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► To cite this version:

Valérie Baisnée. Sex (mis) Education in Sia Figiel's Novels, Where We Once Belonged (1996) and Freelove (2016). *Alizés: Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 2024, Sex (Mis)Education in the English-Speaking World, 44, pp.81-92. 10.61736/alizes.123/44/06 . hal-04847332

HAL Id: hal-04847332

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-04847332v1>

Submitted on 19 Dec 2024

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Sex (mis) Education in Sia Figiel's Novels, *Where We Once Belonged* (1996) and *Freelove* (2016)¹

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Abstract

This article explores the politics and poetics of sex education in Sia Figiel's novels, *Where We Once Belonged* (1996) and *Freelove* (2016), against the backdrop of Western anthropological theories and indigenous Samoan perspectives. Figiel's novels, set in the 1980s, intertwine narratives of female sexual awakening with the cultural and historical impact of missionary-led Christianization and American popular culture. By opting for fiction over anthropology, Figiel redefines the discourse on Samoan sex education, creating a space for indigenous female voices to challenge colonial gender stereotypes and patriarchal domination. The novels subvert Western libertine narratives through the incorporation of Samoan storytelling techniques and language, exploring hybrid gender identities and the tensions between traditional and colonial values. The use of linguistic hybridity underscores the possibility of a new language of love and sexuality, blending the sacredness of love and desire from Samoa's ancient past with contemporary global influences on Samoan sex education.

Cet article propose une lecture à la fois poétique et politique de la représentation de l'éducation sexuelle dans les romans de Sia Figiel, *Where We Once Belonged* (1996) et *Freelove* (2016). Situés dans les années 1980, ces deux romans peignent des récits d'éveil sexuel féminin dans une société où l'héritage de la christianisation se mêle à la culture populaire américaine. À travers une fiction hybride qui tourne en dérision les théories anthropologiques occidentales, Sia Figiel recentre le discours sur l'éducation sexuelle samoane en adoptant une perspective genrée et locale. Elle donne ainsi une voix aux femmes indigènes, tout en défiant les stéréotypes de genre coloniaux et la domination patriarcale. Ses œuvres subvertissent les récits libertins occidentaux en intégrant des techniques narratives et linguistiques samoanes, explorant les tensions entre les valeurs traditionnelles et coloniales. L'hybridité linguistique mise en avant par Figiel fait naître un nouveau langage de l'amour et de la sexualité, fusionnant le caractère sacré de l'amour et du désir issu du passé de Samoa avec les influences contemporaines occidentales sur l'éducation sexuelle samoane.

Keywords

samoan sexuality, linguistic hybridity, postcoloniality, indigenous perspectives, Sia Figiel, mimicry
sexualité samoane, hybridité linguistique, postcolonialité, perspectives indigènes, Sia Figiel, mimétisme

Margaret Mead's famed anthropological study *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) as well as her other works on sexuality in isolated island nations, *Growing Up in New Guinea* (1930), *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935), and *Male and Female* (1949) are both credited and blamed for inspiring the so-called "sexual revolution" of the 1960s. Insisting on the cultural construction of sexuality against the prevailing notions of biological determinism, Mead, a pioneering sex and gender scholar, would become a key intellectual figure of second wave feminism. Her Samoan study included a description of adolescent sexual behaviour as free and easy, thanks to fluid stages of development. Thus, Samoa vindicated Mead's free-love doctrines that called for sexual experimentation and prohibited jealousy. *Coming of Age in Samoa* held the record of sales in social sciences for a long time. After Mead's death in 1978, her Samoan study was dismissed as "hoaxing" by New Zealand anthropologist Derek Freeman who demolished it in his book *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth* (1983), sparking one of the most famous controversies in anthropology. Western theories and anthropological debate over Samoan sexuality have frustrated local artists and intellectuals left out of the conversation while anthropologists objectified and "othered" the Samoan people in discussions about their own culture². This is the intellectual background of

¹ DOI: 10.61736/alizes.123/44/06.

² Europeans often viewed Samoa as an idyllic place populated by either simple, unsophisticated people or the

Sia Figiel's coming-of-age novels, *Where We Once Belonged* (1996) and *Freelove* (2016), which recount female awakening to sexuality at the crossroads of *fa'a Samoa* (the Samoan way/identity) and external culture, both intellectual and popular, using the Samoan means of expression (language, imagery, storytelling, mythology). Both novels are set in the eighties and engage with the ubiquitous imperial American culture of the time. *Where We Once Belonged* unfolds around 1983, coinciding with the Mead-Freeman controversy and the popularity of the TV series *Charlie's Angels*. In *Freelove*, the story is set in 1985, a year marked by the prominence of *Star Trek* and Madonna whose song "Like a Virgin" "ruled the airwaves" and topped Samoan singing charts. As well as the inevitable influence of a global popular culture, the novels also emphasise historical factors on sex education, such as the impact of missionary-led Christianization in the nineteenth century, which altered gender dynamics and led to the repression of female sexuality, exemplified by the transformation of the once empowering practice of shaving girls' hair into a humiliating punishment for sexual misconduct (Mageo 1998). Born and raised in Samoa, Figiel became one of the first writers to offer an insider's view of Samoan sexual education from an indigenous female point of view.

