry, Thaman expresses the deep ambivalence among Pacific Island leaders regarding the value of indigenous knowledge in educational programs:

our director of education
 supports vernacular studies
 for other peoples’ children. (1993b: 55)

Funding and leadership from dominant countries, Thaman argues, continues to keep dominant ideologies and philosophies in the curriculum that displace and demean local values.

Thaman seeks an indigenous vocabulary for her students and for her own poetry. As a teacher, she is pressed between English standards, as expressed in the curriculum unit on William Wordsworth, and her own recognition of their irrelevance for her students:

looking at boredom
 i wandered lonely as a cloud
 memorize this verse! (1993b: 48)

Thaman and Figiel join Caribbean writers such as Jean Rhys, Michelle Cliff, and Jamaica Kincaid, who have similarly used Wordsworth's poem to express their scorn for the English fetishization of its own culture throughout its imperial classroom. Alofa learns "The Daffodils" poem but doesn't understand a word of it and surmises that a daffodil is "a dancer that lives in the sky" (Figiel 1996b: 173). In Figiel's performance poem "The Daffodils, The Other Version," she reads the poem with pious inflection but ends with mischievous irreverence: "I wandered lonely as a cloud / That floats on high o'er vales and hills / When all at once I saw a crowd, a host of golden daffodils. / I wondered and I wondered, wondered and wondered / What the fuck is a daffodil?" (Teaiwa and Figiel 2000). Thaman offers a countermetaphor in her essay "Of Daffodils and *Heilala*," where she proposes the Tongan sacred flower and the garland as appropriate sources and forms for Polynesian literature.³

Indigenous Epistemologies

In his caustic appraisal of colonial dependency in *Tales of the Tikongs*, Epeli Hau'ofa ridicules Pacific Island "diploma dependency" and dresses his character Manu in a T-shirt that reads "Religion and Education Destroy Original Wisdom." A recent movement of Pacific Island educators and cultural leaders is attempting to determine what indigenous cultural values or "original knowledge" can be taught in school to counter the western values of individualism and capitalism.⁴ There is a growing literature defining indigenous epistemologies, comparing these "ways of knowing" across Pacific Island cultures, and countering inaccurate western anthropological descriptions of local knowledge and cultural meanings.⁵

This desire of Pacific Island scholars, educators, and community-builders "to create an indigenous account of indigenous culture" (Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 2001: 67) is a central theme in contemporary Pacific Island fiction and poetry as well. Patricia Grace is a contemporary Maori writer whose novels focus on the struggle to keep indigenous cultures alive under colonialism. For Grace, school is a damaging environment where Maori children are taught to "rubbish" their traditions and their ancestors. In her novels, hope is provided by characters

of a new generation who refuse to attend school, who refuse to send their children to school, or who use western education to fight back against the encroachment of westerners on their land or their rights as indigenous people. For those children not strong enough to withstand the violence of an imposed epistemology, for those who “fall through the cracks of the school room floor,” the adults in Grace’s 1986 novel *Potiki* find alternatives and look back at traditional ways of educating children in their cultural values and skills. Roimata, a mother of five, keeps two of the children home and contemplates what they need to grow and thrive. Roimata begins to tell her children “own-centered” stories of her childhood, those of her parents, and then older stories of her people. This process leads them all to relearn a Maori way of knowing, a knowledge set in a concept of cyclical time radically different from the western idea of linear time.

Educated in their own traditions, the children become able to evaluate the western view that sees them as marginal, on the periphery. Like Figiel, Grace takes on the western developers and educators to reclaim the definition of what is the center, what is the periphery, what is sacred, what is debased. In *Potiki*, Grace introduces the white character Mr. Dolman (renamed “Dollarman” by the Maori characters), who has come to negotiate the use of their land for the development of a tourist leisure area and a sea park. He has come to pressure them to allow developers access to the sea and to encourage them to participate in the project for their own economic development: the plans “were to do with excursions and water sports, the underwater zoo and the animal circus, the clapping seals, the man putting his head in the mouth of a whale . . . a letter came telling us how we could be involved, and how we could dress up and dance and sing twice a day and cook food in the ground” (Grace 1986: 97). When Dollarman suggests their house be shifted to a more central location nearer to town, “Everybody had laughed then, because the man had not understood that the house was central already and could not be more central. . . . [Dollarman] had a surprised look when the people laughed and looked down at his clothing as though he could suddenly be dressed strangely” (100). Toko, the narrator of this scene, who is the boy-ancestor, the son-father whose body is not long for this world, suddenly understands how the white man sees his beloved family:

