

‘Who Speaks for Culture?’ Challenging Gender and Sexual Violence in Māori and Pacific Island Literature in English

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IF POETRY AND FICTION ARE WIDELY REGARDED AS FOCUSED ON INDIVIDUALS, WHY DO majority-culture readers tend to foreground questions of (collective) culture, and cultural representation when reading texts by writers from indigenous or minority cultures? ‘Culture’ in such cases is inclined to signify in an anthropological or ethnographic, rather than aesthetic, sense, and fictional representations of indigenous and minority life and experience are often read as referencing a broader cultural, even ethnic, reality. In Aotearoa New Zealand, part of the context for this is that the now-significant body of Māori literary writing in English began to emerge along with the rise of decolonisation movements and identity politics. The literature in English published during the 1970s-80s Māori political and cultural ‘renaissance’ tended to emphasise Māori ‘cultural difference’ in both content and literary form, whether explicitly assuming, or imputed with, a ‘burden’ of cultural representation. Māori renaissance fiction often included didactic passages that could be termed autoethnographic,¹ and writers developed textual aesthetics that reflected cultural patterns and values. Similarly, both Pacific Island-resident and diasporic (including New Zealand-resident) Pacific Island writers in English have emphasised cultural identity and collectivity in their

¹ Pratt (1992) defines autoethnographic texts as texts in which ‘colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer’s own terms’ (7, emphasis in original)

fictional settings, themes and plots, developing literary strategies to echo traditional cultural forms and practices. However, this context of representational politics raises a methodological problem for the analysis of gender violence in Māori and Pacific Island literature: given the potential for both literary and scholarly writing about violence to enact or elicit its own epistemic violence, how can we approach important questions of culture and representation without falling into the traps of generalising or stereotyping? At the same time, how do writers articulate treatment of gender and sexual violence with their various stakes in, and attachments to, culture—and with the literary forms of their works?

The importance of attending to the dynamics and politics of cultural representation—representation as both depiction, and as ‘speaking as/for’—is illustrated in the terms of response to Alan Duff’s *Once Were Warriors* (1990), as the novel, and later the film, entered into public imagination and discourse. The novel was immediately both notorious and lauded for the raw realism of its portrayal of extreme, usually alcohol-fuelled, violence, including gendered domestic or partner violence, and sexual violence. A significant line of response to the novel was that here, at last, was the unromantic truth of urban Māori lives in conditions of unemployment, state benefit-dependence and hopelessness, ‘straight from the horse’s mouth’ (Stewart). Duff himself had opined that Māori literature in English, to this point—along with its readers—had been too much in thrall to romanticised depictions of Māori lives and culture (Duff, ‘Introduction’ ix; see also Duff, ‘Viewpoint’ 7). The 1994 film exacerbated the spread of this popular discourse of truth in representation. Although it was challenged in other cultural and scholarly quarters (see Pihama; Vercoe), the novel’s literary strategies, and former television commercial maker Lee Tamahori’s directorial approach to the film, arguably enabled *Once Were Warriors* to gel with frequent New Zealand media reports of violence within Māori (and Pacific) families, and public service broadcast anti-violence campaigns that often feature Māori or Pacific households. A novel’s or film’s ability to contribute to circulation of stereotypes and simplistic explanations renders urgent the question of how incidents of violence, media and other discursive framing and coverage of them, and literary or filmic representations, are articulated. Any consideration of violence—including gender and sexual violence—must challenge a neoliberal political will to bracket the persistence of historical impacts on the lives of Māori and Pacific Island individuals, families and communities. At the same time, overlooking the discursive or aesthetic framing of representations, including genre and narrative strategies, also risks flattening complexity and nuance to feed stereotypes and broad-brush polemic.

In the wake of European imperialism in the Pacific, Pacific Island territories’ and peoples’ political, economic, and labour ties to regional powers such as New Zealand and Australia, along with vicissitudes of immigration,

residency/citizenship, and refugee status, identify them with a multifaceted colonial history. Despite New Zealand's statutory biculturalism, and its self-identification as part of the South Pacific region, social and institutional structures sustain colonial-derived hegemonic value systems. Many Māori and Pacific Island individuals and communities strive to maintain cultural affiliations and practices. However, the terms in which wealth, well-being and success are attained and measured are cast overwhelmingly in terms of the values of the surrounding hegemonic (post)colonising, and more recently neoliberal, order. At the same time, the forms that cultural traditions take—whether sustained through changing contexts or revived after colonial suppression—are inevitably marked by that colonial order, a point to which I return below in relation to gender.

