

Activist Archives and Feminist Fragments: Claiming Space in the Archive for the Voices of Pacific Women and Girls

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Abstract

The voices of Pacific women and girls have too often been excluded from Fiji's archival history. However, alternative understandings of history, stories that defy and blur accepted polarities and reflect the knowledge and experiences of women and girls, have always co-existed. This article attempts to address the lacuna of Pacific women in the archive by claiming space for women's voices, and contributing herstories which record and are inspired by Fiji women's feminist activism. We offer three stories from women whose activism seeks to reveal and challenge dominant historical narratives in Fiji. Their stories celebrate Fiji's communities as historically and inextricably interwoven, and encourage a renewed sense of belonging to one another. These examples of feminist storytelling as activism emerge from women's complex and intersecting identities, and from an understanding that oppressions overlap and interconnect. Activist work therefore needs to occur in a variety of spaces and forms, working relationally across marginalised communities and stories, in order to challenge exclusionary understandings, and to build peace. The contribution of alternative stories of practice is a call for the inclusion of diverse voices: we seek to offer feminist, community-centred, and practice-based knowledge from Fiji to the archives.

Keywords: activist; archive; Fiji; women; intersectionality; peace; Pacific; hope; resilience; feminist; storytelling

This article is inspired by and dedicated to our friend Sister Alaima Talu.

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Introduction

Sharing words, telling stories, and retelling histories and mythologies is part of a contemporary cultural revitalization in the Pacific. Reclaiming oratory through writing allows the healing of past silences and invisibilities to take place in the wake of colonization.

(Tusitala Marsh 1999, 169)

The power to remember is strongly linked to the power to narrate. The possibilities of resistance can occur when one can offer an alternative reading of history and destabilize “legitimate” narratives, not by merely throwing them aside or rejecting them, but in attempting to read them side by side in a spirit of honest resolution and reconciliation.

(McIntosh 2007, 47)

Stories are powerful and important. The stories we choose to record, to remember, and to tell, whether they are shared orally or in writing, shape our lives in the present. Perhaps the most powerful of all stories are those that have been archived—recorded, saved and protected. Archives mirror dominant ideas and power relations within societies. They have generally privileged the stories and perspectives of powerful, rich, white men (Gerder 1993; hooks 1984; Nicole 2011). Archives often prioritise stories about conflict and war, about national and political manoeuvrings, rather than local responses or experiences. As a consequence, what has been recorded has too often excluded and rendered invisible the voices and epistemologies of women and girls, people from the Global South, and Indigenous Peoples. Representations of diverse feminist activism in the archives is additionally limited because this urgent and spontaneous community-centred action often precludes written records.¹

His-story books have emphasised certain kinds of tales, from highly ethnocentric and gender biased points of view. This article seeks to celebrate alternative herstories, consciously contributing and claiming space for diverse feminist fragments in the archive. It emphasises local responses which prioritise stories of peace-making and which challenge dominant power relations. We offer examples from the feminist activist practices of three Fiji women—Cresantia Frances Koya Vaka’uta, Peni Moore, and Rosie Catherine—to the archives. Through reflecting upon these stories of praxis, we can better understand the diverse ways that women are using storytelling as a form of feminist activism in contemporary Fiji.

Although women’s oral activist practices are held within informal, local and community archives, they often remain unwritten. We use the term “the archive” to embrace *all* records of the past, including oral histories. Because the stories of women and girls have so often been

¹ Eichhorn (2013, 73) argues that generally “feminist publications have favoured accessibility over durability, resulting in a legacy of highly ephemeral documents.”

marginalised and written out of formal and often nationally funded archives, we use the plural form “archives” to denote the institutional character of these collections. We argue that there is a need to consider both the records *and* the silences that we find within the archives; to think about how dominant and subjugated agendas are represented, and how they might speak through these records. Following the work of Kate Eichhorn (2013, 2), we argue that archives exist not merely as repositories which preserve the past, but to “generate and promote the circulation of ideas, cultural interventions, and activism in the present.”

Diverse Feminist Fragments: Three Stories of Women’s Activism from Fiji

Feminist storytelling as activism emerges from the complex and intersecting identities of women and girls. Although their work has focused on different issues and used different modes of expression, Frances, Peni, and Rosie² are all activists in their communities who recognise different forms of oppression as intricately interconnected. They share an interest in creative, informal and culturally relevant approaches to education, and in supporting communities to reflect on and explore complex socio-cultural issues through storytelling and the arts.

Frances has many years of teaching experience, including as a lecturer in education. She is currently the director of the Oceania Centre for Arts Culture and Pacific Studies at the University of the South Pacific. She is also a poet and an artist. Frances’s research interests include Pacific and Indigenous research methods, Indigenous epistemologies, curriculum development and design, culture and multiculturalism in education, and using arts-based education processes for both formal and informal education. Much of Frances’s activist work has critiqued and complicated dominant narratives about intercultural relationships in Fiji.

Peni’s feminist activism has been central to the emergence of the women’s movement in Fiji. Peni worked tirelessly to eradicate all forms of violence against women and girls. She founded the community theatre company Women’s Action for Change because she recognised the efficacy of engaging people creatively and through story, and that processes of transformation for women and girls necessarily involved people of all genders and gender expressions. A passionate advocate for the rights of Fiji’s LGBT community, she was instrumental in setting up Fiji’s first organisation supporting sex workers. Peni understood that all forms of oppression

² Research which seeks to celebrate oral histories and to write the stories of Pacific women necessarily includes genealogy, place and gender. The use of first names throughout this paper is an intentional departure from more formal academic writing styles that have often excluded women’s identities and voices. Within their informal activist work, Peni, Frances and Rosie include their first names in how they introduce themselves, to connect with people and place.

are connected, and that working with and for the most marginalised communities in society is an important part of feminist activism.

Rosie co-founded the Youth Champs for Mental Health (the CHAMPs) in 2008, a volunteer-led organisation that supports people with mental illness and their families. The CHAMPs work to challenge the socio-cultural stigma surrounding people with mental health issues in Fiji. They use arts-based processes to support people with mental health difficulties, seeking to “educate the community about the constituents of positive mental health, and to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness” (Clery 2013, 329). Stories and creative approaches to engaging communities have been at the heart of the CHAMPs’ praxis.

