

‘For I have fed on foreign bread’: Modernism, Colonial Education and Fijian Literature

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Abstract:

This article examines the ways in which the Fijian authors Vanessa Griffen, Pio Manoa, and Subramani revised and reworked modernist texts in their construction of a local postcolonial literature. These writers were schooled in a colonial education system that was, by the 1950s and 60s, in ideological disarray, as the jingoistic, imperial texts of the English syllabus began to give way to the crisis and self-interrogation of literary modernism. The students who graduated from these classes went on to create a first wave of Fijian creative writing in English. As this article shows, Griffen, Manoa, and Subramani carried into their writing fragments and forms of the texts they had been required to learn by rote, and they refashioned these into new wholes. In their short stories and poems of the late 1960s and early 70s, these writers turned the literature of past imperial breakdown towards present and future needs, adapting fragmentary, perspectival and multivocal texts towards a postcolonial independence still riven by colonially introduced problems. Ultimately, we argue, the creation of this new literature denotes the failure of the education system to impress British superiority upon its colonial subjects, and the success of the subaltern in reclaiming the means of expression.

Keywords: Pacific Literature, Fiji, Modernism, Education, Oceania

In her short story ‘The Concert’ (1973), Vanessa Griffen dramatises an act of Indigenous resistance against colonial educational values in Fiji. Miss Renner, the foreign, white head teacher of a rural iTaukei (Indigenous Fijian) school, organises an excursion to Suva to hear an international quartet play, assuming that the works of famous

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European composers will make the schoolgirls more cultured and appreciative of good music. Miss Renner anticipates that they will be awestruck by the solemnity of the occasion and the beauty of the music, but once seated in the concert hall the girls are quickly bored, and when one mistakenly claps during a moment of quiet, they are overcome with laughter. Miss Renner is furious, and on the bus journey home the uncomfortable silence is broken only when the girls begin to sing. The harmony between the classical concert and the girls' songs should have enabled an epiphany for Miss Renner, a moment in which the teacher finally realises the value and beauty of local art forms. Yet the woman who tried to sow roses and chrysanthemums in the place of Fijian plants fails to see the worth before her: '[i]t was only when they were silent that Miss Renner realised that their singing was beautiful. But then, she thought, again with the same feeling of regret, they're only Fijian songs'.¹

In this short piece, Griffen evokes the educational system's insistence on the intrinsic worth of European art forms, and its corresponding dismissal of Indigenous modes. Importantly, however, the girls are not left passive in the face of this devaluing: although they are unable to extricate themselves from the school system, their laughter is an active, instinctive rebellion against colonial value systems and hierarchies. The girls' mirth not only exposes the fragility of the education system's attempts to control cultural capital, it reveals the stagnation of those, like Miss Renner, whose aesthetic judgements are entrenched in the ideology of empire. That the girls should be unmoved by their first encounter with an unfamiliar form is no embarrassment; that their teacher, resident in Fiji, should every day refuse to be moved by the forms in front of her most certainly is. Their teacher is revealed to be an educator who cannot learn, and any intellectual or cultural poverty is seen to be her own.

The power dynamic depicted in Griffen's story joins it to the accounts given by postcolonial scholars and writers across the former British Empire, who have firmly and repeatedly established the complicity of the colonial education system with the imperial project. From Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's reflections on the 'slave mentality' of the Kenyan classroom, to C. L. R. James on the promotion of Britain as the 'source of all light and leading' in Trinidadian schools,² postcolonial writers have described situations in which colonised students were expected to learn and accept British cultural supremacy. Gauri Viswanathan has argued that English literature frequently served as a humane mask on the brutal face of this imperial system, and she cites a Council of Education official in colonial India, who remarked: '[the

Indians] daily converse with the best and wisest Englishmen through the medium of their works, and form ideas, perhaps higher ideas, of our nation than if their intercourse with it were of a more personal kind'.³ In classrooms across the world, students were presented with depictions of Britain that either elided the material realities of exploitative imperial relations, or transfigured them into utopian images of honour, sacrifice, reciprocity, and friendship. Altogether, as Robert Morgan has argued, it is impossible to 'divorce the rise of an aesthetically and racially organised English studies' – the study of the British literary canon – 'from the zenith of British imperialism, whose school editions of "Standard Authors" served as its literary armature'.⁴

Colonised from 1874 to 1970, Fiji was subject to this ideological system for much of the twentieth century. As the prominent Fijian historian Brij Lal remarks, '[w]e were taught to learn, not to question, the values of colonial education'.⁵ Satendra Nandan, a poet and former politician, expands on the distortions this educational experience introduced: 'I've enormous gaps in my knowledge about my country: Fiji, according to our expatriate and local teachers, had neither history nor geography. And as for culture: we were told "agriculture" was the most we could aspire to'.⁶ Yet, although students were taught to respect British norms and values above their own, the education system, throughout the colonial period in Fiji and particularly in its final decades, was less systematised than might be expected from a principle instrument of imperial subjection.