Further, Māori, diasporic Pacific, and Pacific Island-resident peoples have been impacted on every level by globalisation, whose long history reaches back to European exploration and imperialism. Alongside the structural and material impacts of European incursions into the Pacific, the epistemic violence of objectification, manifested in an 'archive' of images of islands, cultures and peoples, has constituted what Žižek would term a 'symbolic' violence of representation.² Pacific peoples face the burden of challenging circulating images, whether of savagery or primitivism, or of exoticism and eroticism. Both such representational archives are gendered, though as Jolly notes, not all Pacific women have been represented in the same way: while Europeans have tended to fetishise the sexual allure, even agency, of women from the 'eastern' islands (broadly speaking, the Polynesian islands), those from the 'western' (Melanesian) islands have tended to be depicted as 'sexually unappealing, and sexually sequestered "beasts of burden", cruelly oppressed by [Melanesian] men' ('Imagining Oceania' 520). Addressing (and subverting) the former archive, Selina Tusitala Marsh, a New Zealand-born poet of Samoan, Tuvaluan and European ancestry, ironically 'thanks' such figures as Bougainville, Balboa, and Vasco for

Desiring 'em young
so guys like Gauguin could dream
...
then take his syphilitic body downstream to the tropics
to test his hypothesis
about how the uncivilized
ripen like pawpaw

² Žižek distinguishes three kinds of violence: 'subjective violence', that 'performed by a clearly identifiable agent', and two kinds of 'objective violence'—'symbolic violence' which is 'embodied in language and its forms', pertaining to 'its imposition of a certain universe of meaning', and 'systemic' or structural violence, which is 'the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our [capitalist] economic and political systems' (1). The latter includes 'ecological decay and human misery' (11). My discussion will attend to gendered/gender violence at each of these levels.

...

dangling like golden prepubescent buds
 seeding nymphomania ('Guys like Gauguin', in *Fast Talking PI* 36).

Marsh responds to the encumbrance of exotic/erotic images of Pacific women, in her ekphrastic poem, '*Two Nudes on a Tahitian Beach, 1894*', named for Gauguin's painting. The voice of one of the women Nudes describes how the artist has posed her: 'You strip me bare / assed, turn me on my side / shove a fan in my hand / ... / pout my lips below an / almond eye' (*Fast Talking PI* 40). But she subverts the male (painter's, viewer's) gaze by actively directing her own gaze towards the other woman: 'I'm the pulse / on the arm of this wall / and I've drawn her to me again' (40). The poem concludes with solidarity between the women in the painting extending to encompass the woman viewer of the painting, who has also become the poem's speaking voice. Her interpolation into the poem's / painting's imagery, enacts both the contemporary persistence of sexualised imagery of Pacific Island women, and women's agency in subverting and defying that inheritance and its symbolic violence.

Colonial and contemporary 'development' discourses orient Māori and Pacific peoples towards identifying their aspirations in accordance with global neoliberal capitalism and consumerism, invoking what Žižek terms 'systemic' violence. Pacific nations face increasing dependence not only on multinational corporations, but on the governments of former colonial powers (Raiskin 21-2). New Zealand is generally considered an outpost of the Global North in the hemispheric South (Magallanes n.p.), but if the South is 'a synonym for subalterity' (Lopez 8), Māori and New Zealand-resident Pacific Island peoples constitute the South in that Northern outpost, while Pacific Island territories, communities and cultures bear the social, economic, and environmental brunt of global capitalism. Many Pacific Island economies have been rendered dependent on international aid, on remittances from family members overseas, and on the mostly United States military bases that generate diverse forms of local vulnerability. At the same time as tourism threatens and displaces livelihoods and the cultures that sustain them, it translates those cultures (and their subjects) into consumer products, performances and services for others, competing with imported cultural images and commodities in the everyday lives of Pacific peoples interpellated into consumer capitalism. There are certainly Māori and Pacific Island people who exercise agency in relation to globalisation in business and culture (as well as politics, media, and sports). However, a large majority are impacted negatively by a system that both produces and perpetuates inequality, echoing the way the wealth of the Global North is produced by way of the immiseration of the South. Solomon Islands poet Jully Sipolo's poem 'Development' evinces the desolation of development, amounting, for locals, to 'Urban drift / Empty villages' and 'Loose living / Lost identity' (*Praying Parents* 13).

Pacific Island homes are increasingly threatened by the effects of atmospheric and oceanic pollution and climate change. As they bear the impacts of the energy consumption and emissions of the wealthy industrialised Global North, the management of consequences at the level of everyday life could be considered *gendered* articulations of systemic or structural violence. For example, women are often figured as producers and protectors of generational continuity, roles that face increasing challenges in the context of (the politics of) global environmental, economic and cultural threat affecting them at regional, local and everyday subjective levels. In Marshall Islander poet Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner's 'Dear Matefele Peinam', (Jetnil-Kijiner n.p.), a mother shows her baby daughter 'that lucid, sleepy lagoon lounging against the sunrise', creating identification between the lagoon and the baby. The mother tells the baby, 'men say that one day / that lagoon will devour you':

they say you, your daughter
and your granddaughter, too
will wander rootless
with only a passport to call home.
But she promises her daughter that
no greedy whale of a company sharking through political seas
no backwater bullying of businesses with broken morals
no blindfolded bureaucracies gonna push
this mother ocean over
the edge
...
Because baby we are going to fight

The agency of violence is figured as climatic, environmental, economic and political; and the mother's vision extends to encompass other island groups and other regions of the Global South affected by the active political neglect of those 'hidden behind platinum titles', expressing shared struggles and solidarity with those who have faced:

... typhoon haiyan in the philippines
and floods of pakistan, algeria, colombia
and all the hurricanes, earthquakes, and tidalwaves

The voice of mother to baby daughter foregrounds a gendered perspective on climate change's threat to intergenerational cultural continuity, and her reference to 'mother ocean'—like the imagery that aligns baby and lagoon—presents a gendered identification with place. However, Jetnil-Kijiner articulates Marshall

Islander agency, in the face of structural violence, in a holistic vision of sustaining culture, with men, women and children working together.