This essay explores the poetics and politics of female sexual education in Sia Figiel's novels, demonstrating how Figiel adapts historical Western master narratives of sex education to the nuances of Samoan cultural contexts. Through a detailed examination of narrative techniques and emplotment, it reveals how Figiel's works critique and subvert dominant Western paradigms of love and sexuality, without entirely rejecting them, employing Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry (1984) to highlight the complexities and resistances inherent in postcolonial discourse.

Navigating the (Western) Plots of Female Sexuality

In *Freelove*, even more so than in *Where We Once Belonged*, Figiel strategically positions herself within the mainstream tradition of the Western novel by engaging with well-established narrative forms, particularly the coming-of-age story and the narrative of sexual initiation. Yet, her approach involves a nuanced engagement – a sort of "unthreading" from the inside. By choosing fiction over anthropology, Figiel displaces the debate on Samoan sex education from a purely historical discourse, heavily colonised by Western perspectives and controversies, to a form allowing the indigenous voice to be heard, and an authentic Samoan story to emerge, that is, according to Paul Sharrad (1993), one that represents Samoan life through the eyes of someone who lived it. In *Where We Once Belonged*, the protagonist Alofa dismisses the Mead-Freeman controversy as irrelevant to her education, noting, "none of us knew what the Mead-Freeman controversy was. None of us knew what the word controversy meant" (204). After having explained the controversy, the narrator further trivialises it, reducing it to a simplistic debate of ideas between two outsiders:

Mead was a palagi woman who wrote a book on Samoan girls doing 'it' a lot And they were loving and loved 'it' too. Freeman was a palagi man who said that Mead, the palagi woman, was wrong about Samoan girls doing 'it' a lot ... and that Samoans are jealous, hateful, murderous people who do not know how to do 'it' (204).

Instead of engaging in an intellectual intervention in an academic debate, Figiel chooses fiction as a mode of discourse that aligns more closely with Samoan storytelling. This approach is better suited to portraying Samoan sexuality, which can only be fully conveyed through insider

romanticised notion of "noble savages." In his novel *Pouliuli*, prominent Samoan writer and intellectual Albert Wendt seeks to correct this perception. In his essay, "Towards a new Oceania" (1976), he mentions Mead as one of the people who have distorted the view on Samoa.

experience, local language and myths. The novel, while retaining traces of the conventions established since its inception in the eighteenth century, possesses a flexibility that allows for local reshaping and the emergence of an insider/outsider dialogue. Notably, by the nineteenth century, the novel had become a genre largely embraced and written by women, particularly in its more popular forms. This alignment of the novel with the female gender became a robust tradition, a tradition that Figiel consciously aligns with in her aim to provide new Samoan models of female identity (Figiel 2016b, 229).

The narrative plots of Figiel's two novels, *Where We Once Belonged* and *Freelove* are framed by powerful master discourses – the coming-of-age story or Bildungsroman in the former, and the narrative of female sexual initiation in the latter. Reversing the tropes of “weaving” and “threading,” Figiel unpicks and unravels these forms, navigating and subverting stereotypical portrayals of Samoan heterosexuality and Western narratives of female desire. By indigenizing the narrative structure, Figiel introduces a cultural specificity that challenges and reshapes these master discourses, offering a postcolonial perspective on the themes of growth, and female sexual education within the context of Samoan culture.

The structure of the plot in *Where We Once Belonged* contradicts Mead's assertion of harmonious Samoan adolescence during which young girls were free to explore their sexuality. *Where We Once Belonged* tells a story of female puberty by uncovering the awakening of a thirteen-year-old girl to heterosexuality through a series of “first times”: first period, first discovery of genital organs, first punishment for sexual misconduct. The story begins with the protagonist's discovery of the vagina: “When I saw the insides of a woman's vagina for the first time I was not alone” (1996, 1). After many developments, towards the end of the novel, the protagonist touches a boy's genitals for the first time. These discoveries that frame the novel are made painful by the closing in of sexist restrictions enforced by strict Christian/puritanical codes of conduct introduced by the missionaries in the nineteenth century. Unsurprisingly, punishment awaits the heroine who breaches these codes, resulting in her partial submission to the village rules. Thus, the progression of events in Figiel's narratives diverges from the conventional Western narrative of adolescence as a stage of transition marked by freedom, and individual choice before entering adulthood.