Pulled from the start between differing aims and agendas, and further complicated by the shift from British colonial to New Zealand national examination systems, Fijian education was by the 1950s a contradictory affair. Cracks were appearing in the 'literary armature' across the Empire, and what we now see as modernist texts began to appear alongside the canonical works of the English literature curriculum. The novels of, say, Joseph Conrad, or the poetry of T. S. Eliot would perhaps have been presented as part of a great and unbroken tradition, but these texts also questioned the ideologies of progress and civilisation upon which the system as a whole was predicated. Colonised children continued to be taught to accept cultural standards and hierarchies justifying British rule, and as rote learning continued to be a dominant pedagogic technique, students were required to internalise imperial texts and then reproduce them to the letter upon examination. Yet, as modernist texts began to feature on syllabi, the texts students were asked to learn by heart were frequently unstable, and facilitated their own unravelling. It is in this general milieu that the first generation of Fijian creative writers in

English were schooled, and against which, emerging in the late 1960s and 1970s, they reacted.

Indigenous Fijians were publishing literature for at least a century before this period across a range of genres, from *itukuni* (legends) and *itukutuku* (historical and autobiographical accounts or anecdotes), to religious writings and translations of such colonial English fiction as *The Jungle Book* and *King Solomon's Mines*.⁷ However, this writing was primarily in Fijian, and while there is interesting work to be done in tracing the relationship between earlier Indigenous literature and the writing that appeared in the years around independence, the latter remains clearly distinct. Most obviously, it is written for the most part in English, making it accessible to non-Indigenous readers in and outside of Fiji. Secondly, its writers are fully cognisant of the modes and genres of the English literary tradition, and while they continually bend and resist formal conventions, they also produce texts generally identifiable along received generic lines, from the short story to the novella, the lyric poem to the three-act play. Thirdly, this literature was self-consciously conceived as part of a decolonising movement, driven by a group of committed writers who were connected with similar movements in the Pacific and beyond. These distinctions broadly sustain the received critical framing of the writing of the late 1960s and 1970s as a 'first wave' of Fijian creative writing in English.

In his landmark account of the development of Pacific literature, Subramani describes this period as 'a stage of reaction and confrontation', with the education system 'justly criticised by writers for paying scant attention to indigenous cultures'.⁸ Yet this confrontation involved the cooption of tools and premises presented by the system itself. Each of the distinguishing characteristics noted above—the use of the English language by writers conversant with the formal conventions of the English literary tradition, and the conception of literary movements as temporally and geographically bounded, as well as connected to their social contexts—are directly related to these writers' experience of English literature as a discipline. As oppressive as this system may have been, Subramani acknowledges that its 'negative forces' also carried 'generative elements' which could give 'significant impetus to literary development'.⁹ In this article, we argue that modernism contributed generative elements that were especially potent in the postcolonial context.

Analysing the early work of Griffen, Pio Manoa and Subramani, writers who reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of Fiji's modernity, we find that the first wave constructed a modern literature of their own by innovatively transposing and transforming a range of modernist

techniques from the authors they encountered at school and through school connections. Subramani carries echoes of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* into his story 'Tropical Traumas'. Griffen adapts Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, turning his techniques of repetition and reiteration to Fijian, feminist ends. Manoa introduces phrases from Eliot's *The Waste Land* and 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' into his verse, presenting what Stephen Romer has recently termed, in reference to Eliot's own practices, 'mandatory allusion, in the sense that it cannot be missed'.¹⁰ Adapting these texts and techniques, Griffen, Manoa and Subramani insert their works into the Anglo-American modernist tradition, which was from the start characterised by intertextuality, citation and allusion. Yet where this may seem to suggest a capitulation to imposed literary norms, the Fijian authors also transpose a key element of modernist allusiveness – self-reflexivity – to ensure that their experiments in Fijian literature face present conditions and future needs, and do not bow to any past order. By including fragments of a foreign literature within their writings, they reflect the culturally overdetermined character of Fijian modernity, and, reassembling these fragments in newly integrated forms, work towards the creation of new aesthetic wholes that do not seek to repress the composite nature of their construction.

Quotation, repetition and reiteration: these techniques of first-wave Fijian literature were inspired by modernist techniques of bricolage and collage, but they were also underpinned by the rote learning of the colonial Fijian classroom. As Lal's comment above indicates, this generation of Fijian students 'were taught to learn, not to question, the values of colonial education'; the Fijian literary responses to Anglo-American modernism might, therefore, seem to indicate the victory of colonial teaching methods. However, while the writers we discuss here evidently retained long passages of the literature they studied and read, and recalled them directly and indirectly in their works, they did so with self-affirmation and autonomy, repurposing these terms towards the social needs of their decolonising age. Ultimately, their writing denotes the failure of the education system to impress British superiority upon its colonial subjects, and the success of the subaltern in reclaiming the means of expression. To identify modernism as one of the tools of this reclamation is not to deny that it was also heavily implicated in the mechanisms of cultural disempowerment that Fijian authors set out to resist. However, recognising the unsettling if as-yet-marginal place of modernist literature *within* the colonial education

system – as something oppositional and complicating, ambiguous and self-critiquing – helps to avoid critical oversimplifications of the kind that Fijian literature itself defies, and to appreciate better the agency with which Fijian writers subverted the system that worked to condition them as colonial subjects.