When Māori and Pacific Island writers deal with themes of 'subjective' gender violence, essentially violence 'performed by a clearly identifiable agent' (Žižek 1), the stakes in (degrees of) identification with their cultures arise in relation to the pressures of colonisation, diaspora, and globalisation. These displacements and entanglements both intensify the investments in discourses of, or appeals to, 'tradition' while impacting on the very formation and articulation of tradition(s).³ The gendering of imperial and colonial exchanges has shaped the construction and articulation of gender for individuals and communities. Jolly refers to processes whereby 'introduced Christian forms of gender hierarchy have creolised with indigenous gender hierarchies to produce recalcitrant and militant forms of male domination which are staunchly defended as traditional... God's divine ordination of male authority is thereby powerfully proclaimed as indigenous' ('When She Cries Oceans' 360); while as Lynda Newland notes, 'violence perpetrated against women and girls in major social and political disruptions' reveals how gender relations are 'entangled with—and vulnerable to—changes in religious and political relations' (209). Culture is 'expressed through a politicised habitus representing male interests ... and violence is used as a threat against women who do not accept their roles' (212).

Such (re)articulations of gender and 'tradition' further inflect decolonisation and independence movements. Selina Tusitala Marsh, referring to Vanuatu in the context of discussing Grace Mera Molisa's poetry, notes that 'The danger of hasty and uncritical resurrections of "traditional" practices in a post-Independence era is that they are inevitably subject to colonial influence and male bias' ('Black Stone Poetry' 3). Marsh describes the Vanuatu independence movement's definition of the 'Melanesian Way' as centred on '*kastom* in conjunction with Christianity' (2, emphasis in original). She concludes that 'The arrested development of certain aspects of tradition served to reinforce patriarchy as both indigenous and non-indigenous men capitalised on existing (male-oriented, colonially inherited) power structures' (2).⁴ Molisa's poem 'Custom' decries the misuse of 'custom' as an alibi for continuing oppression. Pointing to the term as 'more honoured / in omission / than commission' and as 'misapplied / bastardised / murdered / a Frankenstein / corpse / conveniently / recalled / to intimidate / women' (*Black Stone* 24-5), Molisa chooses the English word 'custom' rather than the Bislama

³ Following Newland, I treat the term 'tradition' or 'traditional' as 'a *contemporary claim to wholeness*, a way of unifying a community through an expression of shared values that have, in fact, been chosen and redefined by a specific and contemporary regime or group' (Newland 212, my emphasis).

⁴ See also Irwin (17) and Hokowhitu ('Producing', 32-3; 'Tackling', 276) for similar arguments about the deleterious effects on women and gender relations more generally in the context of patriarchal Māori revivals and articulations of 'tradition.'

word ‘kastom,’ according to Marsh, in order to avoid being misread as presenting an anti-culture stance (‘Black Stone Poetry’ 2). These lines from Molisa’s poem adumbrate my argument that gender violence is largely a problem for women that relates to particular socio-cultural constructions and expressions of masculinity legitimised as ‘traditional’; yet that in challenging both the violence, and the culturally sanctioned gender forms and power relations that subtend it, women writers retain their cultural identifications in order to rearticulate them in more empowering ways for girls and women.

There are male Māori and Pacific Island writers who treat gender violence critically, alluding to forces that produce particular kinds of masculinity, and to girls’ and women’s agency in surviving and challenging both violence and hypermasculine patriarchy more generally.⁵ However, I am primarily concerned here with how *women* writers treat gender and sexual violence in their literary works—how they articulate it in relation to both ‘lived’ culture *and* culture in the sense of artistic expression. The question gains further focus in the context of attention to the problem of gender violence on the part of scholars in such fields as anthropology and law, or of human and gender rights research and policy advisers, workers and activists. Scholarly, policy and activist discourses make vital contributions to efforts to combat gender violence, to gain redress for victims, achieve legal and social reforms at local and international levels. However, while a perspective that brackets history and politics obscures important factors in relation to gender violence, there are also pitfalls when research, policy, or activism produces generalising discourses. Referring to gender violence in Papua New Guinea, Jolly argues that ‘the incidence of acts of violence against women approximates a war or an emergency’, and asks:

How can scholars like ourselves, writing from the distance of Australia or the United States, deal with such gruesome daily horrors of gender violence in the region without compounding the hurt by engaging in a sort of ‘pornography’ in representation—which reports these horrors in graphic detail and ... which thereby risks reducing the women so hurt to further victimhood and which contributes to a broader popular portrait of the western Pacific ... as dystopia[?] (‘When She Cries Oceans’ 343)

In this important question about how to avoid perpetuating violence in the very act of addressing it, Jolly’s own discourse is uncomfortably caught between the commitment to bear witness to gender violence without minimising its extent or seriousness, and falling into the very trap of “pornography” in representation’

⁵ They include virtually all of Ihimaera’s works and later works by Albert Wendt. The treatment of gender and sexual violence in Alan Duff’s novels is more ambivalent.

that concerns her. When she refers to its incidence as 'approximat[ing] a war or an emergency' manifested in 'gruesome daily horrors', the distant reader is implicitly invited to look, with her, *at* gender violence in Papua New Guinea, and to see 'victims'.