Rosie describes her activist identity as having been influenced and shaped by feminist organisations and individuals in Fiji. “Feminists taught me how to be an activist, gave me the platform to learn, advocate, and to influence” (personal communication with Rosie Catherine, March 28, 2018). Rosie is one of many Pacific Island women working continuously for the empowerment of women and girls who would not necessarily call herself a feminist,³ but who recognises that effective activism needs to work at the intersections between different forms of oppression. She (personal communication with Rosie Catherine, March 28, 2018) describes the profoundly intersectional approach of the CHAMPs:

We wanted to empower, to give power back to young people. To give a voice to the voiceless. Young women and men. Where culture and traditions said young people were to be silent, not speak, sit at the back, not participate in decision making. We wanted to stand side by side, walk side by side, and help each other side by side, strengthening and collaborating. The women’s movement [in Fiji] did not have men and boys walking alongside them for a long time. The CHAMPs created the space where young women and men could address issues of gender equality and human rights together [through] learning, reflecting, and telling stories. There is strength in young women and men working together to address and eradicate all forms of violence against women and girls.

³ There are ongoing multiple tensions around what it means to call yourself a feminist in the Pacific cultural context. Tensions include the idea that feminism is a Western dominated, adopted and/or colonised way of thinking about the world which prioritises ideas of individualism/individual rights over community, and is therefore a culturally inappropriate/ineffective foundation for activism (Marsh 1998; Naepi 2016; Trask 1996). Feminism is often seen as being against culture, tradition and religion, as it challenges versions of Christianity that use specific Bible verses to uphold patriarchal ideas (Keil n.d.). Hoskin, Jenson and Blair (2017, 3) point out that feminism continues to be stigmatised in a variety of ways, and consequentially many people who agree with feminist ideologies would not identify with the term feminist. Pauan-Australian feminist Dani Tauni (cited in Gerlich 2018) points out that “[t]he majority of the world’s women fighting male supremacy are not white. They are by and large indigenous feminists fighting agribusiness takeover of their land and culture.”

Intersectional Foundations: Appreciating How Oppressions Interconnect

Fiji's feminisms are multiple, fluid, contested and emergent (Nabulivou 2006, 31).⁴ There is no single feminist story or focus in the Pacific (or elsewhere). Rather, there are intersectional understandings about the interconnected nature of all forms of oppression. Just as identities overlap, so do the hierarchies and structures through which power imbalances are maintained. The idea that we need to challenge oppressions in their many forms in order for feminist activism to be effective informs the activism of the women we describe.

If feminism is understood as exclusively involving work on issues of gender, or involving only women and girls, the activism that we story in this article might not appear to be feminist. However, following the work of scholars including Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991; Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013) and bell hooks (1984) that advances intersectionality as an essential category of analysis, we understand feminist activism as an activity which builds on the recognition that women inhabit multiple “intersecting axes of identity” (Hoskin, Jenson, and Blair 2017, 3)—as individuals, within their families, and wider communities. These diverse and intersecting identities can lead to complex and multiple layers of oppression and exclusion, but also to possibilities for recognising commonalities of oppressions. This recognition can create allegiances between marginalised groups, who form coalitions that use socio-culturally constructed categories strategically, working with dimensions which extend between and across categories (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013; McCall 2005). “Multiple grounds of identity” need to be taken into account “when considering how the social world is constructed” (Crenshaw 1991, 1245). As Crenshaw (Columbia Law School 2017) observes,

Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It's not simply that there's a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LBGTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things.

We argue that the diverse activist work storied in this article is feminist activism because it proceeds from an intersectional analysis of gender and oppression as the basis for action in the world, undertaken with and for the most marginalised groups in society, including women and girls. Feminist activism works to increase justice and equality, and challenges violence and oppression in all its forms. Tensions about what should constitute feminism(s) are necessary

⁴ Pacific feminist scholars have often focused on the practical application of feminist principles and on engendering change in the world rather than contributing to academic feminist discourses and theories (Teaiwa and Slatter 2013, 448).

and generative; discourses and challenges, definitions and redefinitions are an important part of what makes change happen (Nabulivou 2006). However, this article's focus is not primarily engagement with feminist theory, but the contribution of stories of Fiji women's activism to the archive: to acknowledge, honour and remember their important and ongoing contributions.

Fiji feminist Noelene Nabulivou (2006, 32) argues that change happens through "conscious storytelling for a collective and individual remembering of herstories." Frances, Peni and Rosie have consciously used stories for many activist purposes. They recognise that telling alternative tales can encourage communities to recognise and reflect on the power of dominant socio-cultural narratives within their daily lives. They understand that storytelling as activism engages people emotionally, resonates culturally, and can encourage greater empathy with "others." They have used storytelling and the arts to attempt to change the script, to allow diverse stories and experiences to be included and respected, to share stories of peace, and to include stories that are reflective of perspectives and understandings that have been historically silenced or marginalised. This is intersectional feminist activism.

Revealing and Complicating Archival Versions of History: Including Diverse Voices, Spaces and Forms

Understanding the generation of knowledge and ideas as an ongoing dialogic process, we argue that the archive is a place where there should be a complex layering of voices. Inspired by the work of Acacia Cochise (2010), we understand the archive as a palimpsest, containing stories upon stories, voices that speak with and over one another, extending, complicating, contesting, contradicting, harmonising with, and ultimately enriching one another. Women often seek out diverse stories and ways of knowing because we recognise that we are so often set apart from or subjugated by the dominant story. Because of our lived experiences, women can be more acutely aware that alternative stories exist. We seek a complex polyphony of stories to give rise to our recordings, our narratives, our histories and our presents.

Archiving in the Pacific began as part of the colonial project, reflecting the values, prejudices, and power relationships of that time. Archives "are not innocent sites of storage [but] texts shaped according to the interests of certain groups" (Pollock 1993, 12). Because of this history, archives have often explicitly devalued oral traditions and Indigenous perspectives. The idea of archives as containing "valuable" things that are "worthy" of remembering has Western origins. Stories and perspectives not included in the archive have invariably been perceived as

having lesser value, effectively rendering voices and perspectives outside of dominant power structures invisible (Schwartz and Cook 2002).