Schooling in Colonial Fiji

The Indigenous education systems developed by Fijians over several thousand years were first disrupted by what the British would see as ‘formal’ education in 1835, through the educational and evangelising endeavours of Methodist missionaries.¹¹ In 1874, the self-styled Tui Viti (King of Fiji), Ratu Cakobau, ceded the islands to the British Crown, but it was not until the early twentieth century that the colonial government involved itself in the colony’s educational provisions. By the 1940s primary education had progressed little: as the Stephens Report (1944) expostulated, schools were inadequate in number, poorly administered, under-financed, over-crowded, lacking facilities, and beset with gender and racial issues. The general quality of education was poor, with few pupils progressing beyond class four.¹² This report, along with the Lewis-Jones Report that followed for secondary education in 1955, was not without effect: by 1960 most children were completing at least six years of primary schooling,¹³ with 5,439 students enrolled in secondary schools – a huge increase from 530 in 1946.¹⁴ But the underlying problems remained, with resources especially limited in the interior and on remote islands.¹⁵

When the passage of years means that lesson plans and textbooks have been lost, examining board records offer useful indications of classroom content. For much of the twentieth century, students who progressed to post-primary schooling sat the Cambridge Oversea School Certificate (known in Fiji by its older name of ‘Senior Cambridge’). As the ‘semi-official examining board of the colonies’,¹⁶ the Cambridge Examinations Syndicate had a wide reach, and was inextricable from the twentieth century’s changing ideologies of Empire. Although localisation of material, particularly from the 1950s, diversified the content of syllabi, the focus of the examinations was usually on Britain or the larger colonial territories, with the result that, as Nandan recalls, ‘the Senior Cambridge exam taught me a lot about the number of sheep a New Zealand farmer had or the height of the tallest mountain in the British Isles but nothing about how many tonnes of sugarcane my father harvested every year’.¹⁷ Literature classes were equally uninterested in local realities, as Subramani notes:

'[n]o concessions were made to the foreign learners; we were uniformly compelled to grapple with the complexities of language and thought of such diverse authors as Jane Austen, Dickens and Hardy; Shakespeare, Sheridan and Goldsmith; Gray, Wordsworth and Coleridge'.¹⁸

As Subramani was confronting the Cambridge at Suva Grammar, other schools were moving towards the New Zealand School Certificate. Despite the fact that the Cambridge exams contained Hindi options and what the Stephens Report referred to as 'other subjects of local importance', the Report had advised schools in Fiji to focus on the New Zealand University Entrance examination, rather than Cambridge's Oversea School Certificate, as students who did progress to university typically went to New Zealand.¹⁹ The movement was gradual, but by the late 1960s, the majority of Fijian schools sat the New Zealand School Certificate, which proved indifferent to local requirements. When the Fiji authorities broached adaptation to those responsible for public examinations in New Zealand, they were told that the examinations were designed specifically for New Zealand children, and neither Fijian nor Hindi examinations would be offered, nor would island content be included.²⁰ This is despite the fact that a scheme of co-operation had been launched between New Zealand and Fiji in 1924, which enabled teachers from New Zealand to work in Fiji while retaining superannuation benefits. The growing presence of these teachers meant that literature was taught in ways strongly influenced by the New Zealand system,²¹ and under either examining body, the subject remained paramount. Until 1951 for Cambridge, and 1968 for the New Zealand School Certificate, an overall pass could not be achieved without a pass in English. When asked as a teenager if his parents were illiterate, Nandan would reply in the affirmative, because although they could read Hindi, their inability to read and write in English overshadowed all other linguistic or literary competencies.²²

Vijay Mishra, a prominent Fijian literary scholar has argued that the cultural imperialism enacted through the teaching of English literature in Fiji was augmented by the exclusion of 'the great and complex texts of the metropolitan centre', particularly 'those high modern texts that were experimental and that arose from a desire to foreground the uncanonised'.²³ Certainly the English syllabus for both the Cambridge School Certificate and the New Zealand School Certificate facilitated a recognisably canonical engagement with the British 'classics'. The former offered the familiar fare of William Shakespeare, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Geoffrey Chaucer, George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Jane Austen, William

Wordsworth and Alfred Tennyson, with the occasional inclusion of later writers such as Conrad, H. G. Wells, George Orwell, and John Buchan.

The New Zealand School Certificate was substantially similar in its design, testing composition, comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary, as well as poetry, plays, fiction and non-fiction. However, while it also tended towards the canonical, it was not so exclusive, featuring popular writers such as H. Rider Haggard, Mark Twain, and Nevil Shute, as well as non-fiction authors such as Gerald Durrell, Anne Frank, Edmund Hillary, Mary Anne Barker, and Temple Sutherland. Poetry consisted of the expected John Milton, Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley, but also allowed the inclusion of the likes of W. B. Yeats, Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, W. H. Auden, and Wilfred Owen, while drama added Oliver Goldsmith, Sheridan, Oscar Wilde, and George Bernard Shaw to the ubiquitous Shakespeare. The New Zealand University Entrance exam was analogous in focus and scope, although it allowed for greater engagement with the modernists. The 1956 paper, for example, asked students to give 'a critical account of the writings (or of any one work, if you wish) by *any one* of the following twentieth century writers: Ernest Hemingway, T. S. Eliot, Christopher Fry, E. M. Forster, G. B. Shaw, Robert Graves, Katherine Mansfield, Frank Sargeson, Dan Davin, Dylan Thomas, Aldous Huxley, Graham Greene, Terence Rattigan'.²⁴