The problem in Jolly's reference to 'gruesome daily horrors' is not only a problem of representation in terms of depiction of Papua New Guinea women, but also—in casting them principally as victims—a problem of representation as discursive agency. Jolly herself highlights this issue when she points to Sally Engle Merry's argument concerning victims of gender violence who 'come to see their experience through the "mediation of middle level and elite activists who reframe their everyday problems in human rights terms"' ('When She Cries Oceans' 354; citing Merry 219). Of course, Pacific Island and Māori women also speak about gender violence in scholarly, policy and activist discourses. Marsh ('Black Stone Poetry'), points out that poet Grace Mera Molisa was also an activist, a political figure, and an environmentalist:

Molisa was a staunch advocate for holding the government accountable to its pre-independence promises... Molisa's specific use of a cohesive indigenous metaphor realised a Vanuatu poetics that created ways in which to work within disequilibrium in order to bring about equilibrium. For Molisa, equilibrium was only possible by... addressing the 'double jeopardy' experienced by women of colour the world over: racism and sexism. (2)

Nevertheless, 'Molisa openly acknowledges the limitations of writing in island communities where rates of literacy are low, book culture is limited, and the expense of books is high: "Literacy is a luxury so Writers mean nothing..."' ('Black Stone Poetry' 7; citing Molisa, *Local Global* 31). Although Marsh identifies Molisa's 'disingenuous disclaimer' as 'strategic in its deployment' in a 'context of women's ongoing deprivation' (7), the point remains that the levels of mediation between the social reality of gender and sexual violence, and the perspectives, discursive media and forms through which such violence is represented—including metaphors of/for indigeneity—all weigh against simplified 'culturalist' readings of evidence from 'expert' and/or 'native' informants. The assurance of reliability sought (or offered) through the 'native informant' implies notions of culture and experience as unified, stable and uncontested, readily able to be transposed into representation. Literature, however, foregrounds *acts* of imaginative (cultural) translation and transformation.

Culture, in all its permutations of meaning, is about sustaining collective identification. The works of Māori and Pacific Island women writers, in their treatment of gender and sexual violence, point both to the stakes in collective

cultural identification (as Māori, or Samoan, or Solomon Islander etc), and to contestation as integral to cultural life. They emphasise the importance of recognising culture as a *process* of internal as well as inter-cultural power dynamics and inequalities, of argument and negotiations. Making their own critical interventions into vexed questions of culture and the politics of cultural representation, Māori and Pacific Island women writers acknowledge the reality of gender and sexual violence in the lives of girls and women, while complicating generalisations or stereotypes about their cultures. In writing about—against—gender and sexual violence, they enact their own responses to the vital question, ‘Who speaks for culture?’ (Merry, cited in Jolly, ‘When She Cries Oceans’ 359). When writers give expression to girls’ and women’s experiences and perspectives, they challenge or even subvert hegemonic narratives of tradition and the structures of authority in which they are founded—conservative power structures and hierarchies that preserve male privilege in the name of a ‘reified concept of culture’ (Jolly, ‘When She Cries Oceans’ 359). Yet in most cases they do not (freely or willingly) dissociate from their cultures; insisting on continued cultural identification, they implicitly restore the dimension of contestation that animates culture as a dynamic and non-totalisable process. Further, they expose and explore culture’s dynamism by articulating culture as the lived texture of *everyday* problems, experiences, and relationships. As Judith Raiskin argues, literary works ‘often offer the most nuanced cultural understandings, enriching and complicating ethnographic representations’ not least because their formal structures can ‘provide richly textured analyses of cultural fragmentation and creative responses to rapidly changing cultural environments’ (Raiskin 20). Women’s writing about gender violence complicates a subject-object relation in representation that risks casting girls and women as helpless victims of the reader/spectator gaze as much as of the violence depicted. If policy discourse tends to refer to ‘women’ or ‘they,’ literary works are more likely to refer to ‘I,’ ‘we’ or ‘she.’ Women’s literary treatment of gender violence restores agency to girls and women who face violence by employing literary strategies, including perspective and voice, to complicate or even supersede mere ‘victim’ status.