I pulled myself up on my sticks. . . . Right then I saw what the man saw as he turned and looked at the three of us and as my eyes met his eyes. I saw what he saw. What he saw was brokenness, a broken race. He saw in my Granny, my Mary and me, a whole people, decrepit, deranged, deformed. (102)

The novel turns away from such debasing western values to explore a model of teaching the children the sacredness of their environment, apprenticing them to carving, fishing, performing traditional funeral rights, and growing crops.

Rather than school, the true learning in the novel takes place “at the elbow” of an elder who passes down indigenous skills and values. Similarly, in Alan Duff’s 1990 *Once Were Warriors*, the salvation for the neglected and abused children is found in learning traditional rituals, *haka*, chants, and learning about the history of the Maori people from the perspective of Maori elders.

Thaman’s concerns about the effect of inculcating western ideas of individuality, learning to see oneself as a “free market agent,” and learning to desire all things western, mostly American, are expressed with great poignancy in Sia Figiel’s novel. Alofa’s repeated question, “What is that supposed to mean?” is a basic question of epistemology as Solomon Islanders David Welchman Gegeo and Karen Ann Watson-Gegeo define it: “who can be a knower, what can be known, what constitutes knowledge, sources of evidence for constructing knowledge, what constitutes truth, how truth is to be verified, how evidence becomes truth, how valid inferences are to be drawn, [and] the role of belief in evidence” (2001: 57). Alofa lives in a community where a multitude of beliefs and practices from both indigenous and colonial worldviews are intertwined; because they are called simply *fa’aSamoa* and are given the status of cultural imperative, Alofa finds it difficult to interpret, appraise, or reconcile them. Alofa suspects that the simultaneous referral to supposedly indigenous and Christian social structures in the schools and church meetings—values that support the violently enforced *and* violated sexual purity of the girls—is an overdetermined defense of patriarchal authority, power, and freedom. Her ability to survive (when many of her friends do not) comes from the lessons she learns outside of school and church from Siniva and Sugar Shirley, both surprising traditionalists in their own ways who, pointedly, do not themselves survive.

Alofa struggles throughout the novel between two competing but intertwined epistemologies regarding her understanding of herself as an individual. The western-style education that is imported from New Zealand and is taught by Peace Corps volunteers from the United States demands an individualized identity, separate from that of the village or family. This is an identity that is mystifying, potentially nullifying for a girl who has been raised to measure her wealth, prestige, and place in the world through the recitation of her genealogy and current family relations. The Peace Corps volunteers who teach in the schools consider it one of their primary educational responsibilities to develop in their students a sense of individual identity, a self separate from that of their families and village, a private “soul” that is simultaneously deplorable and enticing to the children. Miss Cunningham, a teacher from Oregon who is as perplexed by her students as they are by her, gives them essay assignments to encourage their sense of personal ownership and perceptions. She has them choose among the topics “My Village,” “My Pet,” and “On my way to school today I saw a . . .” The essays she receives from the students continually disappoint her by their generalizations and

lack of a strong personal voice. Finally, forced to write on the third topic, Alofa explains her confusion:

I knew only that it was hard to witness something—anything—alone. You were *always* with someone. . . . Nothing was witnessed alone. Nothing was witnessed in the “I” form—nothing but penises and ghosts. “I” does not exist, Miss Cunningham. “I” is “we” . . . always. (Figiel 1996b: 136–137)