In terms of narrative techniques, *Where We Once Belonged* reshapes the Bildungsroman form by incorporating traditional Samoan storytelling features – particularly the symbolic use of weaving – based on a traditional genre called *su'ifefiloi* where composers thread together different types of song to make one very long song for a special occasion (Figiel, 2016c). Departing from the linear trajectory commonly seen in Western coming-of-age narratives, the story embraces circularity in both time and space, portraying character transformations, whether they be moral shifts from good to bad or transformative changes from human to animal and vice versa. Rather than adhering to a conventional progression, the narrative is shaped by circularity, where stories reverberate, and characters make intermittent appearances and disappearances. An illustrative example is the character of Siniva, initially introduced as the “village fool” at the story's outset, whose true identity and pivotal role in the protagonist's intellectual and spiritual development unfold towards the novel's conclusion. As noted by Michelle Kweon (2005, 58), the circle emerges as a predominant shape in several of Figiel's works, creating a thematic resonance. The recurring motifs of circularity and repetition also draw parallels with menstruation, referred to as “moon sickness” in the narrative, which serves as a crucial milestone in the girls' sexual education. This association between the Moon and the feminine is a motif previously explored in Sia Figiel's first collection of short stories, *The Girl in the Moon Circle* (1996).

Blood emerges as a common thread linking the two novels. In Polynesian culture and myths, menstrual blood is seen as similar to the bleeding from defloration, an event central to

*Freelove*³. While, on the surface, the narrative structure of *Freelove* may appear to display fewer indigenous storytelling characteristics than *Where We Once Belonged*, linguistic hybridity prevails in both, with the use of both Samoan and English languages. While the first novel incorporates oral performance forms such as song, poetry, and anaphoric style, the second opts for a more “literary” format and engages with intertextual references. The title “Freelove,” though ironic, carries connotations that evoke the fiction of sexual paradise in the minds of readers. It harks back to the outdated association of the South Pacific with an “open,” “free” love, where the exotic intertwines with the erotic – a concept present in colonial literature and amplified by Mead’s study⁴.

Freelove is divided into two parts. In the first book, the protagonist Sia, a seventeen-and-a-half-year-old schoolgirl is sent to the capital Apia to buy thread for her mother. She is offered a ride in her science teacher’s pickup, Mr Ioage Viliamu. During the trip, they realise their mutual attraction, and on the way back, perform their first intercourse in a clandestine way as this act is marked by a major socio-religious taboo: the brother/sister relationship whose covenant (*feigaiga*) rules kinship and the village political organisation (Schoeffel, 1995). As a pastor’s son, the teacher is considered as a brother to people in his community, so Sia becomes his sister, rendering the relationship incestuous. Thus, the journey, both physical and symbolic, intertwines personal exploration with a broader examination of the social forces that affect the characters’ identities and relationships. Tropes of journeying and transgression echo the narrative of Marguerite Duras’ *L’amant (The Lover)* (1984), where a white schoolgirl undergoes sexual initiation from an older Chinese man after meeting him during a ferry crossing of the Mekong River. This relationship also carries the weight of taboos related to race and class. In addition, the journey in both novels holds a central position, unfolding in both time and space. Sia Figiel openly acknowledges this intentional intertextual reference to Duras in an interview with Vilsoni Hereniko (2016b, 226), adding another layer to her narrative.

With its extended sexual initiation scene, the first book of *Freelove* falls into the category of erotic fiction, and its narrative features as well as characterisation smack of eighteenth-century libertine fiction. In Figiel’s narratives, erotic scenes are characterised by a dual approach: they are vividly depicted yet simultaneously distanced through the male character’s speeches. This distancing effect is achieved not only through the male character’s role in performing the initiation, but also by his assuming an intellectual stance. The male character not only engages in the physical aspect of the initiation, but also takes on the responsibility of transmitting ancestral knowledge. This intellectual dimension adds a layer of complexity to the erotic scenes, intertwining physical intimacy with a broader cultural and intellectual context.

The combination of eroticism and philosophy in *Freelove* mirrors a distinctive trait found in certain French eighteenth-century libertine literature, notably exemplified by the works of Marquis de Sade and even Marquis d’Argens’ *Thérèse philosophe*. In this context, the depiction of sexuality in the novel aligns less with the exotic/erotic genre and more with libertine fiction, driven by the dual purpose of transgressing societal norms, especially religious taboos, and exploring eroticism. The deliberate choice of a pastor’s son as the initiator introduces a transgressive element, defying Samoan taboos in a manner similar to Sade’s heroine in *Justine ou les Malheurs de la Vertu*, who is initiated by monks, thereby challenging Roman Catholic codes.