By the middle of the century, then, a number of modernist texts and writers were, at least on paper, available for Fijian syllabi, if schools and teachers chose to use them. Detailed records from the period are scarce, but anecdotal reports suggest that modernist literature was neither resolutely prescribed nor absolutely proscribed. Griffen, who took the New Zealand School Certificate, studied both Hemingway and Mansfield.²⁵ Nandan, who sat the Senior Cambridge, had a teacher from New Zealand, one Mr Joyce, who taught them *To the Lighthouse* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.²⁶ Mishra, the Division One winner of the Cambridge School Certificate in 1961, studied late Conrad for prose, and would later add verse by Auden, Eliot, e. e. cummings, and William Carlos Williams to his influential poetry anthology *Waves* (1975), which became the standard text for the Fiji Junior Literature syllabus.²⁷ Subramani, who also sat the Senior Cambridge, states that although he never formally studied the modernists at school, he read them himself and went on to teach modernist literature in Fiji.²⁸ Lal was a student in both Mishra's and Subramani's English classes, and vividly remembers their skill and passion, including Subramani's brilliant analysis of *Lord Jim* and the fact that he accompanied a class on 'The Love Song of

J. Alfred Prufrock' with a gramophone recording of Eliot's reading.²⁹ He captures the joy and empowerment his literature classes brought:

for all their cultural biases, the books opened new imaginative horizons for us, levelled hierarchy based on economic wealth and social status, connected us to other worlds and pasts, awakened our imagination, emphasised our common humanity across boundaries of culture and race, and sowed the seeds of future possibilities.³⁰

It would, therefore, not be quite correct to say that the education system denied colonial students exposure to European and American modernism, as limited as this may have been, nor to assume that the limiting of modernist texts was a calculated strategy for inhibiting colonial growth: students taking the Cambridge General Certificate of Education ('O' Level) in England during the same period had a syllabus practically identical in its engagement with modernism. The syllabus choices made by teachers and ministers in Fiji would have been influenced by their own colonial schooling, and may well have privileged the canonical, but if modernism was marginal in the colony at this level, it was not much more central to the curriculum back in the metropole. Altogether, as was the case across much of the Empire, the Fijian education system and its syllabi were in transition. The strict centralisation of the Senior Cambridge curriculum was slipping towards more localised content, if not yet in literature, and English was beginning to open slowly towards writers now considered modernist. The New Zealand School Certificate, by contrast, was patently uninterested in Pacific Island contexts, but more readily included modernist texts. In either system, the sovereign self-assurance of English literature as a discipline was being unsettled by the experiments and provisions of an as-yet-vaguely defined modernism. The generation of students who went on to identify as the first wave of Fijian writers experienced a subject in crisis, within a system under flux.

Partial, riven and decentred, the fracturing of both the colonial education system and English literature as a discipline reflects the broader crisis of European modernity in the first half of the twentieth century, as totalising claims of civilisation and progress were undermined by the brute realities of imperial conflict and war. That European modernism emerged as the literary expression of this fragmenting modernity is a truism as old as the texts themselves. More recently, scholars such as Simon Gikandi, Abiola Irele, Jahan Ramazani and Laura Doyle have argued that this form of expression may have been grasped most readily in the colonised and decolonising

world, where the rupturing of traditions, the insufficiency of received and imposed discourses in accounting for lived realities, and the gap between incommensurate worldviews were at their most extreme and unavoidable.

Modernism arrived with the promise of rebellion, even revolution, against the fixed forms that had served to stabilise and universalise a particular, and particularly limited, ideology. As Gikandi points out, this rebellion was ‘directly connected to the operations of the English canon propagated by the colonial school and university as both sacred and inimitable’.³¹ Under the imperial education system, canonical literature was taught according to the basic premise that it ‘represented the values of an innate Englishness’ – to be emulated but never fully attained by the ‘lesser subjects of Empire’.³² When Conrad, Mansfield, Yeats, Eliot, and James Joyce began to appear in colonial curricula, they were no doubt presented in much the same way. Yet with their marginal and often colonial backgrounds, their ironic and ambiguous treatment of imperial claims to civilisation, and their disruption of the staid conventions of Victorian literary form, these writers undermined the ideologies they were meant to serve. In the colonial classroom, in Fiji as elsewhere, the seeds of literary decolonisation were sown. From here, as Gikandi puts it, ‘postcolonial creativity bloomed’.³³

‘Constructing Itself in Unison and Collapsing into Fragments’: Mastering Modernism

The creativity facilitated, but never dominated, by Anglo-American modernism often drew particular motifs and techniques from key works into complex expressions of Fiji’s modernity. Griffen’s ‘Marama’ (1973), which translates as ‘woman’, is one such example, offering a Fijian, feminist reworking of Hemingway’s Cuban novella *The Old Man and the Sea*, which Griffen studied at school. In Griffen’s reimagining, the dignity, patience and humility of Hemingway’s old man is shared by Griffen’s unnamed old woman, and like Santiago, she represents a struggle with nature and the painful supplanting of traditional skills. But in response to Hemingway’s masculinist epic of an idealised man driven to fish too far out and catch a fish too large, Griffen presents the daily, common struggle of marama – every Fijian woman fishing on every sea wall or reef edge – performing a traditional female task made harder by urbanisation, pollution and overfishing.

The woman sits with ‘endless, timeless patience’ amidst signifiers of permanence and change: the reef, water, and sea birds, as well as

ferries, cars, and foreigners.³⁴ Griffen's piece contains little extraneous detail and limited development of plot; it is, like Hemingway's short fiction, invested in presenting a sharp image of a particular moment in time, unburdened by background or circumstances, always in medias res. Mirroring the protagonist's care as she sits and silently fishes, the story quietly, and with deceptive simplicity, stays with the old woman, watching her watch the reef. The dramatic loss suffered by the old man in Hemingway's story is contrasted with the woman's quiet failure, as Santiago's enormous fish is replaced by her little ones; and while his defeat means that he will die with noble tragedy, her inability to catch enough food for her family forces her to capitulate to a cash economy, and use the little money she has to purchase, rather than provide, food.