The silencing of women's stories, and of Pacific voices and epistemologies in the archive, is not a thing of the past. Opeta Alefaio (2017), director of the National Archives of Fiji, points out that many Pacific Island nations still struggle with putting basic information management systems in place to record their own knowledge. Alefaio (2017) argues that archives are a vital part of how societies are able to remember and imagine themselves. They are therefore critical resources for building society. "The ability of a society to secure, sustain, and share its memory, information, data and knowledge has a direct impact on that society's ability to travel, that society's ability to progress" (Alefaio 2017).

The stories that we are able to access and remember become part of our identity. Memory is fundamentally linked to our sense of self. Without the presence of stories which reflect us, the self can dissolve and dissipate. Because of the absence of women's stories from many archives to date,⁵ there is an urgent need to weave the stories of women and girls together, in order to build identity and to find something coherent to link ourselves to as women. We must look critically at what our archives contain, searching beneath the surface for absent voices, and paying attention to glimpses of accounts that might differ from dominant narratives.

Despite significant power imbalances in archives, and the lack of voice and representation of women, girls, and Indigenous Peoples in the historical record, archives are valuable. They constitute pathways through histories. They can help to reveal us to ourselves. Archives give the value of perspective, even if it is the dominant society's perspective. They can reveal differences, and point towards how these have developed over time. A critical reading of archival accounts can help to show us how we might reflect upon and address mistakes from the past. Archives can be bridge building, but they can also show us where we need to set existing bridges on fire.

Activism has always had a place in the archive. Stories can challenge dominant narratives, acting as "vehicles for voices and visions that implicitly or explicitly claim a better world" (Solinger, Fox, and Irani 2008, 5). Critical examinations of the knowledge that has been kept in archives reveal the fundamentally contingent and constructed nature of history.

⁵ Recorded history has "obliterated or marginalized" women, who have had to struggle "not only against exclusion but against a content which defines them as subhuman and deviant" (Lerner 1993, 4-5).

Dominant narratives in colonial and postcolonial Fiji have too often divided Fiji's citizens along racial lines. Alternative stories such as those shared by Peni, Frances and Rosie act as "counterdiscourses" (Tyson 2003, 20), broadening our imaginative frame, and offering visions of peace. These are stories of everyday cooperation, kindness and sharing. They seek to provoke community dialogue, to support both formal and informal education processes, and to inspire Fiji's people to think differently about how they conceptualise belonging to one another. Boulding (2000, 29) argues that because people find it harder to work towards the realisation of stories and situations they cannot visualise, offering stories of peace is therefore an essential part of creating more peaceful communities. As Ursula Le Guin (1989, 168) observes,

It is the story which makes the difference. It is the story which hid my humanity from me, the story about ... bashing, thrusting, raping, killing, about the Hero ... [T]he trouble is, we have all let ourselves become part of the killer story, and so we may get finished along with it. Hence it is with a certain kind of urgency that I seek the ... words of the other story, the untold one, the life story.

Disrupting Dominant and Exclusionary Understandings: Accepting the Challenge of Writing Orality to Archive Activism

Writing "Oceania's library of orality" (Subramani 1993, 3), and creating adequate records of dynamic and inherently relational practices such as oral activism and storytelling for social change, is a challenge. The bodies and memories of activist individuals and organisations are often repositories for the stories of marginalised communities. The traces of activist work that might be left to the archive are often partial glimpses of wider processes that have been recorded in a particular artistic moment or product. The fragments that remain of this complex relational work point towards the outlines and shapes of the wider activism from which they have emerged. The creative records that are produced—poems, plays, stories, artworks and performances—document unique experiences and are revealing of evolving community and activist practices.

The task of writing the stories of disenfranchised groups into history is not easy, and must take many forms. The perspectives of women and girls have been written out for so long that creating archives of Pacific women's responses and perceptions may involve gathering fragments together—remembering, uncovering, reclaiming, and sometimes reconstituting stories, guided by imagination, creativity, and empathy. Enduring and significant differences in voice and power underpin the very act of creating written representations of marginalised groups.

In Western cultures, the written word has an authoritative status and has often been accorded greater weight than oral histories. The value of oral histories has been much maligned (Hau'ofa 2000, 456) until relatively recently.⁶ Oral histories were regarded as unreliable and biased in comparison to written sources. History in the Pacific prior to the arrival of Europeans has often been referred to as “pre-history,” implying that history began with the arrival of Europeans, thus “drastically shortening the roots” of Pacific cultures (Hau'ofa 2000, 456). This has led to a de-valuing of history and cultural heritage, as Nandan (2009, 26) suggests:

History meant others' history, not your own. People said you didn't have a history. That is why history has gone out of their lives.

Archives contain accounts that have been recorded and fixed in time. Because of their textual nature—whether the source is a written record, or an audio or visual recording—these records can be revisited, and consequentially the contents of archives have been associated with a certain degree of stability or fixity. In contrast, stories shared orally as part of activist practices for social change are often fluid, intimate and highly personal. They are intended to effect social change, but not to be written. Oral accounts are adaptable and context specific. The emphasis within a story may change over time and depends on the perspective of the teller. Stories morph in response to particular spaces and audiences, and in response to stories and cultures embedded in the land from which (and on which) people speak.

Emotional engagement with audiences is a significant part of storytelling as activism. Fiji activists often use their own life experiences to connect with audiences emotionally, to build relationships as the basis for transforming the ways that people look at complex socio-cultural issues (Clery 2013; Sipeli 2016). This kind of activism is bespoke. It depends on the skill, sensitivity, intuition and flexibility of the facilitators involved.

The archiving of activism rooted in orality is transformative: it fixes stories and examples of practice, which are always actually adapted and fluid. There is a danger that writing activist stories that have been communicated orally cages and captures them. Attempts to create written accounts of oral activism may lose the emotional, tonal and gestural texturing, timing and phrasing, melody and silence of an oral performance of activism that can be so essential to the

⁶ See e.g. Bennett and Wanhalla 2016; Leckie 2007; Luker 2005; Nicole 2011; Talu 2008; 2009.

act of telling and to the meaning of a story. Tension arises over how to write this texture in, and whether or not the detail can be remembered or recovered.

Feminist/community archives need to find innovative and creative ways to write, which include rather than reduce complexity. We argue that people endeavouring to create written accounts of oral histories and of storytelling for social change need to attempt to write not only the stories themselves, but also to describe the particular contexts in which stories are told—nationally, locally and relationally.

