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Vanuatu Literature and Alternative Forms of Creative Expression

Devlin Peck



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VANUATU LITERATURE AND ALTERNATIVE FORMS OF CREATIVE EXPRESSION

By

DEVLIN PECK

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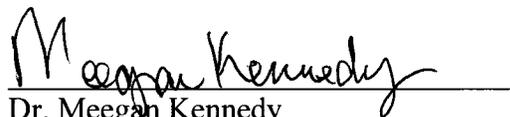
The members of the Defense Committee approve the thesis of Devlin Peck defended on
April 19th, 2017.



Dr. Robert Stilling
Thesis Director



Dr. Jeannine Murray-Román
Outside Committee Member



Dr. Meegan Kennedy
Committee Member

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Terminology

Vanuatu / New Hebrides

The New Hebrides is the pre-independence name of Vanuatu, a small Y-shaped island nation located in the Pacific Ocean.

Ni-Vanuatu

This term refers to anyone born in Vanuatu, just as someone born in America would be considered American.

Bislama

This language is a Pidgin English that incorporates indigenous native dialects and grammar. It is spoken by almost all Ni-Vanuatu people and its origins are outlined in Chapter 1.

Melanesia(n)

This is a geographic region that includes Vanuatu, New Caledonia, West Papua, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands. As discussed in Chapter 1, there is a common sense of identity among Melanesians.

Kava

Kava is a root crop that is harvested to produce a drink with anesthetic and sedative properties. It is extremely popular in Vanuatu and drunk daily by many.

Anglophone

I use 'Anglophone' to refer to the use of the English language. For example, an Anglophone Ni-Vanuatu person is a person born in Vanuatu who can speak English. An Anglophone poem is a poem composed in English.

Francophone

This term mirrors 'Anglophone' in that it refers to the use of the French language. However, the term 'Francophone' carries with it an additional political component, as it connotes the politically motivated spread of the French language which is discussed further in Chapter 1.

Introduction

Vanuatu, known before independence as the New Hebrides, is a Melanesian island country in the Pacific Ocean. It features volcanoes, beautiful beaches, and rainforests, and it maintains a tropical climate year-round. Each of the nation's 83 islands is home to multiple unique languages and cultural practices, resulting in a high degree of diversity. First settled by humans several thousand years ago, the region fell to European subjugation during the 19th century. Some nations in the region eventually earned their independence, Vanuatu included. Other nations, however, still remain dependent. This is the case for both New Caledonia and West Papua, where political corruption and colonial oppression reign. This thesis focuses primarily on Vanuatu: specifically, its literature and other forms of poetic and cultural expression.

My motivations for this undertaking lie in part with the nation's diversity, but also with the absence of Vanuatu from global literature. Whereas postcolonial writers and texts from the Caribbean, Africa, and Ireland are known internationally, works and writers from the Pacific do not receive attention outside of the region. Furthermore, texts from Vanuatu are virtually inaccessible from beyond the region. So, from my first exposure to Vanuatu, I noticed that it would be a different case from the archetypal postcolonial nations. To immerse myself in the country's diversity and better understand its uniqueness, I began locating every work that contained Vanuatu literature, and I began planning a trip there myself.

In the summer of 2016, I traveled to Port Vila, Vanuatu, to volunteer with Further Arts, which is a community organization dedicated to promoting local art and artists.

While there, I met with authors, participated in local events, studied under scholars, and

even attempted to start a locally-sourced, Bislama-language newsletter of creative writing. My thesis is guided and supported by much of this first-hand experience.

Before arriving in Port Vila, I spent several weeks at archives in Auckland, New Zealand and Canberra, Australia, where I viewed colonial correspondence and independence-era newspapers. Also, while in Auckland, I met with Dr. Selina Tusitala Marsh, a prominent Pacific literature scholar who was mentored by Albert Wendt, the ‘father’ of Pacific literary studies. She spoke to me about the field, gave me reading recommendations, and suggested contacts for me to speak to in Vanuatu.