Despite the titular promise of “Freelove,” the characters find themselves constrained by socio-religious codes, revealing the illusory nature of the freedom depicted. This anti-religious stance

³ For instance, the Gimi people of Papua New Guinea consider the Moon as a woman’s “first husband,” who deflowers her, initiating the cycle of menstruation (Gillison 1987, 178).

⁴ The association of Polynesia with “Freelove,” meaning sexual promiscuity, already existed when Mead published her study on Samoa (Tcherkézoff 1997).

is more explicitly articulated in *Where We Once Belonged*, where the character of Siniva vehemently opposes the introduction of Christianity in Samoa, drawing parallels with capitalism and lamenting its impact on people's connection to their ancestral roots.

While eighteenth-century libertine fiction contributed to changing codes of sexuality and representations of love between men and women, Figiel's postcolonial novels of formation and desire also detached sexual education from Western contemporary narratives or exposed their contradictions. Figiel weaves erotic desire into a broader quest for scientific and ancient knowledge of the world. Similar to the ubiquitous figures of mentors/lovers in eighteenth-century literature, the pedagogical dynamic existing between Sia and her teacher undergoes a transformation into a sexual/sensual relationship, suggesting an underlying ideology. The yearning for scientific knowledge becomes intertwined with the erotic and transgressive desire, challenging the notion that learning is a purely intellectual pursuit divorced from the physical. Sia's desires are explicitly tethered to her thirst for knowledge, and during the sexual initiation, the lovers engage in discussions encompassing mathematics, science, and ancient wisdom. This fusion of intellectual and sensual pursuits underscores a complex interplay between the realms of cognition and desire within the narrative.

Despite sharing formal similarities with libertine literature, the characters in *Freelove* deviate from the extreme gender power imbalances often found in traditional libertine fiction, where submissive/virginal female characters are contrasted with aggressive/beastly male counterparts. While the male character in *Freelove* exudes an aura of authority and amasses various forms of patriarchal and intellectual power, the autodiegetic narrative draws the reader closer to the heroine's self-authorising perspective. In the dialogic and philosophical framework of the novel, the girl actively engages with her initiator, challenging the conventional female passivity and objectification in libertine fiction. For instance, she resists certain aspects of the gendered sexual script, explicitly refusing to have her nipples squeezed. "I'm not a bloody cow" (90), she asserts, illustrating through this act of resistance her determination to reclaim control over her body. Moreover, unlike typical libertine fiction mostly written by men, *Freelove* does not adhere to the characteristic structure of obstacle, complicit resistance, and seduction. Instead of depicting seduction as a conquest and women as the erotic object to be possessed, as seen in works like *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782) where Valmont finally "conquers" Mme de Tourvel, *Freelove* presents a different plot dynamic. The male lover's goal is not seduction but the performance of a ceremony or ritual, suggesting a more egalitarian view of initiation where consent plays a pivotal role. The novel also diverges from the traditional moral model of the marriage plot, as the protagonist expresses a disinterest in marriage, highlighting an unconventional perspective. The lovers in *Freelove* acknowledge the impossibility of a sustained love affair, granting autonomy to the female character. The plot direction or indirection reinforces the novel's departure from conventional gender dynamics and romantic plotlines, presenting a feminist exploration of autonomy, consent, and the pursuit of knowledge within the context of a love story.

Sia's sexual and intellectual initiation, detailed in Book I, is followed by correspondence between the two lovers as Sia leaves Samoa to study in the USA while pregnant. This narrative shift represents a significant departure from the preceding mode of narration. However, the choice of letters as a medium for communication may also be interpreted as a nod to eighteenth-century literature, often considered the golden age of epistolary art. The use of letters as a narrative device recalls famous examples from both sentimental and libertine fiction. Notable instances include *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), which tells the tale of an impossible passion between Saint-Preux, a commoner tutor, and Julie, the daughter of Baron d'Étanges. On the contrasting side, there is *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, featuring Machiavellian characters and innocent victims in a web of intrigue.

I will now turn to how these plots of female sexual awakening and initiation engage with

cultural practices of sexuality as well as identities and gender roles in Samoa, both pre and post contact, as represented in the novels.