Literary agency against gender violence is enacted in poetry or fiction that voices protest. Tongan poet Konai Helu Thaman’s ‘My Blood’ (1974), addressed to a ‘brother-in-arms’ in the struggle against colonial oppression, protests against male political and social privilege. The first stanza begins: ‘You tell me that I’ve been “exploited” / And that I must rebel NOW’; but the poem progresses through the myriad ways in which the speaker sees her ‘brother’ as sharing more in common with the oppressor than with her. Rejecting his masculinist rhetoric of political liberation, the final stanza points to gender as the unacknowledged basis of ongoing inequality:

My problem is that I

Have been betrayed and trampled on
By my own blood. (6)

The imagery of violence to express the 'problem'—as having been 'trampled on / By my own blood' (where 'blood' signifies violence as well as connection)—is more chillingly literal in Grace Mera Molisa's poem 'Delightful Acquiescence' which suggests, at the thematic level, little opportunity for women's social or political agency: 'Any woman / showing promise / is clouted / into acquiescence' (*Black Stone II* 24). Male privilege within the domestic sphere is protested in July Sipolo's 'A Man's World' (*Civilised Girl*). The poem recounts everyday examples of girls and women exploited by male relatives who not only enjoy greater rights but also exert authority over sisters and wives. It begins with the child's perception of injustice: 'My brother ... / ... can say what he likes whenever he likes / I must keep quiet'. It progresses through further inequalities to those that beset adult sisters: 'Carry out my love affairs behind his back / Custom allows him to thrash both of us if caught' (10). However, the significance of women's literary treatments of gender violence lies precisely in the gap between such thematic reference to violence and disempowerment, and the agency implied in the very act of articulating their struggles. Calling on the work of Elaine Scarry, Otto Heim notes that 'the recovery of language... plays a crucial role in the process of survival. The struggle against pain begins with an attempt to verbalise it... The act of rebuilding a shattered world begins with the recovery of a voice, which ... enables us to reconnect ourselves to the collectively shared realm of a social world' (Heim 19). Although Heim, like Scarry, is concerned with the physical pain of the body—and gender and sexual violence certainly entail such pain—I argue that the role of language and (re)articulation to a social world are just as crucial in reclaiming agency in the context of the psychological and emotional pain that gender and sexual violence inflict.⁶

Domestic or familial violence is enabled by isolation, while such violence isolates its victims, redoubling the importance of healing social bonds. Indeed, isolation may be a woman's experience within the family setting itself. Sipolo's 'Wife Bashing' opens with 'Sister, I've come to you with my black eye and bruises' and subsequent stanzas present replies from family who refuse to become involved; her father directly expresses patriarchal complicity: 'Go back to your husband, he owns you now'. A policeman casts the violence as 'a domestic affair'; and the pastor reminds her, 'the Bible says, "No divorce"'. The poem concludes with the woman resignedly declaring 'Hubby, I'm back I've brought back this battered body, /

⁶ In his study of violence and ethnicity in Māori writing, Heim's careful contrast of narrative techniques that achieve empathy with victims of violence as against those that enact complicity with its perpetrators, offers many salient insights for my own discussion. However, although he discusses writing by both men and women, neither 'gender violence' nor even 'gender' are specific terms of analysis in his work.

Battered face plus battered case I am the ball that players pass around / ... / Now I'm back / Have a ball' (*Praying Parents* 12-3). New Zealand-born Samoan poet Tusiata Avia's 'Nafanua's sister talks about the family' evokes the confusion of violence and abuse in the midst of otherwise 'normal' family life, contradictory experiences jumbled together in the mind of the speaker, echoed in the continuous, long line layout on the page, all in lower-case letters, as she recalls:

if anyone asks me i can't explain / chuck your washing in / i was the
one in the family who got picked on / the spoiled one / the pretty one
/ everyday i got a custard square chips and a Sally Lunn / he used to
body-slam me into the floor / threaten me with knives / call me names
/ i used to scream at my mother / ... they say uncle pe was grooming /
grooming / around / in / appropriate / not ok... (*Bloodclot* 44)

These poems express gendered experiences of violence and abuse while also evoking the breakdown of language that marks pain and trauma. As Heim argues, again invoking Scarry, 'The closest language can get to a representation of pain ... is an enactment of its own breakdown' (19). A dramatic breakdown of linguistic form is seen in Avia's 'Demonstration (*Fale Aitu*). The speaker's controlled and rational (rationalising) discourse as an anti-rape demonstrator collapses as she finally acknowledges the pain of her own rape experience. The poem concludes with her insistence, 'IT WAS NOT MY FAULT IT WAS RAPE', running together into a howl of anger and pain: 'ITWASNOTMYFAULTITWASRAPEITWASNOTMYFAULTITWASRAPE...' (65). The enactment of breakdown in poetry, however, both attests to the pain of violence or abuse, and also marks the agency of the poetic voice. It speaks through degrees of inarticulacy to affirm the 'victim's' agency, exercising mastery over pain and victimhood through its effective poetic expression—the agency of the empathetic poet.

Contrasting the breakdown of language in depicting gender and sexual violence, Avia's 'Shower' (*Wild Dogs* 22-3) acknowledges the 'private' spaces in which gender and sexual violence are often experienced (and hidden), but expresses agency and control over an experience of vulnerability through images and metaphors that liken bruises to flowers, and recasting the scene of violence through an aesthetic eye. Rather than minimising the pain and harm of violence, though, the imagery jars with the subject matter, echoing how the violence itself jars with the ostensibly safe space of the home and intimate relationship. However, literary agency over gender violence may also take the form of not representing the violence at all, but instead depicting the emotional and psychological toll it takes, in anticipation or aftermath. Similarly, emphasising empathy with the victim rather than focalising through, and risking narrative complicity with, the perpetrator (cf. Heim 17), offers a further response to Jolly's

concern to bear witness to gender violence without succumbing to “‘pornography” in representation’ (‘When She Cries Oceans’ 343).