After my time at the archives, I arrived in Port Vila. Bobby Shing, the program manager at Further Arts, picked me up from the airport. I spent much time with Bobby Shing and Marcel Meltherorong; Meltherorong is a Further Arts board member and one of the only published authors in Vanuatu. The three of us spearheaded a literary newsletter initiative, consistently planning, discussing, revising, and meeting with community members to see through the initiative’s success. This experience highlighted both the resistance to and desire for a literary culture in the Port Vila community.

Furthermore, I met by chance with Howard van Trease at a *nakamal*, or kava bar, during my first week in Vanuatu. Howard is a now-retired professor of Pacific politics and history, and before arriving in the nation I had read much of his work. This led to a mentorship that pushed my critical eye in directions that I otherwise would not have looked. Having lived in Vanuatu since the eve of independence, he shared his views on the Anglophone-Francophone tension, the role of foreigners in Vanuatu society, and the current state of Vanuatu as a whole.

With these experiences and conversations having a large impact on my understanding of Vanuatu's present and past, this thesis includes more first-hand, personal experience than would otherwise be expected. I include research alongside anecdote, and I intend for this approach to give a clearer picture of contemporary Vanuatu in relation to its past. All of the conversations interspersed throughout this thesis are taken directly from the handwritten notes that I took during my time abroad.

Additionally, this thesis focuses more on Vanuatu than on Oceania as a whole. Despite Pacific Islanders viewing their islands as interconnected pieces scattered throughout a vast ocean, analyzing the literary and artistic production from a single nation provides a powerful snapshot of the literary barriers and artistic diversity that exist in just one part of the Pacific. While there is currently an uptick in discussion about New Zealand Maori literature, the literary production from many smaller Pacific island-nations is completely nonexistent. Vanuatu is an interesting, worthwhile case study in that some of its authors have overcome the barriers to literary production, but the nation itself is still starved of resources and completely excluded from the global literary stage. However, even though it does not show in the literature, the nation's creative force has been shaped by millennia-old artistic traditions. By focusing solely on Vanuatu, we can explore the complex relationships between past, present, and future as they play out in art—and we can understand the influence that politics, foreign control, and otherness have over creative expression.

Finally, I focus on the Anglophone literature with little analysis of the Francophone literary output. This is due, in part, to my limited abilities with the French language and my limited amount of time. If I were to take these studies further, I would

address the Francophone literature—particularly, the novels of Marcel Meltherorong that I discuss later in the thesis. As we will see, the Anglophone Ni-Vanuatu and the Francophone Ni-Vanuatu were divided leading up to Independence in 1980. The tensions have eased, but the past still finds its way to the present. With that being said, the Francophone literature likely posits an alternative narrative, and perhaps *conflicting* narrative to that told by the Anglophone literature and music. Admittedly, my thesis is limited to the voices of those that advocated independence.

Argument

This thesis is my attempt at situating Vanuatu in the world literary scene. It arises from an absence—namely, the absence of Vanuatu Anglophone literature from the global literary marketplace. The reasons for this are complex: there are linguistic, political, educational, cultural, financial, and institutional factors that bar Vanuatu literature from becoming more popularly known. Beginning in the 1800s, Great Britain and France spread their opposing languages, politics, religions, and cultures throughout the nation's 83 islands, resulting in a linguistic and political schism among the Ni-Vanuatu people. Therefore, the first issue is one of language. Are Ni-Vanuatu writers to use English or French, which puts them at risk of alienating the other half of the Western-educated population, or should they use Bislama, a Pidgin language spoken by most of the nation that has dark colonial roots? The other alternative is to use a local dialect, of which there are nearly 100 and the largest of which is spoken by only 5,000 people.

However, some indigenous authors have taken up English as their language of choice. Beginning in the 1970s, they used their voices to criticize the colonizers, disparage their Francophone anti-independence counterparts, and call for a sense of

national unity. These voices did not make it to the international literary marketplace because they were not intended to. Pascal Casanova discusses how postcolonial nations adopt the rich literary traditions of the Western languages that are imposed upon them, but this is not the case with the Ni-Vanuatu Independence authors. These authors use simple, short-verse English to project their voices to their colonizers and their educated Ni-Vanuatu neighbors, but not to international literary consumers. This conscious denial of Western influence, coupled with Western judgments about ‘provincial’ poetry and a halt in literary funding after the Independence era, ensured that the nation’s literature would not circulate widely outside of the nation itself.