Re-interpreting and Modernising the Taupou

As tales of female sexual education, both novels take place in “zones of ambivalence” (Mageo 2008) between colonial and ancient cultures, creating hybrid identities. They articulate a discourse on sexuality originating from ancestral Samoan sexual practices and customs, while discussing a modern conception of love that comes from the adoption of the Christian religion by Samoans and circulated by contemporary popular American culture. In addition, the novels, especially *Freelove*, are written within the framework of *fa’a Samoa* in which there is virtually no discourse on sexuality (Tcherkézoff 2003), unlike in the West which abounds with it. According to Ken Plummer, in the West, “We have become the sexual story tellers in a sexual storytelling(?) society” (1995, 5). Figiel’s first novel, *Where We Once Belonged* (1996), more directly exposes the dark, violent elements of Samoan girls’ education which stem from the patriarchal and hierarchical social structure that was reinforced by Christianity (Schoeffel et al 2018). Along with the introduction of the new religion, the missionaries aimed to reform Samoans, particularly women, and transform them into docile subjects. This objective is illustrated in the first novel through detailed lists of moral and physical rules imposed on the girls by the Church. The Christian faith was introduced as a form of social control so that Samoans would become more like white Christians. Within this context, and for women especially, there cannot be such a thing as “free” love and sexuality in Samoa.

Homi Bhabha’s notion of mimicry may be useful here to understand the effects that “hybrid” Samoan identities had on sexual behaviour. Bhabha (1983) theorises mimicry as an ambivalent strategy whereby colonised peoples simultaneously express their submissiveness to the more powerful and subvert that power by making mimicry seem like mockery. It derives from a desire of the colonisers, in Samoa the missionaries, to reform the colonised so that they would be identical to the coloniser but not quite, as there must always be a difference for the superiority of the coloniser to reveal itself. It is in this slippage, “the same but not quite” that subversion or resistance through mockery takes place. When the colonised subject “mimics” the coloniser, by adopting the coloniser’s cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values, the result is never a simple reproduction of those traits as the old culture resists among the modern conception. Bhabha defines mimicry as “a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed; a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them” (1994, 89).

Jeannette Mageo, an American anthropologist married to a Samoan, has used Bhabha’s concepts to analyse two evening performances in Samoa involving the key figures of the *Taupou* (ceremonial virgin) and the *Fa’afafine* (transfeminine). She demonstrates that “Bhabha’s zones of ambivalence, then, spawn self-contradictory identities that colonists force mimic men to assume” (2008, 62). In this respect, *Freelove* “mimics” Western conceptions of love and sexuality, which are caricatured, and the role and functions of *Freelove*’s characters reflect those ambiguities, producing hybrid sexual identities. Ioage Viliamu, in particular, is portrayed as an authority on old Samoa as well as a scholar of modern-day science. This dual aspect allows Figiel to “establish the priority, in time, space and episteme, of decolonial conceptions of mathematics and science” (Ellis 2018, 212). However, his indigenous knowledge is questioned by the protagonist Sia, a brilliant science student, whose conception on these matters is influenced by Western modernity and a Western sense of self that can be traced back to the introduction of Christianity.

In the two novels, hybrid gendered identities and roles are epitomised by hair styles, which used to firmly entrench gender, social and political differences in old Samoa. Ioage wears his hair

long, as was the custom for pre-contact Samoan men. Long hair signified *mana*, a Polynesian concept meaning power and charisma which was associated with sexuality in old Samoa (Mageo 1998, 125). For women, long hair denoted fecundity: pregnant women were allowed to wear their hair long because it was thought that pregnancy gave women *mana*. By contrast, virgin girls shaved their hair except for one lock, a practice of which Ioage reminds Sia in one of his letters: “Only your head did not possess the long hair of a boy or man but was shaved instead like the head of a woman’s with a curl behind your left ear, signifying your virginal Taupou status” (188). This practice disappeared, while shaving a girl’s hair turned into a humiliating punishment for sexual impropriety, as experienced by the character Alofa in *Where We Once Belonged* (Mageo 1998, 127). The arrival of the missionaries after 1830 led to a reversal of gender hair styles: men had to wear their hair short and women long, which created ambiguity in terms of *mana*. In contemporary Samoa, Ioage’s long hair is frowned upon by the community, so he wears it in a bun as a form of mimicry (almost the same as white men but not quite). In addition, he does not wear any shoes as a sign of his difference. This way, he can also play the role of cultural intermediary in the sexual initiation.