One way of writing the texture of the spaces in which activist storytelling takes place is to explicitly attempt to write the visceral nature of oral community activism—writing what can be felt, in and around the space, through the body and memory of the writer.⁷ Written accounts of orality should attend to the context surrounding a particular story/act of storytelling, and include the herstory and perspectives of the storyteller. Writing the author(s) into the accounts that they create, so that their positionality and perspective can be glimpsed if not fully understood, is an essential part of reflecting on written accounts that have been created.

Through writing stories of activism, we make no enlarged claims to truth or authenticity. Written knowledge can be questioned. All texts should be seen as having an inherent openness and contingency, containing the capacity to be re-curated and re-interpreted.

Writing the Texture in: A Context for Women’s Activism in Fiji

Fiji has experienced significant intra-cultural conflict in its colonial and postcolonial history. Militarised, highly political and male-dominated stories loom large in Fiji’s archives to date. Stories of conflict and war are more prevalent than stories of peace. Written representations of Indigenous Peoples have been dominated by tales about their assumed “inherent” violence. Stories about Fiji’s communities prior to Western contact emphasised the “warlike nature” of Indigenous Fijians, depicting cultures of cannibalism and extensive intra-Indigenous warfare in the country (Durutalo 1986, 40). Colonial stories have also polarised Fiji’s two largest ethnic

⁷ Eichhorn (2013, 7) argues that “the current archival turn reflects a desire to take control of the present through a reorientation to the past.” “[F]eminist archives and special collections—even those connected to established institutions—have, since their earliest incarnation, exhibited a strong tendency to exceed preservationist objectives, thereby challenging expectations and understandings of the archive broadly defined” (2013, 31).

groups, emphasising cultural and racial differences between the Indigenous population (I-Taukei) and Fijians of Indian descent.

As part of a well-established British colonial strategy of divide and rule, colonial powers consciously underpinned and sought to naturalise divisions between Fiji's communities in order to reduce the possibility of protest. Colonial legislation ensured as little contact as possible between Indigenous Fijians and the newly arrived indentured labourers from India. Fiji-Indians were generally confined to the cane belts on which they worked, and strictly enforced legislation also ensured that Indigenous Fijians lost much of their mobility. Indigenous people were to remain in their villages, continuing their "traditional" ways of life, free from the burdens of the modern economy. "Progress" and "development" were reserved for colonial powers (Jolly 1992, 57), and "traditional" Indigenous culture was insulated from the "competitive, dehumanising pressures of the modern world."

By keeping communities separate, the risk of any unified protest against the colonial order was eliminated (Rakuita 2007, 32). This geographic separation was a crucial part of instilling and perpetuating "ethnocentric viewpoints" (Rakuita 2007, 35), which have extended into Fiji's contemporary history. The constructed origins of the stories about distance and division between Indigenous Fijian and Fiji-Indian communities are often silenced or forgotten in contemporary Fiji. However, accepting the "truth" of these stories was crucial to creating and maintaining division and mistrust between these two subjugated communities.

Divisions between the communities that originated in the colonial period have powerfully impacted upon Fiji's postcolonial politics. Fiji's history over the past 30 years has involved four coups, dating back to 1987.⁸ The popular and simplistic explanation for the 1987 and 2000 coups is that they were rooted in conflicts between Fijian and Indian "races" in terms of land, politics, culture, language, values and religion. The coups were justified through stories about the need to "protect" the paramountcy of the Indigenous Fijian community, which had been enshrined in the colonial Deed of Cession, and was now being "threatened" by what was perceived to be an ever increasing risk of "Indian" economic and political domination.

⁸ Fiji's coup history is well documented and extensive. For further reading about Fiji's coups, please see Finin and Wesley-Smith (2000), Fraenkel, Firth, and Lal (2009), Halapua (2003), Lal (1992), and Lal and Pretes (2001).

During the 2006 coup, discourses about racial differences being at the heart of the conflict were inverted. The military commander Commodore Frank Bainimarama claimed that it was necessary to overthrow the democratically elected SDL⁹ government due to its racist and discriminatory policies, systemic internal corruption, and economic mismanagement (Gaberiel 2008, 14). Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase had been elected seven months earlier, with the support of 80 per cent of Indigenous Fijians (Fraenkel and Firth 2009, 3). The narratives surrounding Fiji's "coup culture" had changed significantly. The 2006 takeover was heralded as a "clean-up campaign" (Tarte 2009, 409). The "temporary" suspension of democracy was "necessary" to set the conditions for a return to a lasting democratic rule which, if managed "correctly," would resolve Fiji's political problems and mark a permanent end to the cycle of coups (Fraenkel and Firth 2009, 4).¹⁰

Discourses about the need to "clean up" Fiji's corrupt and racist leadership as a means of healing the divisions in society led to divisions in Fiji's feminist civil society organisations, who had previously been broadly united as staunchly pro-democracy and anti-coup. Many organisations who had opposed previous coups were "seduced" by the "possibility of the Bainimarama coup being a good coup" resulting in "the creation of a better-governed, race neutral society" (Lal 2010, 430). The confusion about how to interpret and understand Fiji's coups, and the shifting discourses and rationales surrounding them is portrayed in Frances Koya's poem "Letter to the Editor" (Koya 2010, 289–90).¹¹ This poem challenges Fiji's communities to gain a deeper, and by implication more politically and historically nuanced, understanding of contemporary conflicts:

Dear Sir,

So many people have asked me *What is wrong in Fiji? What is the real situation?* I feel that it is time to face facts . . .

It is crucial that we all try to understand the situation. It is crucial that we understand that understanding is crucial to the situation. The situation is crucial. Almost as crucial to understanding that we must understand what the hell has gone wrong before we take sides.

⁹ SDL refers to the political party Soqosoqo Duavata ni Lewanivanua, meaning "united group of the people."

¹⁰ Although there are many new aspects to the discourses surrounding the 2006 coup, the idea of democracy as a "foreign flower" for which Fiji is not yet "ready" is a lingering idea (Laracy 2001, 22; Finin and Wesley-Smith 2000, 28; Fraenkel 2009, 157). This metaphor has been a pervasive part of the conceptual landscape in Fiji since the first coup in 1987 (Tarte 2009, 411).