Additionally, the Vanuatu literary scene did not develop in the same way that it did in Africa, the Caribbean, and other postcolonial nations. In Vanuatu, multiple institutional forces are working against literary production, such as the education system, the publishing scene, and the law. To date, many of the schools teach either English or French, and most teachers and administrators are still exercising their power to stop students from speaking Bislama. Besides *Alliance Française*, a politically motivated Francophone organization, there are no outlets for creative publishing in Vanuatu. Furthermore, there are intellectual property laws that prohibit the use of traditional knowledge, and the only ‘bookstore’ consists of a couple of shelves of used books located in a local café that caters to foreigners and wealthy locals. Reading and writing creatively for pleasure does not seem to be prevalent in Ni-Vanuatu culture.

However, Vanuatu does not need a literary revolution, and it does not require resources or inspiration to spark literary output. While there are contemporary writers who would like to find their way into print, such as Rebecca Olul, the majority of the

population revels in the nation's alternative forms of artistic expression. The music scene is booming and the discussions of the nation's direction play themselves out on the stage. Ever-evolving *Kastom* stories have been passed down for generations and continue to influence the Ni-Vanuatu way of life. The *Wan Smolbag* theater is sold out almost every night, where actors perform plays about issues that face their community. The nation is in no need of artistic inspiration, as there are many alternative forms of art outside of print.

So, while there is an absence of print literature from Vanuatu, the nation stands in a unique place relative to the world literary scene. If contemporary authors choose to accept the influence of the Western canon, of which there is some early evidence, and if they combine the English language's literary history with the diverse cultural and artistic practices that they have grown up with, then Western audiences will likely rejoice at the literature they are met with. If this does not happen, though, then Vanuatu is not worse off because of it. The nation has a rich artistic scene that may not benefit the Ni-Vanuatu people commercially, but it helps them explore and reinforce their national identity.

Chapter 1: Vanuatu Context and Background

This chapter details the relevant historical, cultural, and political context of Vanuatu. The context is essential for understanding the nation's literature and art, such as Grace Mera Molisa's rich anti-colonial poetry, Tujah Nalainuja's songs that beg for national direction, and Rebecca Olul's stories that highlight the violence against some Ni-Vanuatu women. Furthermore, I detail the early colonial contact, the Independence era Ni-Vanuatu schism, and the contemporary effects that result from the chaotic past. This will demonstrate why there is such a cry for nationhood and sovereignty in today's art. Vanuatu is young. Many obstacles have stood in the way to developing a national sense of identity and direction, but, as we will see, many of Vanuatu's artists are still trying to move the nation forward.

1.1 European Contact and the Mission

Nearly 3000 years ago, Vanuatu served as a Pacific Islander melting pot; it was a center-point where many different people from the region settled (MacClancy 18). Other than pottery, we have little physical evidence of what life must have been like during these early days. However, we do know that *kastom*, which is the traditional, unique set of customs that govern Vanuatu life and society, dictated daily life on the islands. This Melanesian way of life flourished and evolved in Vanuatu for millennia; in 1606, however Spanish explorer Pedro Fernandez de Quiros arrived on the biggest island in the archipelago, Santo, with 130 of his men. He named the island "Austrialis del Espiritu Santo." Today, this island is still called Espiritu Santo, or, more colloquially, Santo.

Spanish contact, however, left the island with more than a name. *To Kill a Bird with Two Stones*, a book that details the history of Vanuatu, explains this contact on Santo in vivid detail:

Initial contacts were not good; one sailor shot a Ni-Vanuatu, cut his head and foot off, and hanged the body from a tree for all to see. The men of Big Bay [Santo] tried to limit the advance of the new arrivals but fled under attack from musketfire . . . his [de Quirios'] men made many forays into the bush, shot and killed several people, stole pigs and food, kidnapped three boys and were met by continued and increasing local resistance. (36)

Rather than attempting diplomacy, the Westerners treated the Ni-Vanuatu people as pests that had to be disposed of or scared away. But, despite these brutal and sustained efforts to colonize the island, the effort was unsuccessful. The Spaniards retreated from the island 50 days after arriving, leaving the people of Santo “with the memory of white-skinned men in strange clothes who travelled in floating villages, killed others in a mysterious way and stole pigs, boys and food” (MacClancy 36). Furthermore, as this text is a national book, any educated Ni-Vanuatu people would be aware of these events, artists included; as we will see in some of the independence literature, some authors want to repay this violence with violence. Europeans, however, did not make contact again until over a century after the initial Spanish foray.