Although her Samoan upbringing insists that she is always part of a group, that she know herself and understand her experiences only through that group, the sexual pressure exerted on the girls by the boys and the sexual abuse they receive from men are always experienced alone. Alofa senses an incongruity between what girls are taught in their families (“I” is “we”) and what each girl experiences on her own. Alone Alofa touches the pastor’s son’s penis, alone Alofa sees her father’s penis as he makes love with her teacher, and alone Lili is raped and then beaten by her father. Although any public recognition of these events (Alofa and Lealofi are caught and exposed, Lili becomes pregnant) leads to brutal beatings of the girls, they nevertheless bring these stories back to each other, “confessing” what has happened to them alone.

Whereas Miss Cunningham, ignorant of the danger associated with that position, encourages them to value who they each are “alone,” the Samoan-Christian set of strictures that Alofa calls “girl lessons” depend on the first principle that each girl is “through” her family, her village, her church, Samoa (138). Everything each girl does is an expression of her role, her place in her community. But the world that Sia Figiel describes is one where it is not clear to the girls, despite the constant prayer meetings and classes, just how one successfully becomes a woman. The “girl lessons,” taught with slaps and the pulling of hair, give the girls some guidelines:

We were not allowed to laugh too much or too loudly.
 We were taught to be meek.
 We were taught to be humble (again). . . .
 Always take a shower twice a day, once when you wake up and once in the evening—and three times when you are sick from the moon.
 Never wear the same panty twice when you have the moon sickness.
 Never laugh at blind people or deaf people . . . or palagis.
 Never walk alone at night—only bad girls and teine o le po [prostitutes] walk around that late.
 Never wear anything exposing your knees. . . .
 Never go bra-less to church.
 Never speak with the “k” in your mouth.

Never pray for yourself—you should pray for the whole village and for the whole of Samoa.

“We” were taught to mimic Jesus Christ in all that he was, so that “we” too could be good examples of his life.

“We” were young ladies, and “we” should handle ourselves as such.

Therefore:

“I” am “we.”

“I” does not exist. (140–141)

While the girls are taught that this negation of individual selfhood is “the Samoan Way,” there is, Siniva teaches her, access to a powerful sense of self that is rooted in Samoan culture. At the conclusion of a series of Samoan legends told by Siniva and the narrator, Alofa identifies herself and her Samoan “soul” as central to that tradition. While she finds a place of identification in pre-Christian Samoan cosmology, it remains a tenuous and somewhat threatening place where she is vulnerable to spirit sickness. Alofa’s willingness to listen to Siniva exposes her to the danger of losing herself completely, but it also gives her freedom from the constrictions of modern Samoan-Christian beliefs that insist on her debasement. Alofa’s soul separates from the trappings of global commerce and enters a world that is distinctly Samoan:

Agaga is the soul that each man and woman has.

Agaga lives in peoples’ bodies.

And leaves the body only when one faints, loses consciousness or dies. . . .

When my body dies [at night], agaga leaves the “Made in Taiwan” cotton sheets (all floral and colourful), the “Made in China” blue or green or red panties, the white polyester brassiere, and the watch also. . . .

This is when ghosts are born again and again. They roam the village looking for a waking baby, looking for a waking cat. Ghosts eat baby eyes and cat eyes . . . and dreams, too. Ghosts do.

And “I”?

“I” become a god . . . “I” am . . . “I” exist. (194)

Although she is terrified of Siniva, Alofa can find a recognizable sense of self only through the Samoan myths imparted to her by her aunt. Alofa recognizes that Siniva is not just a village fool but a warrior of great strength and power (192). Alofa interprets Siniva’s battle against colonialism in traditional Samoan epic terms and, through her aunt’s struggles, she celebrates herself:

Nafanua gathers the invisible people of Samoa and leads them to war, covering her breasts with coconut leaves to disguise the fact that she is a woman warrior. She

leads Samoa into war and overthrows the oppressive power . . . cutting their heads off one by one . . . cooling the hot earth with blood.