Within Griffen's domestic adaptation of Hemingway, Santiago's devoted acolyte is replaced by a hungry grandchild, and the Fijian woman's lonely struggle with nature is broken far more immediately by the problems of urbanised, commercial modernity, symbolised by passing cars, streetlights, a shop and its canned provisions. These trappings of a changing world are joined by its beneficiaries: a passing European couple, who represent colonial history and racial power imbalances. Their dog sniffs inquisitively at the woman's fish, but she curbs her desire to hit it when she sees the identity of his owners. The woman, until now so dignified and self-possessed, at once adopts a non-threatening mask: '[i]nstantly, a wide, shy, good-natured grin spread across her face'.³⁵ The Europeans and their pet move on, but they leave pestilence behind them—a swarm of flies over the fish. The sharks that surround and consume Santiago's fish become flies contaminating hers, as fearsome nature is replaced by the insidious contagion of domestic pests. The smaller scale of Griffen's story, with its hero who cannot go out to Santiago's fateful depths, undercuts Hemingway's tale to present the equally noble struggles of a woman and the everyday.

Fittingly, Griffen's measured reply to Hemingway draws too on his technique of repetition. The reiteration of words and phrases adds gravitas to Hemingway's works and characters, as the recurrence of clear, simple wording causes the text to mimic a circular movement around an implied truth. Take this instance from *The Old Man and the Sea*:

[Portuguese man'o'war] were the falsest thing in the sea and *the old man loved to see the big sea turtles eating them*. The turtles saw them, approached them from the front, then shut their eyes so they were completely carapaced and ate them filaments and all. *The old man loved to see the turtles*

*eat them and he loved to walk on them on the beach after a storm and hear them pop when he stepped on them with the horny soles of his feet. He loved green turtles and hawks-bills with their elegance and speed and their great value.*³⁶

Such repetition, sometimes exact, and sometimes with variation, is effective in creating intimacy and immediacy: it diminishes the sense of a retrospective ordering and sorting by a narrator, and gives the illusion of the old man's affections swelling with quiet passion as he reflects. The scene, and its emotions, are shown through a form of continuous present, which keeps the reader in step with the old man as he works his way through his thoughts. It also creates a form akin to a verbal cubism, which shows the emotion from various angles, and connects Hemingway with the experimental repetition of Gertrude Stein and Joyce.

It is through this register that Griffen situates her reworking of Hemingway's tale. Like Hemingway, she offers a series of repeated phrases and words, sometimes exact, and sometimes with variation. Within the story's concise 800 words, three times the woman spits on her bait, spins her line, and casts it out, and again and again the woman waits: 'she crouched down again, tucking her skirt about her, to wait'; '[s]he sat down to wait'; '[a] long interval of waiting passed'; '[t]he Fijian woman sat on'; '[a]gain, she crouched down to wait'. And so the story ends: 'the Fijian woman sat down to wait'.³⁷ Griffen extends Hemingway's technique to present an ongoing present that, despite the story's brevity, evokes vividly the sense of a day-long task and the patience that must go with it. Such recurrences connect both the man and the woman with the Sisyphean labour they value and endure: the endless repetition of fishing. And such recurrences point too to the infinite task of absorbing and speaking back to masculinist texts, to Western texts, and to classroom texts, and retelling them, rewriting them in a continuous present where repetition creates new forms.

Elsewhere, Fijian writers repeat and interpolate direct phrases from the modernists. In Manoa's first published poem, 'Recall' (1968), the poet sets out to recover a connection with the land he left to study in Australia. The poem's free verse begins boldly with a line from Eliot – 'Do I dare' – and, as in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', the repeated phrase opens into a series of self-interrogations:

Do I dare
dip my bread
in the old, old wine?

Do I dare
suck dewdrops
out of early dawn?³⁸

In Manoa's hands, the line becomes a provocation towards a first act of literary self-affirmation. The speaker responds to the challenges set by Eliot's poem, the education system that taught it, the colonial project as a whole and the independence drive opposing it, by repurposing an imposed language and using it to examine a native and distinctly uncolonised Fijian territory, a Fiji of Indigenous inheritance:

Do I dare sail
an ancient river
and draw my life
from my primal mother,

still shuffling down
from dark, dark hills
in her native summer? (11–17)

The triumph of this act of 'recall' in the creation of an Indigenous art form in English, with its implication that each interrogation of the speaker's daring is to be answered in the affirmative, is perhaps qualified by the melancholy cry that closes the poem:

For I have fed on foreign bread,
sipped foreign wine;
I have sailed a foreign river,
felt foreign earth:

I forget my mother...! (22–26)

Manoa identifies this feeling of cultural loss as an initial stage in the growth of Pacific poetry in his 1976 essay, 'Singing in their Genealogical Trees', where he relates it to the sense 'that schooling is an enforced process' that makes 'the captive *whiter*'.³⁹ Yet if the title of this early poem, 'Recall', can be read ironically to denote his recollection of particular lines memorised from English poetry – an act once compelled in the classroom – it also describes the way in which the poet writes his way back into the land as site and subject of postcolonial literary resistance.