¹¹ This poem mimics a popular newspaper column in the national daily newspaper the *Fiji Times*, through which the public can air their grievances, and voice their understandings and concerns.

Taking sides is wrong. It is wrong to take sides.

The fact that it's all about power is wrong. We must understand that understanding is the key to life. The key to understanding what is right and wrong. Accepting that we are all wrong. We got it wrong and for the most part we are still wrong.

P.S. So what do we need? We need to be taught to understand the simple things; like living. Love. Acceptance. Gentleness. Humility—That in the end these make a life worth living. We need to understand that *understanding* is crucial to the situation. The situation is crucial because we don't understand.

Citizen 657,924

Suva

Whilst academic discourses argue that race is an outdated construct with no academic/scientific credence, noting that there is as much diversity amongst peoples from any given racial group as there is between groups, these ideas often fail to be engaged in Fiji's communities. Colonially influenced stories continue to be a powerful part of how Fiji imagines itself, effecting contemporary discourses, relationships, and possibilities. Stereotypes about the inherent differences between Fiji-Indian and Indigenous Fijian communities often persist powerfully into the present. Stories about contact, kindness and cooperation are rarely found in the archive of Fiji's history.

But there are always alternative stories.

Frances's Story

In November 2009, Tui Clery (2013) listened to poet, artist and educator, Dr Frances Koya-Vaka'uta share a story from her family's history. Frances spoke about possibilities for peace and empathy between Fiji's different communities at a political moment when racist tensions and mistrust were rife, and when words were highly censored by the then unelected Bainimarama¹² military government.

Frances shared a story of peace from her family history at the Wasawasa Festival of Oceans (Koya Vaka'uta 2009), held in Suva's Albert Park, just across the road from the then derelict Grand Pacific Hotel. The hotel was full of Bainimarama's men who were occupying this centrally located, strategic place, just metres from Fiji's parliament. Tui was acutely aware of

¹² Following the coup he led in 2006, Bainimarama was democratically elected by the people of Fiji in 2014, after leading the country as interim regime prime minister since January 2007.

the inherent differences in the spaces on either side of the street, and of the risks involved in speaking at this particular historical moment.¹³ She created these life notes¹⁴ on 26 November 2009. They are creative reflections about the research process, included here (Clery 2013, 156–57) as a way of setting the wider social and political scene for Frances’s activism, and of writing the author in:

Stay on the Pacific side, try and find ways of playing in the margins. Look away, stroll, eat, laugh, enjoy, bask in forgetfulness, but make sure you stay on the safe side of the street.

Reality changes across the road. Unseen soldiers watch over this city playground, we can feel their eyes. We can feel their eyes and the presence of their guns.

The foreshore around the Grand Hotel is subtly cordoned off, politicised ground. Only the young, the innocent and people *vulagi*¹⁵ to this place could possibly misunderstand. Inevitably we blunder across the invisible line.

The hidden eyes intensify their gaze. As we cross the invisible boundary, the grass beneath our feet feels different, suddenly sharper and spikier. It might cut. Our senses shriek, perception is heightened. We are exposed, unsafe. The land speaks and listens. It has eyes and teeth and knows the truth.¹⁶

Sa tabu eke,¹⁷ we intuit before we are told, uneasy feelings do psychological battle with the fragile sense of fun and freedom on the other side just moments before.

Just a few steps from this frolicking festival space—where families play together, and Pacific peoples, cultures and identities are performed in beauty pageants—is another world. The texture changes ...

Under cover of darkness, at the back and in between, Oceanic poets find ways to speak the unspeakable, to challenge the silences.

Sheltered and hidden by noise and people, taking risks amongst the multiple festival happenings and the many stalls and stages, poets dare to speak, about and within the silence, shielding and cloaking themselves in the safety of metaphor.

¹³ Women and human rights activists who had been vocal about the coup in Fiji were taken to the military camp and some were forced to run around the ground at the barracks and made to lie on the ground and lick the boots of the military officers, while other women had their hair cut to humiliate them (Coalition of Women NGOs 2009, 9).

¹⁴ The inclusion of life notes is a way of placing creative and emotional understandings back into written accounts of research. Life notes are narrative and expressive. They encourage a poetic voice and a reflective approach, complementing the more “objective” and assertive voice often found within academic writing (Spirito 2007). Dillard describes life notes as a means of “constantly attending to a whole life as it is embedded in socio-cultural contexts and communities of affinity” which is “unedited and uncensored” (2006, 5).

¹⁵ *Vulagi* means stranger or visitor (Capell 1991, 272).

¹⁶ “It has eyes and teeth and knows the truth” is a reference to Vilisoni Hereniko’s 87-minute film *The Land Has Eyes* (2004).

¹⁷ *Tabu* means “forbidden, prohibited, implying a religious sanction, but now also used for a legal prohibition such as ‘no admission’” (Capell 1991, 210).

Fiji artists and activists used the Wasawasa Festival as a space for innovative and transgressive speech about issues including cultural identity, climate change and environmental activism. People gathered and shared ideas despite the risks of doing so—despite swirling rumours of plain-clothed military men amongst audiences, watching and listening, and despite real and ever present fears of being taken up to “the camp” to be interrogated. Amidst this atmosphere of tension and surveillance, Frances’s story shone out as an example of the inherent kindness and compassion of people—itself an act of bravery, encouraging empathy and hope.

Frances’s story takes place at the home of an Indian woman who had recently settled in Fiji as part of the wave of people who were brought to Fiji to work as indentured labourers during British colonial rule.¹⁸ She is baking roti one day when she encounters her first Indigenous Fijian man. The woman has heard tales of cannibalism in Fiji, and she is very afraid that he will want to eat her baby. The man speaks no Hindi, the woman no Fijian. The woman intuitively offers the man some curry and some roti¹⁹ and he accepts. After a month or so the man returns to her home, this time with his wife and his child, and with a gift of fish. This exchange of food continues, and an enduring cycle of kindness between families has begun. Embodied acts of humanity and care take the place of words.