“I am a warrior,” sings Nafanua. “I am a warrior.”

“I am,” sings Alofa. (193–194, 197)

Like Maxine Hong Kingston’s adolescent girl in *The Woman Warrior*, Alofa finds a model of independent selfhood and womanhood in modified versions of her community’s legends. These new heroines allow the girls to claim individual identities without having to deny their communities or be cut off, as are their suicidal aunts.

“Girl” Lessons

Alofa’s other mentor and protector is her cousin Fa’afetai (Sugar Shirley), who is the village *fa’afafine*, a man who lives “in the way of a woman.” In village lore, Shirley is born at the time that Alofa’s aunt commits suicide. Alofa, named after her beautiful and tragic aunt, struggles to find a way to become a woman who lives and continues to be respected and embraced by her family. Shirley helps the teenage girls of the village negotiate the rules that govern their domestic duties, their grooming, their speech, and their relationships—each of which is seen to reflect their sexual status, particularly as they enter adolescence. Shirley teaches them “girl lessons” that, while they do not overtly contradict the expectations of *fa’aSamoa*, expose those expectations as cultural choices that have changed over time—and therefore can and will change again. If the dictates of *fa’aSamoa* derive from traditional cultural practices of communal selfhood as shaped by Christian restrictions of female sexuality, Shirley challenges that particular conflation by performing a traditional role that elicits expressions of value for “femaleness,” both female labor and female sexual autonomy. When she can, Shirley protects the girls from adult brutality and maintains for the community a performance of female sexual levity, which was traditionally the role of unmarried girls but was prohibited after the arrival of Christianity.⁶

Alofa’s skepticism about the education she receives in church and in school is due in part to her lack of understanding and in part to her sensitivity to the hypocrisy of her elders. While she is taught with violence to suppress her sexual curiosity, the girls are regularly peeped at by neighbors, impregnated by teachers, courted and sometimes raped by male family members. Girls who become pregnant are badly beaten and are held solely responsible for the sexual transgression, whether they wished it or not. Alofa is searching for a way to interpret her experiences and her encounters with friends, family members, and teachers. Whom can she believe and what perspective is dictating the conflicting expectations? The chapter called “The Centre” explicitly raises this epistemological problem: “There is no consensus

as to what the centre of Apia is. Everyone has their own version, their own definition, which varies in degree from one person to another” (Figiel 1996b: 65). The chapter describes a series of different centers for a range of characters. It is clear that while all characters have their own perspectives and obsessions that run their lives, the foreigners, who come bringing one form of “truth” or another, are always ignorant, understanding little of what they see or hear.

The presence of various *fa'afafine* in the novel highlights, often with humor, alternative perspectives on western ways of knowing. For instance, Soia, the devout widow and mother of fifteen, names her only sons after the American anthropologist Derek Freeman (who claims not to have met any *fa'afafine* during his research in Samoa). These twins, Freeman (Pagoka-ua-faasaolokoiga) and Derek (Keleki), “both turned out to be fa'afafine. Keleki returned from Hawai'i with breast implants, and Pagoka-ua-faasaolokoiga leads a life of sin in Apia with sailors and unhappily or happily married men” (68). While this is a wry undercutting of the pomposity of the foreigner's interpretation of Samoan culture, it is also a way for Figiel to express the complexities of “coming of age in Samoa” from the point of view of Samoan teenage girls. Far from being merely a joke, the *fa'afafine* in the novel offer the girls a traditional education in a way the schools cannot—an education even their mothers and disciplinarians of the village cannot—for in many ways the adults have idealized the school system, even as they remember their own misery there. Sugar Shirley is an excellent vehicle for portraying the effect of the conflicting “knowledges” in the village and the changing sexual politics, where traditional sexual and gender codes are influenced by Christianity, migration, and media.