While Eliot's text is undoubtedly part of the 'foreign' cultural estrangement Manoa describes, the refrain, 'Do I dare', is finally more enabling than it is for Eliot's hand-wringing Prufrock. As Manoa would observe in his 2010 essay, 'Retrospective', this 'successful' poem set the pattern for his 'subsequent effort and avocation' as poet.⁴⁰ Against all

of the 'various names' for the imperial project, 'Progress, Civilization, Religion, Science, Education, and the latest one, Development', Manoa works to reclaim the 'multivalent hinterland concept' of the vanua, the land, which for Fijians includes the surrounding waters. As Manoa explains, retaining the vanua as the site of postcolonial Fijian identity helps to sustain its social and sacred values of belonging, stability, and reciprocity, 'never really fully understood or appreciated in the process of subjugation or conversion'.⁴¹

In his 1983 poem, 'The Search', Manoa once again repurposes Eliot in his exploration of the meaning and value of the vanua under modernity, while again staging a coming-to-terms with the compromises and potentials of his mixed aesthetic and educational heritage. The 'empty bottles, sandwich papers, | Silk handkerchiefs, cardboard boxes, cigarette ends' washed from the 'Sweet Thames' of *The Waste Land* drift up on Manoa's Fijian 'sea dump beach': 'cellophane, plastic, | shoe heels, soles, | seeds, odds | without end'.⁴² Eliot's Fisher King may close with a mad mutter, but in repeating the 'fragments I have shored against my ruins' (430), Eliot sustains the figure of the great artist in control of his craft and material, at the head of contemporaneous conceptions of the English literary canon as an enduring and stabilising force. Manoa maintains a more playful commitment to the act of creation – 'I have gathered pieces | shored by other tides' (52–53) – punningly recycling Eliot's line towards Fiji's oceanic and postcolonial contexts. Neither the poem nor the land are fully sovereign, open as they are to the inflows brought by uneven global relations. Yet for Manoa's speaker, the perviousness of aesthetic and geographical borders does not preclude artistic production:

And I shall go down again
goaded by this faith
even if I know
I'm only a second comer[.] (54–57)

'[S]econd comer' is an apt phrase here, at once wryly self-disparaging, knowing in its extension of the Yeatsian images drifting by the repurposed flotsam of Eliot's verses, and mischievous in its invocation of the figure of the messianic poet. Accepting the foreign origins of the language and images that have washed up with Fijian modernity, the speaker determines to accept the integrity of the aesthetic moment staged in the poem, resolving to 'go down again' to the bordering shore – 'even if only to know | again that there | lies the pure gift' (59–61). This openness to the influx of a porous border is the final stage of postcolonial development in Manoa's schema of Pacific poetry.

‘The cultures have mixed’, writes Manoa, ‘to such an extent that there is no hope of ever going back to ancestral ways; the realistic attitude would now be of forging a new way of life, of creating a new organism, of creating a new whole [...] from both the old and the new’.⁴³

For Subramani, descended from Indian indentured labourers brought to Fiji by the British, and denied legal or ancestral land rights, ‘forging a new way of life’ remains a fundamental necessity. Mishra has argued that the violent and traumatic history of indenture scars and disfigures Subramani’s prose. For all their psychological complexity, says Mishra, Subramani’s characters regularly “translate” into standard English their inner-most feelings,⁴⁴ and from one perspective this may diminish the effectiveness with which the author conveys the complexity of Fijian modernity—for Mishra, Subramani remains ‘bonded to a kind of literary imprisonment which leads to a general mimicry of the colonizer’s discourses’.⁴⁵ Subramani’s work has taken a radically localising turn since the publication of Mishra’s essay, and his pioneering novels in Fiji Hindi, *Dauka Puraan* (2001) and *Fiji Maa* (2019), defy any charge of ‘linguistic slavery’. But even in his earlier, English-language stories, Subramani’s ‘mimicry’ appears more productive when viewed in relation to his modernist influences.

The short story ‘Tropical Traumas’ (1976) explores modern Fiji through the microcosm of a Fijian resort, in which the tensions and pressures troubling the decolonising country play out by the beach and the bar. Everyone at the holiday spot inhabits a space of difficult belonging: the iTaukei staff are not fully at home, as they struggle with ‘the contradictory emotions of playing the host, being apologetic, and the deep offense given by aliens who monopolised the luxury’ of the land.⁴⁶ The tourists, initially confident of the entitlements bought by their foreign currencies, descend ‘upon the resort like plunderers, invading the beach, the swimming pool, and the bures’ (23), but their confidence is gradually eroded as simmering tensions, born of colonially introduced problems, intrude upon their vacation. An Indo-Fijian woman taking a brief holiday from the restrictive cultural norms and expectations of her community is constantly unsettled by the Indo-Fijian narrator’s presence, while the narrator, seeking respite from his ‘deceitful existence’ in the civil service in Suva, observes the gatherings with subdued disquiet.