These more empathetic strategies are adopted in short stories by Māori writers Patricia Grace and J. C. Sturm. Although some acts of violence are depicted, the emphasis is on the emotional impact, and on its effects. Grace’s ‘The Geranium’ (*Electric City*) is focalised through Marney, at home with the baby after her husband Bob has gone to work. The narrative generates tension through the minute detail of her daily housework, and the detailed account of stories in the newspaper, as though occupying her mind with anything to ward off her anxiety. A virtual prisoner in her home, she wears a cardigan to hide her bruises from visitors. When Bob returns, his aggressive questioning unbalances her in her attempts to recount the day’s activities. Her language becomes increasingly halting, marked by ellipses. He twists her words, while ‘His grip tightened even more on her arm, ... beginning to twist’ (22). Although ‘[h]er arm hurt’, the psychological and emotional violence is encapsulated in Bob’s order that she throw out the geranium the visitors had brought her, that she destroy that small gift of beauty, and signifier of social contact. While ‘The Geranium’ focuses on the role of isolation in the experience of gendered domestic violence, Grace reveals the importance of ‘witness’ for survival in the episodic story ‘Valley’ (*Waiariki*), narrated by a teacher through a primary school year. She sees a small boy, Hiriwa, make a detailed model of a clay insect, then sees ‘his arm raised and his fist clenched. His thin arm, with the small fingers curled, like a daisy stem with its flower closed after sundown. The fist came down three times on the carefully modelled insect’ (56). Some weeks later, the teacher sees Hiriwa’s father at the woodchopping competition, ‘Unsmiling. Heavy in build and mood. Blunt fingered hands gripping the slim handled axe’ (63). The mood, actions and imagery suggest what the narrative does not spell out. Weeks later again, Hiriwa makes a gingerbread man, then writes a story: ‘The gingerbread man is lost and I am lost too’ (71). The teacher notices that one side of his face is heavy with bruising. Hiriwa’s mother comes to the school and tells the teacher, ‘We are going away, Hiriwa and I. We need to go, there is nothing left for us to do’ (71). As Heim notes, ‘Grace’s sensitive attitude’ in the story’s narrative strategy ‘focuses on promoting empathy with the victims of violence’ (30), rather than on the perpetrators or acts of violence themselves, or turning violence into a ‘cause.’

Heim observes that Grace’s writing generally refrains from concentrating on conflict and social tension—‘this aspect of Māori life’ (30), as he phrases it. His comment points to another strategy Grace and Sturm use to avoid “‘pornography” in representation’; that is, a focus on ethnicity, which risks suggesting that gender violence is a *specifically* Māori or Pacific Island problem. As Jolly argues, it is important ‘stress the universality of gender violence’ (‘When She Cries Oceans’ 343). Thus, Marney and Bob in Grace’s ‘The Geranium’ are not marked, by name

or any other detail in the story, as being Māori. Similarly, in J. C. Sturm's story 'One Thousand and One Nights' (1983) the characters are unnamed. The story's tone, hovering between realism and fantasy, is ominous. Details of a mother's domestic life suggest an almost overwrought determination to maintain the fantasy world of play, as though warding off some unbearable reality. The chill tone is exacerbated by imagery of creeping coldness outside, as the time approaches for 'Daddy' to return home. Belying the homely narrative discourse that verges on baby-talk between 'Mummy' and the children, the atmosphere becomes increasingly threatening, her reassurances to her children about Daddy's late return sounding hollow. She is haunted by a previous time when he had terrified the children by appearing at the window, 'a terrible dead white face with everything dragged down ... pressing to reach them through the glass' (13), before entering and laughing. Her nervousness about his return is suggested in her distracted attempts to read, her decision not to have a bath, because 'a bath wasn't a good place to be caught in' (14); and yet 'she didn't want to go to bed in case it happened again' (14). 'It' is not specified. As time passes, the house seems to close in on her, her options all point to danger, and eventually she goes to bed. Later feeling 'the footsteps thudding through her sleep' (15), she gets out of bed and hides, but the door swings open and there is 'the face at the window, dead white and terrible and all dragged down, pressing to reach her and *there wasn't any glass*' (15; emphasis in original). Her own screaming wakes her up, and she hears the footsteps again. The story evokes entrapment in a repeated cycle of events, depicting not physical violence, but the terror of anticipation and repetition.⁷