In this novel, as with many other contemporary Pacific novels, the children are presented with alternative sources of knowledge to the missionary, colonial, or foreign-influenced educational systems. Both Sugar Shirley and Siniva complicate family sexual politics and challenge village and foreign representations of contemporary life in Samoa. Sugar Shirley is fully integrated into village life and is well loved for her intermediate state by both men and women, boys and girls. Sugar Shirley is called a girl and treads the line between girl-sister (*teine*) and woman-wife (*fafine*) and between boys and girls who are separated as functional brothers and sisters. She speaks the respectful formal language more associated with girls than with women, boys, or men (Mageo 1992: 453), but her jokes are usually sexually irreverent.⁷ In her liminal role between genders, Shirley is permitted more freedom than others, male or female, to comment on village sexual politics. Her clowning (accusing the boys of the Christian youth group of impregnating her, complaining to the old women about her period) maintains a grace for the kind of impropriety that often brings terrible violence upon the girls in the village. In her study of Samoan gender and sexuality, Mageo describes the way *fa'afafine* express the contradictions inherent in the contemporary constraints on female sexuality, contradic-

tions that the girls experience as hypocrisy: “In the transvestite body . . . one finds an intercalation of opposites that places the figure of the virginal girl in ironic quotation. . . . [T]ransvestites make a mockery of virginity itself and the Samoan-Christian ideal for which it stands” (Mageo 1998: 211).

Mageo suggests that the *fa’afafine*, not mentioned in nineteenth-century reports or missionary journals,⁸ is a role of increasing importance, given the decline of traditional ways of performing gender roles of being a girl and being a woman. For the girls of this story, the transition from *teine* to *fafine* is fraught not only with sexual violence, but with generational changes concerning permissible behavior. According to Mageo, the *fa’afafine* “represents a novel cultural stratagem for assisting real girls to play idealized roles and for defusing an increased pressure toward violence in public gatherings,” where boys and men must challenge any defamation of categorical sisters (Mageo 1992: 444). Because Shirley is performing girlhood, her behavior underscores the expectations of girls while exposing, to the girls as well as to their elders, girlhood as a performance. It may be argued that when only designated members of communities are allowed to cross boundaries, their transgressions are at the cost of more widespread freedoms. Hereniko suggests that the performances of *fa’afafine*, like other licensed clowning performances, serve a conservative role in maintaining gender roles and sexual norms that are under great pressure in contemporary Samoa (1999: 24). Sugar Shirley’s performance, however, operates on two levels that might appeal to the imaginations of some members of her community, like Alofa, who is actively searching for ways to express her own *agaga* and not lose her social place. Even though she acts in ways that real girls must not, Shirley opens a gap between gender expectations and behavior that may allow for broader understandings of what is appropriate masculine and feminine expression. Her behavior also calls attention to what is considered appropriate “Samoan” behavior. Because she is not a *real* girl, Sugar Shirley is permitted to perform the sexual expressiveness of girls and women that were part of traditional Samoan culture before the missionaries’ arrival. Because she is not a boy, she is not held accountable for her sexual clowning in front of girls. The village agreement not to prosecute Shirley for her behavior is a powerful undercutting of the Christian strictures of the past century and a tacit acknowledgment of a Samoan way that could allow girls more freedom. Niko Besnier explores the ways transgender performances in Tonga rest upon tensions between local and “translocal” identities central to a society where so many Tongans and their children live in metropolitan cities in the United States, New Zealand, and Australia. Like the *fakaleiti* Besnier describes, Sugar Shirley has taken an English name that signals the existence of and connection with alternative social constructs while she simultaneously performs local Samoanness as a *fa’afafine* (Besnier 2002).