The tensions reach their peak when Felicity, a white New Zealand tourist, is sexually assaulted:

At first it was an insidious whisper. At the end of the week the news of the assault in the caves was splashed sensationally on the front page of

The Sun. In the corridors, behind the bars, the waiters discussed all the sordid details of the brutal orgy. There was an air of hushed expectancy when a taxi pulled in to take away Felicity's luggage. (27)

The narrator had observed Felicity previously, 'explaining in clipped monosyllables the virtues of abandoned ceremonies' to the iTaukei cruise organiser Meli (25), and a fellow guest described her interest in the 'primordial' as a '[p]hilosophy of the genitalia' (26). Felicity's pseudo-anthropological presumptions about cultural mores and traditions imposes a racist discourse of natural, organic sexuality on the iTaukei men, and they in turn—we are led to suppose—interpret her low-cut dresses and physical intimacies as promiscuity and permissiveness. The tourists, who had fled the 'disorders of temperate wastelands' (26), encounter the disorders and wasteland of modern Fiji, eventually causing the French-Canadian Pierre to despair: '[i]t never works, does it? [...] This bringing together of people. Fijians. Indians' (27). Pierre's elision of the agent of colonial dislocation—the British Empire, which brought Indians to Fiji often under deception or duress, and always on exploitative terms—is, of course, a telling indictment, but through this statement Subramani also presents Fiji's problems under modernity as both singular and universal: inextricable from global economies, its maladies mirror those of other modern cities, from Auckland to Vancouver.

Like the Fijian resort, Subramani's text is embedded in global flows of power. His story, like so much of his writing, exhibits the unease, the ambivalence, and the irony readily associated with major texts of European and Anglo-American modernism. The assault in the caves, the cultural confusions, the quests for authenticity, and the caesuras in signification all echo E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924). Forster claimed in a letter in 1934 that he had 'tried to show that India is an unexplainable muddle by introducing an unexplained muddle—Miss Quested's experience in the cave. When asked what happened there, I *don't know*'.⁴⁷ Perhaps Felicity's assault is all too real, or perhaps it is as indefinite as Adela Quested's, but if Adela was disoriented by a 'boum' in the Marabar caves, a sound that escapes definitive interpretation, for Subramani that disorienting sound is in continuous reverberation throughout Fiji.

This resistance of definite interpretation, or definite identity claims, is everywhere in Subramani, whose work continually expresses incommensurability, decentring, fragmentation, multiple realities, linguistic failures, partial translations—in other words, the quintessential features of modernist prose. Mishra's identification of

Subramani's 'intractable, deep-seated schizophrenia' may, therefore, be quite appropriate,⁴⁸ and is in fact pre-empted by Subramani's discussion of his early literary influences from school and home:

Suspended between two languages, writing will be a waiting dream, a secret pleasure, the most important of all work, though endlessly postponed, forever causing a nagging dissatisfaction, and in the meanwhile a huge monologue of swirling narratives made up of a multitude of dreams, memories, exiled texts, written and unwritten—Malayalee narratives broken by sleep, half-understood English prose, Hindi romances about feudal loyalty; none having any clear definition in my infatuated bookish mind—will be seeking articulation, a form and an ending, constructing itself in unison and collapsing into fragments.⁴⁹

What Mishra sees as unfortunate distance and fragmentation stemming from the loss of an authentic relation to a local language and literature appears from a modernist perspective as a skilful, artistic response to the polyvalence and overdetermination of Fijian modernity—a powerful distance and fragmentation arising from a complex relationship with multiple languages and worldviews.

'The Language We Regarded as Our Own': Writing Fijian Modernity

Writing in the 1990s, Mishra relates the 'linguistic slavery and conformism' of Indo-Fijian literature to the colonial education system, 'a cultural imperialism that triumphed in the colonies and was continued when a curriculum based upon Senior Cambridge was replaced by that of a New Zealand University Entrance'.⁵⁰ There is no question that the education system was from the start a major part of the British imperial project, in Fiji as elsewhere. With English literature in particular, rote learning practices—which required students to learn long passages by heart, and to reproduce them with acceptable paraphrase in order to pass examinations—epitomise a system imposing an alien value system and frame of reference upon students whose lived realities were elided from the texts they were made to learn.

It is also true that the first wave of Fijian creative writers in English, schooled in this system, demonstrate deep familiarity with English literature. Yet evidence of this influence in Fijian literature neither reduces the originality of its writers, nor undermines the agency with which they created a decolonising body of work. For

all their foreignness, the texts of the colonial system become these writers' to appropriate and to own, to use towards their own ends as they see fit. As Subramani says, the 'cultural norms' of the writers he studied 'we discarded or treated as new mythology. *The language we regarded as our own* and were naturally enchanted by the shapes and sounds of words. We imitated the styles and tones of Gray and Hardy, and capitalised and punctuated our compositions recklessly'.⁵¹ As ideologically problematic as the texts of the colonial education systems were, and as necessary as it was to decolonise syllabi, once taught all texts belong to the students: in citing them they are citing material that is both from abroad and from the classrooms of Fiji, and written by those who are, if the students so decide, what the Pacific scholar Teresia Teaiwa describes as literary 'ancestors we get to choose'.⁵²

The writers these students went on to become showed tactical discernment in the texts they chose. While they were schooled in Shakespeare and Sheridan, Wordsworth and Tennyson, these are not the authors we find in their works, nor even the Gray and Hardy 'imitated' by a young Subramani. The references in their works are to Hemingway and Mansfield, Eliot, Forster and Yeats – modernist authors who, for all their Eurocentrism, wrote of a modernity colonised subjects would recognise: unsettled, contingent, and relativised by the global struggles of empire, conquest and war. That Fijian writers responded especially to this questioning and multivocal literary movement strengthens the sense that theirs is a literature of self-determination and agency, created by writers working to make sense of the voices they were taught and surrounded by, and from this polyphony to find their own. The destabilisation of received forms brought by European and Anglo-American modernism has long been associated with cultural exposure to a range of voices and worldviews, in and between the metropole and the colonies: if the city is emblematic of London or Parisian modernism, it is not because writers stayed in their garrets, primly preserving the cultural authenticity of their voices. The growth of writing we see in Fiji stems from much the same intertwining of influences, ideas, and experiences, and Griffen, Manoa and Subramani draw upon these sources not in meek imitation, but in artistic response to the opportunities and difficulties of modern Fiji.