It could be argued that this is a “small” story to offer the archive. It does not do what the dominant story often does. It does not directly involve national and political manoeuvrings. It does not commemorate pivotal historical moments such as battles or wars. However, it does bring into sharp focus the kinds of tales that tend to be told about relationships between Fiji’s multicultural populations. Frances’s story helps to challenge and complicate the binary construction of “Indian” and “Fijian.” Through unmasking the binary, it also helps to point us towards other silences in the historical record about intercultural interactions in Fiji, such as stories about the lives and perspectives of the many diverse Pacific Islander populations living in Fiji, stories which have been persistently omitted from the colonially influenced dominant narrative. As Clery and Nabulivou (2011, 164) observe,

Discourses about the causes of conflict in Fiji since the first coup in 1987 have been dominated by ideas about causes of conflict being located in the incommensurable “racial divide” between

¹⁸ A total of 60,965 Indian workers were brought to Fiji during the period of indenture, which lasted from 1879 to 1915. Indian workers ensured a sufficient labour force to establish a viable sugar industry in Fiji, a core policy of British colonial rule (Sutherland 1992, 32). The Indian community in Fiji called themselves the *girmitya* after the agreement of indenture that bound them to service (Lal 1992, 38).

¹⁹ Roti is an Indian flatbread made from water and flour and cooked in ghee.

Indigenous Fijian and Fiji-Indian communities ... This dialogue forgets, excludes, and renders almost invisible generations of Rotumans, Solomon Islanders, Fiji-born Chinese, relocated Banabans and other I-Kiribati (living in Rabi and elsewhere) and Tuvaluans (living in Kioa and elsewhere).

The stories that we share and record as history are an important part of how we are able to think about ourselves and our humanity (Boulding 2002, 11). In offering another kind of story, a story of peace, Frances challenges us to look again at the structure and content that is privileged within the archives. Enabling communities to access stories from activist and community archives reveals a wealth of stories from diverse Pacific communities who have made Fiji their home. Through encountering and uncovering these long histories, the depth and breadth of the contributions these communities have made to the country become clear: this recognition is an important part of countering racist “identity politics which might [otherwise] divide us” (Alefaio 2017). Stories are tools through which we can begin to imagine more peaceful possibilities for ourselves and our communities, and imagine other ways of being in the world.

Peni’s Story

Stories celebrating cooperation, empathy, friendship and kindness between Fiji’s multicultural communities do exist, but the circulation, celebration and recording of such stories is rare. The second story we offer to the archive also points towards the kindness and cooperation to be found in the everyday lives of Fiji’s multicultural population. It was shared by the late Peni Moore. Peni was a groundbreaking Pacific feminist. She was the first co-ordinator of the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement, and she founded Women’s Action for Change (WAC) in 2003, where she was creative director until 2011. She was an activist committed to the empowerment of women and girls. Peni was also a central figure in helping to establish organisations which support the welfare and rights of sex workers, and LGBT communities in Fiji. Peni was a facilitator, a mediator and a storyteller. She was also a prolific but somewhat reluctant playwright.

In the violent aftermath of the 2000 coup in Fiji, WAC responded by working creatively with communities. Much of their work focused on trauma healing and reconciliation in communities that had been most directly affected by coup-related violence. WAC focused particularly on working with vulnerable women and girls, and on understanding how the coup was affecting them. WAC used Playback Theatre extensively in communities, and invited audiences to share

stories with their communities using this form. These accounts are then creatively played back to community audiences by actors.

Playback Theatre is unscripted, spontaneous, improvised theatre which relies on the skills of the actor/facilitators and the relationships between them. The ritualised structure of this form can act as a “container” for trauma that enables tellers to share their stories (Adderley 2004, 10), and also to transform them in the process of telling and re-playing. Playback Theatre assumes that the stories offered by individuals are stories that the wider community also needs to hear and to explore. It seeks to give the community “an opportunity to see itself” (Perth Playback Theatre Company 2002) through theatre. Some aspects of this form play stories back to communities in their own words, other aspects use metaphor, music, archetypes, and silence to creatively portray stories, and to enable the teller and the audience to consider alternative and transformative ways of seeing a story or event. As Fox (2009, 242–43) explains,

The actors and musicians come before their audiences with no memorized play; they have only their skills at improvisation, their ability to listen deeply and their humanity ... In the course of a playback theatre event, a kind of tapestry is woven of stories told and embodied on the stage. The pattern on the tapestry reflects what is important for the community, made up as it is of tellers “restorying” their experience.

In the aftermath of the 2000 coup, racist violence was rife. Fiji-Indian communities, particularly in the north of Fiji, were intimidated and harassed on racial grounds. Villagers were threatened and cattle were killed (Lal 2007, 35). During this time, WAC travelled to the town of Labasa, where some of the most extreme inter-racial violence occurred, to work intensively with communities there. Among the many stories of fear and distress related to the coup that were shared with WAC, the community theatre company also heard stories of courage and selflessness which subverted the dominant script about belongingness in Fiji.

One story of hope and non-violence that was offered to WAC involved armed rebels who were supporting the 2000 coup. These men aggressively boarded a bus near Labasa, looking for Fiji-Indian passengers, with threatening and obviously violent intent. Indigenous Fijian men on the bus responded not by collaborating with the rebels on the grounds of their “racial” belonging to one another, but instead by protecting their neighbours. Quickly, quietly and intuitively they leaned their own bodies over Fiji-Indian women seated next to them, hiding them from the rebels, and protecting them from harm (Peni Moore, talanoa/personal communication with Tui Clery, March 4, 2010).

Peni stressed the importance of hearing these stories of humanity amidst the weight of stories of trauma and loss after the 2000 coup. Stories of hope were crucial to the resilience of theatre company members, who were working so intensively with traumatised communities that they realised they were at substantial risk of vicarious traumatisation (Peni Moore, talanoa/personal communication with Tui Clery, December 18, 2009). WAC found such overwhelming needs in communities that they took on a depth of work and an intensity of schedule that Peni recognised was unsustainable and damaging. Stories of trauma and loss pushed theatre company members almost to breaking point, ultimately leading to a complete rethinking of WAC’s mission and practice and how they could better keep themselves and communities safe.²⁰

Peni’s story reveals the importance of stories of hope for the survival and healing of communities, and for members of the theatre company themselves. Trauma healing processes involve individuals and communities empathising with others and meaningfully acknowledging suffering and loss, but also the ability to re-story trauma in ways that enable life to be lived, through telling stories that acknowledge the power of resilience and of survival, and that enable people to look towards the future in ways that engage both memory and hope (Lederach and Lederach 2010, 210).