Unlike western drag, which can easily be read as a negative model to shore up male heterosexuality, Samoan *fa’afafine* can be read additionally as a warning for

virginal young *women* not to flaunt their sexuality: “The inversion serves to remind sisters of how they are *not* supposed to behave” (Mageo 1993: 454). Traditional *fa’afafine* occupy a liminal position diffusing the tensions of gender performance and protocol in a community where gender relations have changed rather rapidly. Figiel provides a sympathetic portrayal of such a *fa’afafine* from the point of view of the entire village, particularly of the girls who benefit from Shirley’s enactment of ideal girlhood and its limitations. When she is taunted at a cricket match by a wife new to the village, Shirley knocks her down and is defended by all the men of the village, including the husband of the newcomer. Figiel delivers Shirley from ridicule and makes her a hero, in fact much like the mythical girls of the Samoan stories who die by the will of the gods. When she dies by drowning, she is mourned by the whole village for weeks. It is Shirley, not the schools or the prayer meetings, who helps the girls negotiate the conflicting expectations of tradition and modernity. She is well loved because she affirms traditional cultural practices and protects the girls by delineating, through her transgression, the boundaries they must respect: “‘Don’t do what I would,’ she would say to us girls whenever we left the house for the afaipese [choir] at nights” (Figiel 1996b: 52–53). Her exaggeration of both the sister-role and the woman-role help idealize and stabilize the girls’ gender roles while opening up the possibility, for those who see it, of imagining other ways of being (Mageo 1992: 454). While the *fa’afafine* is a traditional role in Samoan society, Shirley’s concern for the girls that she expresses through her own set of “girl lessons” exhibits the recent pressure on girls in modern Samoan society. Although Siniva and Shirley both perish, Alofa, representing a younger generation of the Pacific Islands, learns from each of them ways that indigenous cultural practices as forms of knowledge can be life-saving. Standing at Siniva’s grave, Alofa can now also hear the cry of the legendary Tuli bird and decides that she, unlike her aunt, will not die; she will not despair, but will return to a “new gathering place where ‘we’ once belonged” (Figiel 1996b: 239). Who will gather here and who will feel they belong are questions Figiel’s novel provocatively leaves open.

Notes

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1. Tiffany (2001) argues that the “sexual life of savages” has been the ruling discourse

about Samoa in anthropology, which has posited the Pacific Islands as civilizations offering us a mirror image of western culture's understanding of itself: where westerners are repressed, the Pacific Island societies are expressive; where the west is civilized, the Pacific Islands represent precivilization. As Tiffany puts it, "In short, the bodies and behavior of Samoan girls are of interest in helping us understand ourselves [i.e. Americans]" (23). Tiffany's examination of the changing representation of Samoan women in particular, through the marketing of Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* and Derek Freeman's *Margaret Mead and Samoa*, raises important questions about the effect of politics on anthropological ethnography as well.

2. Tsitsi Dangarembga, from Zimbabwe, is, like Sia Figiel, the first woman from her country to write a novel in English; for each of them, their choice of English highlights the structures of power they explore in their novels.

3. In the past twenty-five years a number of indigenous Pacific writers have captivated the attention of readers and literary scholars. Some of the better known are New Zealand Maori writers Patricia Grace, Witi Ihimaera, Alan Duff, and Keri Hulme; Samoan writers Albert Wendt and Sia Figiel; Fijian writer and critic Subramani; Tongan satirist and essayist Epli Hau'ofa; Niuean novelist John Pule; and Rotuman writer and filmmaker Vilsoni Here-niko. In Hawai'i, "local" literature produced by descendents of the plantation workers have challenged "standard English" and U.S. "mainland education" with stories and novels that employ Pidgin (among these writers are Milton Murayama, Lois-Ann Yamanaka, Lee Tonouchi, and writers from the Bamboo Ridge journal and press headed by Darrell Lum and Eric Chock). While this literature offers a significant critique of the human costs of globalized labor forces (from the indentured servitude in the cane fields to contemporary hotel workers) and explores the rich cultural possibilities of ethnically diverse communities, native Hawaiians and their concerns are often absent from these works. Writers of Hawaiian descent, such as John Dominis Holt, Haunani-Kay Trask, Joe Balaz, and Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl have influenced native Hawaiian writing. Recently, with the revival of Hawaiian in language-immersion schools and the growth of Hawaiian Studies at the University of Hawai'i, native writers are creating new spaces for performance and publication. The native Hawaiian cultural renaissance of the past thirty years has produced a rich body of music, chants, and poetry, and the native Hawaiian journal *'oiwi* has published poetry, art, short stories, and essays in English and Hawaiian by native writers. Perhaps one of the most interesting projects of this journal is Noenoe Silva's reproduction and translation of newspapers and other texts written in Hawaiian at the time of the overthrow of the Hawaiian government and the U.S. annexation of Hawai'i. Unlike many other Pacific Island countries, where the majority population is indigenous and their languages remain the national languages, New Zealand Maoris and native Hawaiians have had to work to resurrect their native languages in order to challenge colonial history and produce a literature reflecting native concerns and perspectives.