Sexual violence similarly depends on isolating its victims from sources of protection or support, while the violence further entrenches that isolation. A victim of sexual violence faces the desolate effect of her mother's denial in Tusiata Avia's 'Tableau' (2016). Having disclosed abuse, the speaker describes her mother as wearing 'A smile like a terrible accident in a quiet street', while her verbal response is '*That never happened*' (19; emphasis in original). The victim finally regathers her courage to insist '*It happened. And you did nothing*' (19; emphasis in original). 'Tableau' suggests that family does not necessarily mean security, and that girls and women can be at least as vulnerable at home as in more recognised 'risk' environments. Māori writer Ngahua Te Awekotuku's story, 'Tahuri: the Runaway' (1989) is set in a dangerous world of sexual exploitation and violence, both in homes and on the streets. Thirteen-year-old Tahuri runs away from a violent home with a friend Faye, whose own sexual abuse Tahuri naïvely interprets as Faye's sexual sophistication. They find themselves among sexually aggressive men, and while Faye decides to 'consent' to sex for money, Tahuri is

⁷ Typically understated, Grace's story, 'Until We Meet Again' (2006) reveals an instance of agency in direct action against the perpetrator of violence. Seeing a teenage girl being steered through a crowd by an older man, a woman discloses to the narrator her experience of sexual abuse by her stepfather, and her eventual reprisal.

betrayed by a cousin, raped and beaten by his associates. However, when the girls are tracked down by a policeman, the story suggests their possible futures in ominous tones. He brings them to 'a gaunt, grey stone building, very badly lit. A blue-lettered sign glowed glumly above the door', and he gestures at 'the weeping concrete steps', inviting them to enter (52). Presumably the police station, the imagery aligns the building with the sleazy boarding houses and run-down, dirty flats the girls had found themselves in before. Yet being returned home offers no safety.

Literary treatments of sexual violence suggest that the risk posed to girls and women is underpinned by the social and familial structures of patriarchal authority comprising hybridised 'traditional,' colonial, and Christian influences. In Samoan writer Sia Figiel's *Where We Once Belonged* (1996), the thirteen-year-old protagonist Alofa presents an account of Samoan village life that focuses on relationships between girls and women under the constant shadow of male authority and disciplinary figures—parents, teachers, chiefs, ministers. Alofa (her name means 'love') recounts that 'Being beaten up is alofa—love. Real love. Real love is when children are beaten up by their parents... This is in the Bible. This, too, is written in the earth of Malaefou' (219). Girls' and women's appropriate gender comportment is harshly policed by these authority figures, including the women who uphold the patriarchal order. In a chapter called 'Girl Lessons', Alofa offers an account of demands, proscriptions and limits through which girls are gendered: 'We were taught to be meek. / We were taught to be humble' (137). The chapter culminates in such commands as 'Never wear anything exposing your knees. / ... / Never wear high heels. / Never wear make-up. / Never go to church without a hat. / Never go bra-less to church...' (138), revealing the emphasis on policing girls' embodiment and sexuality, insisting on virtue and modesty. Similarly, Tusiata Avia's (2004) 'Fings da kirls should know' is a list of proscriptions issued to girls, more explicitly presented in Samoan-accented English, in the voice of a mother or grandmother: 'Don hang your panty outside. / ... / Don wear your hair out. / Don show your shoulder... / Don swim on Sunday. / Don play on da Sunday. / Better you don do nuffing on da Sunday...' (41). The concern for modesty and observing the Sabbath extends to explicit instructions for sexual purity: 'Don make da frien wif da boy. / Don make da bad fing wif da boy' (41). Although Avia evinces some humour in her use of voice, the ostensible purpose—more explicit in Alofa's narrative voice in Figiel's work—is protest against the restrictions placed on girls' bodies and sexualities. Insisting that "I" is always "we" (Figiel, *Where We Once Belonged* 135), an implication of communal care and responsibility, Alofa declares that 'Nothing was witnessed alone. Nothing was witnessed in the "I" form—nothing but penises and ghosts' (133), associating sexual encounters with men with isolation and danger. However, if the rationale for these restrictions is to ensure girls' physical and sexual 'safety', both Figiel and

Avia expose betrayal of that implicit promise by hypocritical male familial and community authority figures who sexually exploit and abuse girls and women.

Such betrayal is poignantly evoked in Avia's 'O le pi tautau' (2004), whose understated voice emphasises the perspective and experience of a child. Each stanza begins with a letter, each standing for some aspect of the child's everyday family and village life. While some evince a world governed by moral judgment—'S is for Slut / I know what it means / it means pa'umuku / like my mother' and 'T is for teine lelei / good girl / and T is for teine leaga / bad girl' (12)—others disclose the child's sexual abuse: 'M is for moe kolo [molester] / who slips his hard hand under my lavalava' (11). Subsequent stanzas include brief references to her dealing with the painful effects of the abuse amid family 'kilikiti' games at the park (13). The girl is consistently surrounded by others, but always alone in her abuse, subject both to the violation and to the ostensible code of sexual virtue that denies her experience. In Figiel's *Where We Once Belonged*, Lili is raped by her father (64), and Alofa's mother had become pregnant, as a young girl, to Alofa's father in the context of one of his many extra-marital affairs: 'This was the curse of girls. Girls would grow up and continue the cycle of being seduced by middle-aged men. Girls would grow up to shame their 'aiga [family] ...' (104). Girls thus bear the consequences—shame, pregnancy, beatings—for the very abuse they suffer. Alofa is severely beaten by her father, the village disciplinarian, after she witnessed his extra-marital tryst with the respectable school teacher, Mrs Samasoni (215-6).⁸