The central scene of the novel, the schoolgirl’s defloration, connects with an ancestral practice of sexuality, the Taupou. Anthropologists, starting with Mead and Freeman, have noted the centrality of the Taupou in the Samoan kinship system. It was a moot point in the Mead/Freeman controversy which has been debated at length among anthropologists (Shankman 2009). The Taupou used to be the village virgin; in the old days, she was a high-ranking girl whose virginity was preserved and guarded so that she might marry a chief and secure an alliance for her village. Her marriage was followed by a public defloration ceremony so that the village could verify her virgin state and certify the lineage of the children. The virginity status was not attached to any moral or symbolic values as in the Christian religion. Rather, the virgin girl represented a certain “capital” used to secure political and economic alliances. In the old days, it was customary for a man to take on several wives, and formal unions were rare. The most common type of marriage was a kind of elopement called *avaga*. Sexuality and marriage, therefore, were not connected until the arrival of the Mission.

When the missionaries arrived around 1830, they banned what they saw as permissive sexual practices and tried to introduce formal church marriages. They forbade public defloration but saw the emphasis placed on virginity favourably. Thus, all teenage girls became Taupou, and what was formerly a sign of status reserved for the village princess became a gendered condition. Furthermore, in advocating free-choice marriages and promoting monogamy, missionaries paved the way for the new concept of romantic love. Thus, the Taupou system declined all along the nineteenth century (Shankman, 2006), but the sacredness of virginity remained, becoming a mix of ancestral and Christian values.

As a transmitter of ancestral knowledge, Ioage endeavours to perform the ritual virgin defloration, albeit privately and using a condom. He tells Sia she is “a true ceremonial virgin,” therefore a village princess, and reminds her not to equate sex and love, which is unSamoan and a Hollywood invention. Ioage points out that “Samoans arranged marriages to strengthen inter-village alliances and to increase *mana*. What does how you look have anything to do with that?” (97), directly opposing arranged marriages to free-choice marriages based on physical appearance. However, the protagonist has a different view of her first sexual experience: “Ioage and I shared a private, intimate and sensual moment of mutual respect... What did the conventions of society have to do with that?” (108). She partially rejects the emphasis on collectivism over individualism that structures ancient Samoan culture, and calls her defloration, “The day I discovered another layer to myself” (51), thus privileging individual, inner experience. In doing so, she detaches herself from *fa’a Samoa* to promote other models of female identity: Sia’s view is emphasised by the autodiegetic narrative, which makes her the most important character in the story. Similarly, Figiel’s first novel *Where We Once Belonged*

discusses and challenges the priority given to the collective in *fa'a Samoa* according to which the individual exists within a kinship system. The Samoan collective “we,” which bestows a more relational sense of identity than the Western self-centred “I”, is also questioned as an ideology, when the narrator realises that it hides a certain violence in the community: “Nothing was witnessed in the “I” form, says the narrator, “nothing but penises and ghosts” (1996, 136). In *Freelove*, the male sexual script for defloration – the Taupou ceremony – collides with a female sexual script embodied by Madonna’s song “Like a Virgin.” The song’s extreme popularity among Samoans, as the list of the twenty 1985 best songs inserted by Figiel at the start of the novel indicates, testifies to the society’s strong emphasis on the value of virginity. As Sia undertakes her journey of self-discovery with her teacher, she symbolically dons a T-shirt from the Madonna 1985 tour, aligning herself with this widely embraced icon. Like a mimicry of Western love, it is to the lyrics of “Like a Virgin” that she turns as she is being deflowered. Moreover, Madonna’s song itself could be considered mimicry, displacing virginity as a trope for eroticism. Thus, the play of mirrors alters the significance of the ritual. The girl also sees the performance of a sacred ceremony as a shared moment of intimacy despite the significance of the traditional gender roles explained by her teacher/lover.

The choice of a dialogic structure in the representation of defloration allows the narrator to contrast viewpoints on sexuality and marriage without having to resolve them. This form also points to the ambivalence of the male and female sexual roles in postcolonial Samoa: As Jeannette Mageo (2008, 70) explains, “Samoan girls’ gender identities came to mirror not just colonialists’ ambivalence about them (that they should be like whites but not quite), but also disjunctions between indigenous and colonial values – between a *vāga* and church weddings, between marrying for family advancement and marrying for love.” The Taupou ceremony can neither be reproduced as such nor transformed into something romantic.

The ambiguities within the narrative are heightened by the linguistic juxtaposition of the Samoan and English languages. This linguistic interplay serves as a powerful means of challenging colonial stereotypes surrounding Samoan sexuality, employing hybridization and mimicry as tools of resistance. Through this linguistic fusion, the narrative suggests the possibility of a new, decolonial language of love that partially aligns with *fa'a Samoa*, embodying a cultural and linguistic revitalization that counters preconceived notions and stereotypes.