Space and Time for Writing Activism: The Personal Is Political

Women who seek to actively contribute to the archive and to record alternative stories—who either explicitly or tacitly submit the stories of Pacific women and girls—face many barriers. The silencing of everyday stories of peace and cooperation, and the absence of gendered understandings of conflict from the written record, often prevents us from learning about women’s knowledge, and the innovative ways that they work to create and sustain peace.

The complex and shifting boundaries between personal and professional activism can complicate what is documented and how, and indeed whether anything is documented at all. Because of the relatively small size of Fiji’s population, anonymity is rare and activist identities are almost impossible to compartmentalise. There are many kinds of activism. Some activists

²⁰ As a consequence of their work after the 2000 coup WAC created a new vision for the collective focused on creating and supporting “safe spaces for change” and working with “marginalised people to gain strength and confidence to build a just society” (Nabulivou and Moore 2008, 3).

choose to stand publically beside the communities and issues they support, regardless of the substantial risks that might be faced by themselves, their organisations,²¹ and families and loved ones as a consequence.

Some activism needs to be quieter, as activists navigate complex spaces, responsibilities and relationships, multiple and intersecting identities. Due to the complex webs of relationality within Fijian communities, and the close personal links and feelings of solidarity and belonging that often form between people involved in activist groups, activism often overflows into the personal lives of activists. Partners and families are part of the struggle for change, and homes are often opened to those in need.

The CHAMPs emerged in response to a national presentation by the Ministry of Health in 2008 about suicide attempts and deaths in Fiji. The presentation revealed shockingly high rates of death by suicide in Fiji, higher numbers than deaths by either drowning or accident. The organisation's vision spiralled out further in creative waves inspired by Gary Rounds's story, told in the form of a poem which was later turned into a song, a video clip, a public mural, and was also used as inspiration for several other creative projects.²² The CHAMPs seek to engender perceptual change in Fiji, to help the wider community to acknowledge that everyone faces risks to their mental health and wellbeing at some point in their lives. This is not something that divides us, but something that connects us.

The CHAMPs recruit and train volunteers to support people with mental health issues in the community using arts-based and relational approaches. Rosie Catherine, the senior advisor and educator for the CHAMPs from 2008 to 2015 regularly opened her home to people experiencing mental health problems, and to the volunteers that she had trained to support them. The open door that she offered contributed to holding people in crisis together in a real and tangible sense, and was a practical response to the need for community support.

²¹ WAC's open and public advocacy for the LGBT community in Fiji had a variety of consequences for staff members and for the organisation. This included significant stigma by association and sexuality baiting from members of the local community, and "receiving feedback from donors that their work with LGBT communities would be an obstacle to securing further project funding" (Clery 2014a, 38).

²² Gary's poem "keep on walking" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZLiPu7yePQ>) encourages people with mental health issues to keep walking positively through their lives, despite the socio-cultural stigma that surrounds mental illness in the majority of Fiji's communities. This "ability and willingness to present himself and his story publically, both in narrative and creative forms" galvanises and supports the organisation's identity, and their activism (Clery 2013, 318).

Rosie created a safe home space which enabled people with lived experience of mental illness, carers and volunteers to have a sense of belonging, love and care. This space built on relationships of trust between people, helping them to feel heard, valued, and appreciated: “A safe creative home space empowers people with psychosocial disability²³ to live a meaningful and wholesome life. The home and family base, when it is missing or not in its full meaningful function, creates a gap for the full development and meaningful life of an individual” (Rosie Catherine, e-mail message to authors, November 26, 2017).

Her home was an important space for volunteers, and this open door helped to ensure that volunteers’ contributions to the organisation and their support for people recovering from mental illness was sustainable. An extended disability-friendly home reinforced processes of recovery from mental illness. In Rosie’s home, people could “breathe, debrief, share a meal, cry, laugh, create art, reflect, plan, have meetings, have a nap, talanoa,²⁴ share frustrations, follow up on visits and cases, and revise organisational goals and visions” (Rosie Catherine, e-mail message to authors, November 26, 2017). Countering dominant narratives about people with mental health conditions in Fiji, the conversations that took place in this creative home space were intentionally encouraging, empowering and positive. This was a conscious attempt to build strength and resilience, to focus on individual abilities and talents, to increase confidence and a sense of wellbeing for people recovering from periods of mental illness.²⁵ CHAMPs members gathered together as part of keeping everyone involved in this process safe. Rosie was “care in the community” where this was otherwise largely absent.

Due to high levels of stigma in the community, compounded by the powerful impacts of internalised stigma, people with mental health conditions and their families may hesitate to openly give voice to their experiences and perspectives. Rosie identified a strong need to add

²³ Definitions of psychosocial disability vary from “a continuum of tension, stress and distress, to a biomedical understanding associated with mental health conditions including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression and substance misuse” (Carroll et al. 2016, 25).

²⁴ “Talanoa is a word found across many Pacific languages. It means to chat, to yarn, and to tell stories ... Talanoa is context specific and responsive to the needs of people in a given situation. It functions to strengthen relationships” (Clery 2014b, 108). This paper emerged from PhD research undertaken in Fiji communities over an 18-month period (Clery 2013). This research combined ethnographic, relational, Indigenous and performative research methods. Clery’s (2013) thesis argues that the combination of research methods was necessary for undertaking peace research in the Fiji context as peace research should be fundamentally communicative, seeking to build communication, understanding, and empathy between Fiji’s multicultural communities.

²⁵ Writing about aspects of this work, Rosie and her co-authors explain that “[a]ny approach to inclusion requires the promotion of positive attitudes and beliefs about the capacity of people with psychosocial disability” (Carroll et al. 2016, 28).

these stories to the archive, to document and share stories about mental health in Fiji, “to write, recall, reflect upon and create our own history-stories and legacies, and to pass on significant best practices that are spiritually and culturally appropriate to our wellbeing” (Rosie Catherine, e-mail message to authors, November 26, 2017). Rosie’s work with the CHAMPS and her contributions to the archives have considered factors that influence greater community inclusion and the creation of enabling environments (Rosie Catherine, e-mail message to authors, November 26, 2017).