Avia's and Figiel's works reveal gendered and sexual bodies and subjectivities of girls and women as defined and policed within a reactionary patriarchy that seeks to (re)secure cultural stability in their own interests, cast as 'tradition.' However, Figiel's novel exposes and satirises the history of Euro-American constructions and exploitation of Samoan sexuality as much as it critiques the hypocrisy of contemporary Samoan 'traditional-Christian' patriarchy. There are references to Gauguin, Herman Melville, and Robert Louis Stevenson, but the most sustained satire is directed at anthropologists Margaret Mead and Derek Freeman, whose notorious debate about Samoan girls' sexuality is discussed by Alofa's class at school (204). Although the novel brings to light the violence and sexual abuse suffered by Samoan girls and women, and Figiel's work has been controversial in Samoa for exposing these realities—indeed for representing female embodiment and sexuality at all (cf. Figiel, 'Interview' 130-1)—she neither identifies violence and sexual abuse as intrinsic to, nor expresses disidentification from, Samoan culture.

⁸ See also Avia's 'Alofa' (*Wild Dogs* 62-3) for a similarly affecting account of this cycle, also playing on the confusing range of meanings and uses of the word/name, Alofa (love).

The narrative of *Where We Once Belonged* traces Alofa's self-formation through Samoan traditional stories as much as the daily events in her life. However, Figiel alters the stories, as Raiskin argues, 'to emphasize embedded female strength and authorize gender relations that value and protect girls and women', a strategy that 'need not be read as a threat to tradition but as an adaptation that may allow for the preservation of Samoan culture and of Samoans themselves' (19-20). This is preservation through active contestation, restoring the dynamic process of storymaking as cultural act rather than passive inheritance. Through Alofa—and other female protagonists, such as Alofa's aunt Siniva, ostracised for her counter-cultural flouting of Christian respectability, and the 'madness' of placing Samoan culture at the centre of her world—Figiel engages the question, 'who speaks for culture?' (Merry, cited in Jolly, 'When She Cries Oceans' 359). Like Tusiata Avia whose poetry is similarly steeped in Samoan cultural heritage, she refuses to allow culture to be 'spoken' only by reactionary patriarchal voices, but instead draws girls' and women's voices and experiences into its ongoing (re)production, affirming their agency in surviving, exposing and challenging gender and sexual violence.

Through reconceiving culture as dynamic process, Pacific Island and Māori women writers challenge gender violence without being subsumed by western universalising tendencies of either 'human rights' discourses or 'western' feminism. Konai Helu Thaman's collection *You the Choice of My Parents* opens with a poem called 'Women's Lib', which includes the lines, 'So come with me sister / Let's take a chance and make the break' (1), yet Thaman is reluctant to identify with western feminism. Marsh argues that 'to place the problematic label of "feminist" (with all its Western connotational baggage) on to [Pacific Island women] poets would be to theorize their voices away from culturally and historically specific contexts, to perpetuate (though under an arguably more "progressive" mask) the power structures that have rendered Pacific women invisible... Pacific Islands women poets have resisted such labeling' ('Theory' 339). Māori writers, too, refuse to identify culture as responsible for gender or sexual violence. Patricia Grace, J. C. Sturm and Ngahua Te Awekotuku do not foreground Māori ethnicity in exploring gender violence; instead, domestic and urban settings are more strongly identified with settler-hegemonic lifestyles that privilege nuclear families and suburbia, rendering women and girls vulnerable to isolation, or with no safe place or community away from violence and abuse when it does occur. These writers emphasise gendered power relations rather than ethnicity, and in the cases of the stories discussed here, 'Māori culture' is significant more in the breach than as a factor in the violence.

Māori and Pacific Island women writers' treatment of gender and sexual violence foregrounds girls' and women's survival, and both gender and cultural agency. Characters' voices bear witness to experiences of violence, while writers bear

witness to the value of their perspectives. Women characters, or poetic voices, are presented as subjects of their experiences, not simply as objects of violent systemic, symbolic or subjective power relations. In articulating those experiences, they challenge the ideologies and power structures perpetuated by rationalising violence and abuse as ‘culture/tradition,’ as ‘discipline,’ or as men’s ‘right’ over women. Using narrative strategies that avoid sensationalising the violence or objectifying the victims, they foreground victims’ experiences to evoke the emotional effects as much as, if not more than, physical violence itself. Literary techniques that convey a character’s experience of confusion, or trauma-induced psychic or linguistic breakdown, contribute to calling the reader into an empathetic relation with the victim. As literary characters or lyric voices exercise control over the chaos of their experience by putting it into words, organising it into narrative, they establish communication with the reader that breaks through the social isolation upon which violence so often depends, and to which it consigns its victims. In this sense, the characters/lyric voices exceed mere victim status, drawing the reader alongside to share witness to both violence and agency in survival. In short, at the same time they bear witness to girls’ and women’s experiences of gender and sexual violence, Māori and Pacific Island women writers denounce that violence while complicating cultural generalisations and stereotypes. They articulate culture *as* contestation through their very agency in literary expression and representation.

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