Towards a Poetics of Decolonial Love and Sexuality

Born into a Samoan family but educated in English-speaking institutions, Figiel possesses a heightened awareness of the cultural weight and symbolic power embedded in language. The imposition of English at school brought with it a cultural background that Figiel found challenging to fully comprehend. This disconnection led her to rebel against the teaching of English, viewing it as a symbolic manifestation of colonial domination. In *Where We Once Belonged*, the protagonist is instructed to learn Wordsworth’s poem “The Daffodils” without receiving an explanation of the meaning of *daffodils*. Misinterpreting it as a signifier for *dancers*, she engages in a form of mimicry that transforms one of the most popular English romantic poems into a mockery, attaching different signifiers to the intended signified. *Freelove* further explores the protagonist’s resistance to English poetry, as seventeen-year-old Sia questions the relevance of learning verses about flowers from a distant landscape: “How do you expect us to be excited about flowers that grew in a landscape none of us have ever been to?” (2016, 68). For the Samoan girl, the English language conveys absent referents, lacking a grounding in her lived experience. The narrator perceives English as “empty”, devoid of a connection to her identity, despite being drawn to it (Figiel 2016a, 40).

Both novels engage in a reflection on the effects of language in the production of meaning,

shared identity and perception of the world. Cross-cultural comparisons by sociolinguists and anthropologists (Sapir, Boas) have shown that languages have their own conceptual and metaphorical systems. Learning a language implies learning a worldview, and it is through language that cultural identity is shared. The relationship between cultural concepts and language is reciprocal because “Cultural ideas constrain linguistic form, and linguistic form attests to the depth and tenacity of cultural ideas” (DeBernardini 1994, 865). Thus, Mr Viliamu tells Sia that “When you look closer at our Samoan language, you will find that it is intricately connected to nature” (2016, 39). Conversely, Samoans’ ability to read natural signs is reflected in the language. For example, ninety different words may refer to the Moon⁵.

If language shapes perceptions of the world and ultimately how users experience it, then the words referring to sexuality should elicit that. Although both novels juxtapose Samoan and English languages, *Freelove*, through its more didactic narrative structure, explicitly contrasts the English and Samoan language of love and sexuality. As a prelude to the story, two vocabulary lists are inserted: one with English words only, some of them in bold, followed by a Samoan/English glossary. The underlined English words refer to the act of defloration in medical terms, such as “hymen blood” or “penile erection” but also words implying social judgement about sexuality, such as “illicit” “forbidden” “conceal”. The word “reproduction” ties the sexual act with its traditional finality. The words “affair” and “relationship” are also underlined. So, in the English worldview, heterosexual initiation is hinted as a clinical act that may be transgressive of a moral and social order.

By contrast, the Samoan/English glossary (2016, 18-19) contains fewer words, but each word possesses multiple meanings. No word refers to sex organs or the sex act. According to Serge Tcherkézoff (2003, 310), there is no polite way of talking about sex in Samoan, except for women who can indirectly refer to the vagina as something both sacred and forbidden. Therefore, the Samoan list foregrounds words which could suggest or infer from the context rather than explicitly denote sexual bonding. For example, *Afa* can both signify “To connect or unite in one action” or “sinnet” as in a braided rope made of knots. One example for the use of the word is: “They all use one mesh-stick, and the meshes are equal” (18). Thus, the second list may imply a metaphorical language of Samoan love as a (sacred) union although the metaphorical aspect will be felt as the result of the translation into English. While the English world is precise and scientific but emphasises sexual difference, the Samoan worldview of sex is marked by the absence of sexual terms and is replaced by what appears through the English translation as euphemisms of genderless unity and connection.

The narrator confirms the absence of conversation about sex in the family: “Sex was only spoken of as innuendos in the ‘aiga” (2016, 51). This could be interpreted as the symptom of a strict moral order that inhibits sexuality as in the repressive hypothesis that Foucault revises in *The History of Sexuality* (1976). However, the silence around sex in Samoan society is not accompanied by an expansive medical and psychological discourse as with the Victorians. Nor is there any urge to confess. Moreover, while they banned what they saw as permissive sexual practices, the missionaries did not introduce any ideas of “sins of the flesh” or “impurity.” Rather, the lack of sexual discourse comes from the impossibility of talking directly about it in the social and kinship organisation. For Samoans, sexuality belongs to the animal realm. The word *woman*, for instance, can be translated by *fafine*, which is used also for female animals. In the social order, however, women are not referred to as “fafine” but as “Miss” or “daughter of” “wife of.” Tcherkézoff (2003, 168) claims that because Margaret Mead only used English

⁵ A list of words and phrases related to the Moon was provided by Te’o Tuvale, a government translator who wrote the first indigenous history of Samoa in 1918, *An Account of Samoan History up to 1918*. The manuscript is digitised in *The New Zealand Electronic Text Collection* (<https://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-TuvAcco-t1-body1-d40.html>).

for her interviews about sexuality with Samoan girls, she failed to understand it through Samoan eyes.