The multiplicity of voices presented by modernism would have particularly resonated with Fijians in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Griffen, Manoa and Subramani began to write. Despite the achievement of decolonisation in 1970, Fiji remained deeply divided: 'the British have left', reflected Subramani, but 'six years after Independence, the country is disturbed'. Subramani is writing

ten years before the 1987 military coup that would set the model for Fijian political change over the next two decades, yet to him the volatility of the contemporary situation was already clear. Indigenous Fijians owned the majority of the land and were 'in control of the government', yet remained 'dispossessed' and 'disaffected'. Indo-Fijians, making up around half of Fiji's population, were debarred from outright land ownership, yet were 'visibly in control of the commerce in towns and cities'.⁵³ This was manifestly a problem of colonisation, as Subramani pointed out: 'who was responsible for shipping [. . .] Indians to Fiji?' Yet it was the shared victims of colonisation who, amid mutual blame and distrust, were left to resolve the impasse.

In this difficult context, literature appeared to these writers to be one way of coming to terms with the wounds inflicted by colonialism. As Manoa put it, in distinctly modernist terms, '[w]riters have an important role to play' in the 'process of mutual self-understanding', and could enable 'art [to] rehearse truth' by finding the 'proper objective correlatives' for misunderstood feelings on either side.⁵⁴ As Subramani would reflect, such a literature gave Fijians the potential to establish 'models of alternative worlds, which are truly pluralistic, by incorporating various viewpoints and discourses that are in contest with each other, without allowing hegemony to any particular ideology'.⁵⁵

It is perhaps no surprise that these writers claimed modernism—formally perspectival, and fundamentally concerned with the way in which viewpoints and discourses interdepend—in their attempt to negotiate colonially introduced incommensurables. And it is in keeping with this process that, despite their shared drive towards a Fijian literature of their own, these writers claimed it in distinct ways, reflecting their different personal and cultural backgrounds. So the Indo-Fijian writer Subramani primarily used his 'schizophrenic', overdetermined prose to explore the alienation and dislocation that began with Indian indenture. So the iTaukei poet Manoa, accepting the cultural 'soles, | seeds, odds | without end' of modern Fiji, summoned the social and spiritual values of the vanua, the land, as the 'way for our communities towards achieving equilibrium'.⁵⁶ And so Griffen, by her own account less alienated than some of her classmates by 'all the English literature angst, sensibility, [and] drama', was yet able to explore the ways in which girls and women were excluded from the drives and determinations of a decolonising Fijian modernity, and left waiting, waiting, on the seawall.⁵⁷

It is important, however, not to impose racial or sectarian determinism upon authors who were purposefully writing towards multicultural understanding. Subramani, after all, found ways in which

to represent iTaukei consciousness as well as Indo-Fijian (e.g. 'No Man's Land'), Griffen's protagonists are sometimes European, but just as often iTaukei or Kailoma (part-European and part-iTaukei); Manoa at one stage planned with Subramani a collaborative fiction that would 'depict a multi-ethnic society in a rounded and authentic way'.⁵⁸ That these writers each drew upon modernist texts—written by English and American writers, and taught through a colonial education system—in no way compromises the 'authentic' Fijian voice they sought. An 'authentic voice' may be singular, utterly of the individual, or exemplary, utterly of a specific group or collective. Neither of these concepts precludes the idea of social interweaving, amalgamation, or idiosyncratic usage, and Fijian writers insist that authenticity should not reify a calcified (and colonially introduced) notion of untouched purity. As Subramani put it, '[n]o culture is pure [...]. Everything in the modern world is contaminated. Most of us carry more than one culture in our heads. We have several identities welded together in our personalities'.⁵⁹

We have examined a range of modernist connections, from Griffen's stripped-down, evocative prose, to Subramani's complex and 'schizophrenic' narratives, to Manoa's extended repurposing of fragments of modernist verse. Fundamentally, the colonial educational setting required Fijians to assent to British superiority, and in English classes this meant learning foreign texts by heart, and accepting their aesthetic standards as the norm. Yet this arrangement was never very systematic, either in aim or implementation, and by the mid-twentieth century students were compelled to negotiate a muddled system in which the jingoism of imperial British texts was beginning to give way to the crisis and the self-interrogation of literary modernism. It is in this fraught context that Fijian writers wrested the ideological tools of oppression from the weakened hands of the coloniser, adapting the literature of imperial breakdown towards a new literature of postcolonial self-fashioning and reconstruction.

Notes

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36. Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1959), p. 33. Emphasis added.
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38. Pio Manoa, 'Recall', reprinted in *Waves: An Anthology*, ed. by Vijay Mishra (1975; Auckland: Heinemann Education, 1979), p. 111, lines 1–6. Subsequent references are given parenthetically within the text, by line number.
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44. Mishra, 'The Girit Ideology Revisited', p. 7.
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