Peni Moore also lived her activist life in ways that blurred the lines between personal and professional. Due to WAC navigating ongoing funding challenges and constraints, her home was also the organisation’s office, and the theatre company’s rehearsal and training space. Actor/facilitators and members of the management committee would often sleep over at Peni’s home when meetings and projects were held into the evening and transport home became difficult. Peni also worked after hours as a supporter and advocate for the LGBT community in Fiji (Nabulivou and Moore 2008). Peni used her knowledge of the rights of the LGBT community and her networks within Fiji’s legal system to engage in rights-based activism in support of this marginalised community. She often responded to calls from the LGBT and sex worker communities in the early hours of the morning, travelling to local police stations as an advocate, and sometimes to help bail people out.

These examples reveal homes as meeting places and safe spaces, and show acts of solidarity with communities which run beyond the limits of a day job. Peni and Rosie built substantial webs of relationships, gaining respect and trust among communities. People with mental health issues and the LGBT and sex worker communities in Fiji can be incredibly vulnerable. These individuals and communities face substantial risks in their everyday lives, experiencing high levels of socio-cultural stigma and marginalisation. Rosie and Peni often went beyond the limits of their activism because they were working with people who had nowhere else to turn, and no-one else to turn to. Their activist work was so urgently needed because so few other organisations were working in these areas, and in these flexible, intuitive and relational ways. The personal is political.

Encumbered Activist Writing: Writing for Funding Bodies

Pacific women activists face many obstacles in contributing to archives. Activist stories that are held within communities rarely form part of the archive because of the intense nature of

activist work. Much activist work is urgent. It is often focused on meeting acute needs in the present, or on planning and creating transformative work in the future.

The types of written records generated by activists are often created to fit into the bounded reporting requirements of external organisations, and to reflect the terms of their funding structures. As Pacific women activists undertake important projects in academic and community settings, and develop convening power through donor-funded community projects, external and institutional structures and expectations powerfully influence the type of writing that is generated about their work. These written pieces have shapes and terminologies that are externally driven. They are not necessarily representative of the complexities woven into the process of feminist activist work, or of the individual and organisational learning gained.

The ability of activist organisations to reflect, produce writing, and contribute to the archive is often threatened by the ever-present need to secure the next stream of funding to make activist work possible. Donors tend to require writing that is reductive and oriented towards quantifying results and outcomes. Formal reports may not reflect the flexible and responsive ways that activists work on and across multiple issues as they arise in communities. Examples of innovative and relational approaches to activism within communities are easily lost within summaries created for funding bodies.

Work that is grounded in relationships with communities requires an open, flexible and responsive approach. Flexibility is necessary because people are dealing simultaneously with multiple and intersecting issues within and across their communities. Activists in Fiji find creative ways to fit alternative and urgent agendas into their work. These projects may necessarily take place in addition to and alongside work which meets the aims and objectives outlined in their commitments to funding agencies. Because of these flexible and responsive approaches to feminist activism in communities, projects can often contain reflections and ideas which may stimulate and evidence the need for the next wave of work. Activists are often so completely engaged in working for change now that the intensity of their work with communities can be all-consuming. There is little time for pause, and finding the reflective space in which to write about the texture and process of the work may seem like a luxury.²⁶

²⁶ Clery's doctoral research in Fiji (2013) involved working with various NGOs and learning about their reflective processes. Although organisations prioritised making space and time for verbal reflective processes as part of evaluating their work and strengthening their teams, writing the intricacies and complexities of their activist

Activist work with the most marginalised and vulnerable communities in Fiji is under-resourced, and also associated with high levels of burn-out. The intensity of activist work can also consume the lifespan. With scant time in which to reflect and to record experiences and practices, opportunities to contribute Pacific women's activism to the record can also be lost in advanced age and death. Activists who do not record their work before they die leave no memoir. This is a part of the lacuna in the written records of women's activism in Fiji.

Archiving Feminist Activism and Re-Membering with Fragments

This article has celebrated diverse intersectional stories of feminist activism in Fiji. Writing about women's creative approaches to activism is a way of exploring and filling silences in history, and of revealing women's agency. The contribution of alternative stories that challenge prevailing histories and epistemologies is a part of a conscious effort to unmask dominant narratives, and to challenge their power.

In addition to sharing stories of practice which might otherwise have remained unwritten, this article has reflected on some of the obstacles faced by Pacific women activists who attempt to contribute to the archive. We have argued that the urgent and innovative nature of much activist work, which is often under-supported and under-funded, may preclude written reflections. The stories of activism we have shared show that the lines between professional and personal blur for many activists whose commitment to communities extends far beyond the limits of a day job. External funding structures and reporting requirements also powerfully influence the types of writing that are created about activist work, and that can therefore be offered to the archive.

We conclude with encouragement to continue the dialogue. This article is a call to bring forward, record and share stories held within community archives about the practices and experiences of women and girls, in order to critically reflect on and enrich the knowledge held in archives. It contributes to processes of remembering, reclaiming and celebrating women's stories. We must take every opportunity to write the stories of Pacific and Indigenous women and girls into history: stories of activism, feminism, community engagement, transformation, stories of praxis. Contributing alternative stories to the archive is of vital importance as we seek to create more representative archives that reveal diverse stories and perspectives. Each

processes with communities was often not a priority. Many important lessons were learnt from these discussions of process and practice, however much of the detail and the texture of this work was never recorded or archived.

drop in the lacuna has value. Each story, however fragmented, causes us to imagine the shapes and textures that might speak to us through the many silences in the record.

We dedicate this article to feminist activists in the Pacific whose work has not reached the archive. The stories that we have shared reveal feminist activists working intersectionally, innovatively, flexibly, spontaneously, and relationally to meet the needs of individuals and communities in context, and in the moment. This article is a part of remembering this creative and important work. It highlights the activism of the storyteller in the storytelling, and considers some of the ways in which women practise engaging with ever-present tensions in order to build more peaceful and inclusive communities. The story is always more than “just” a story, it is powerfully situated in and reflective of history and culture. We have argued that stories are powerful tools for peacebuilding, pointing towards alternative understandings and possibilities that challenge divisive binary thinking, oppression, and violence in all its forms.

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