The novel shows that in terms of sexuality, what cannot be said with words may be expressed in other ways. Ioage considers body language to be “an ancient sacred language” (45). This non-verbal mode serves as a means to establish a connection with the ancient world because, as the narrator notes, it “had undoubtedly been spoken by our ancestors before us and was older perhaps than the waves and the birds themselves, older even than the big blue sky” (45). The sexual initiation, acting as a reenactment of cosmogony, is imbued with a sense of sacredness that necessitates ritual. This way, a profound connection is forged, echoing an ancient language that transcends verbal communication.

Yet, a new (decolonial) poetics of love is also needed to counteract the ubiquitous sentimental romance model that Sia is subjected to through Hollywood films. This is best conveyed in the epistolary exchanges of book II. Sexual union is followed by long-distance separation which the lovers sublimate in their letters. While the longing caused by estrangement has been the subject matter of many love letters since classical literature, the Samoan lovers communicate within their own mythopoeic consciousness. They rename themselves as Day and Night, using a key Polynesian cosmological division that refers to two different natural and supernatural realms⁶. This division was misunderstood by the missionaries who recast it in moral terms and reinterpreted darkness as Samoa’s past (Bausch, 1978).

To express the pain of separation, the lovers’ letters circumvent the Western language of heartbreak in their letters and dialogize linguistic and spiritual hybridity. The book opens with a poem in Samoan translated into English placing separation on spiritual (a prayer) and memory levels. This echoes the biblical “Song of Solomon,” an Old Testament book featuring a collection of love poems spoken alternately by a man and a woman, and later attributed to Solomon.

In *Freelove*’s book II, conventional Western romantic tropes of heartbreak undergo a transformation, giving way to a blend of both modern and archaic tropes centred around estrangement and longing. The Samoan language of longing and hunger interweaves with scientific comparisons, particularly those drawn from astronomy, a subject the protagonist is studying in the United States. The narrative paints a vivid picture of intense longing, expressed in language reminiscent of both ancient and modern cosmology: “Like an abandoned animal that has been deprived of food and water for days, weeks, months, you devour me with such force that I break apart into a million pieces that float like cosmic dust at the birth of a star, and I am lost” (2016a, 190). The reference to animality in this metaphor harks back to the rich tradition of animals worshipped as gods in Samoan culture. When Sia writes, “Show me your owl eyes” (187), she is addressing herself to a god. The village itself, referred to as the village of the sacred owl, holds cultural and spiritual significance⁷.

The language of mathematics also introduces new tropes of love, as illustrated by Sia’s poetic expression: “I’m delighted in your radiance. It’s like looking into Euler’s identity” (182). Euler’s identity, an equation deemed as “the most beautiful equation” and likened to a Shakespearean sonnet, becomes a unique metaphor for love. These scientific tropes not only infuse contemporary language with a poetic quality but also serve as a bridge connecting the memory of an ancient world to the discourse of modern science. Sia’s pursuit of astronomy and mathematics becomes a means to reach back to old Samoa, facilitating a reconnection with her cultural roots. By studying physics and astronomy at college she wishes “to understand how our ancestors were able to calculate everything in time before compasses and other technology”

⁶ In the Samoan worldview, day and night are not viewed as opposites. They are not part of a dualistic framework.

⁷ Each village used to adopt a special animal.

(210).

Figiel adeptly transforms the language of love and sexuality, reflecting the linguistic hybridity inherent in Sia's position between two languages, two belief systems, and two worlds. Through this linguistic fusion, the narrative explores the intersection of tradition and modernity, blending the ancient and the contemporary in a narrative tapestry woven with scientific and cultural threads. For Robert J. C. Young quoting Bakhtin, "This double-voiced, hybridised discourse serves a purpose, whereby each voice can unmask the other" (1995, 21).

In conclusion, Figiel's novels highlight the intricate interplay between Western and indigenous models of sex education, presenting "zones of ambiguity" that challenge and subvert colonial gender stereotypes. By "talking back" (hooks 1986) to these stereotypes, Figiel's works contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Samoan sexuality, emphasising the importance of recovering a certain sacredness in love and desire from Samoa's ancient past while acknowledging present local and global models of sexuality.

In essence, this essay underscores the significance of cultural and linguistic context in discussions of sexual education, urging a reevaluation of perspectives that have historically marginalised indigenous female voices. Sia Figiel's novels serve as a powerful testament to the complex and evolving nature of Samoan female sexual identity, providing a platform for the reclaiming of narratives that have been obscured by external interpretations.

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