4. "[T]he dominant ideology promotes somewhat anti-collectivist sentiments with

increasing focus upon the advancement of the individual, based upon the capacity to pay within a free market context. Such an orientation, driven not by the democratic impulse, but by economic considerations, is alien to the orientation of Pacific societies and is potentially dangerous to their future as distinct cultural groups. . . . Many foreign consultants lack an understanding of the cultural contexts in which curriculum development and implementation is undertaken” (Thaman 1993a: 253).

5. Manulani Meyer interviewed twenty native Hawaiian educators working to inscribe native ways of creating and evaluating knowledge into the new curricula of the Hawaiian charter school movement, which began in 1999 with the goal of having native Hawaiian educators provide a successful school system for (primarily) native Hawaiian children. Among those indigenous educators are teachers of *hula*, chanting, lei-making, navigation, and care of the land. Meyer argues that an articulated Hawaiian epistemology will “highlight the hidden curriculum of assimilation and the acultural assumptions in pedagogy that exist in Hawai‘i’s colonial schools” (2001: 148). Ah Nee-Benham and Heck (1998) concur with this view and contend that between annexation and statehood in Hawai‘i, the political goal of Americanization “was translated into educational policies that had as their goal the acculturation of Native Hawaiians and other ethnic children into a social order demanding English speech, adherence to U.S. social and political ideals, and industrious labor in their assigned jobs” (1998: 172). Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo argue that the way to knowledge in West Kwará‘ae, Malaita, Solomon Islands, is based in the interpretations of sensory information paralleling what Meyer finds in Hawai‘i and what other indigenous scholars find elsewhere in the Pacific. The Kwará‘ae Genealogy Project seeks to define indigenous knowledge and therefore is run not by scholars trained abroad but by a group of rural villagers who want to clearly delineate indigenous from introduced epistemic frameworks. Part of the motivation of such native projects stems from years of feeling exploited and misunderstood by outsiders who study local culture and by the “massive failure of Anglo-European-designed development in West Kwará‘ae since the 1960s” (Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 2001: 65).

6. Mageo sees this cultural change as central to a crisis in contemporary gender relations and girls’ sexuality. With the Christian disapproval of informal marriages and of culturally governed areas for sexual expression, female sexual flaunting (*fa’alialia*) became a forbidden and violently punished act. When the missionaries made sharp distinctions between formal marriage and elopement and between legitimate and illegitimate children, it became disadvantageous for even low-status families to have their daughters elope, and the policing of daughters’ sexuality was extended from designated high-status girls to all the girls of the village (1998: 55).

7. As Mageo describes the social role of the *fa’afafine*: “If boys’ *ula* [teasing] is likely to turn upon the fact that they are not women in the biological sense, women’s *ula* is likely to turn upon the fact that they are not girls in the anatomical sense. *Fa’afafine*’s *ula* turns upon the fact that they are neither women nor girls, by ironically signaling that they are

both. If the *fa'afafine's* humor has a contrapuntal character, so does her role: it is sisterly in form, but its content is all woman" (1992: 452).

8. Besnier (2002) points out that gender liminality was well documented in Tahiti and Hawai'i in part, he suggests, because the British Royal Navy that landed in Tahiti in the late 1700s was preoccupied with repressing and punishing sodomy; he also asserts that "the absence of historical documentation on gender liminality in Western Polynesia does not necessarily mean that it is a postcontact phenomenon" (1994: 294).