Louis Antoine de Bougainville, a well-known French world-explorer, arrived in Vanuatu and made note of the archipelago in 1768. Shortly afterwards, Great Britain also became aware of the islands when Captain James Cook arrived. Cook is responsible for

naming the nation: he called them the “New Hebrides,” which is the name that lasted from his arrival in 1774 until Ni-Vanuatu independence in 1980.

European efforts to convert, colonize, and populate the islands began in 1839 with the arrival of missionaries on Tanna, a large island in Vanuatu known for its traditional practices and massive volcano. Within moments of disembarking, the two white men were killed by bow and arrow; because of this, “The Australian and English press reacted with horror. The churches, instead of withdrawing, redoubled their effort and changed their tactics” (MacClancy 45). This led to the London Missionary Society’s sending Polynesian men rather than white men, at least until the mission was established successfully. Success was only found when two British missionaries began to learn Tannese, the native language on Tanna, and they started delivering services in this language (MacClancy 46).

As the Presbyterian church began to gain influence, the mission began to restrict the local way of life. Ni-Vanuatu people were forced to wear European clothing, and they were not allowed to drink kava or participate in *kastom* dances; they spent most of their days building schoolhouses to further propagate the Christian mission (MacClancy 48). This effort proved successful, and the missionaries began training the locals to become teachers as well; multiplying the effectiveness and credibility of the instruction. These events mirror those in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, where a group of missionaries led by Mr. Brown slowly transform the African village around them, guiding them towards Western ideals and practices. This was the case in Vanuatu—today, a vast majority of the population is Christian and many traditional practices have been abandoned. Despite these early Western affronts to tradition and *kastom*, many

communities exist that preserve their customs, and many customs still survive within the society.

The various religions on Vanuatu contributed to deep-seated differences between Ni-Vanuatu people. After the London Missionary Society established a Presbyterian following in the South, the French, Catholic missionaries invaded the North from New Caledonia. John Higginson, motivated by trade and agricultural ventures, led his initiative (Garrett "Footsteps" 100). This early religious separation between North and South led to deeply rooted differences that continue to affect Vanuatu today. As John Garrett states in his overview of missionary activity in the Pacific Ocean, the Catholic mission succeeded by ensuring a permanent introduced feature of colonial contact - division between north and south, and Franco-British mutual distaste. The antipathy was transferred to Catholic-Presbyterian religious rivalry among the Islanders. Few converts and few missionaries learned both the colonial languages; fewer still detected virtue in either the culture or the faith of the other group. ("Footsteps" 103)

Therefore, anti-other sentiment between the Ni-Vanuatu islanders began as early as Europeans began settling on the islands. While the churches were uniting local people in their respective regions, powerful barriers began to grow between those converted to Catholicism and those converted to Presbyterianism. Churches eventually began to teach and spread the language of the colonial power they were associated with, forming the basis for the eventual schism between the Ni-Vanuatu people. At this early point in colonial history, however, they were separated by religious beliefs, language, and geography. As we will soon see, these early divisions eventually turn political, resulting in a roadblock to Ni-Vanuatu unity and a colonial situation like no other.

Although, before European contact, the Ni-Vanuatu sense of unity did not extend beyond one's own clan. On the contrary, relationships with members of other clans "were often troubled. People in the next valley most likely spoke a different dialect, if not a different language. [They] were regarded with permanent suspicion and antagonism" (MacClancy 32). This led to wars where clans aimed to kill one member of a neighboring clan; if they were successful, they brought the dead man back to their village, chopped him into pieces, and cooked him before sending this delicacy to friendly villages (MacClancy 32). Because of the emphasis on reciprocity in the Pacific Islands, these receiving villages often pursued war so as to repay the gift of human meat.

So, while the British and French presence did combat cannibalism and lead to unity among the islanders within their geographic regions, it concurrently created deeply seated ideological, religious, and cultural differences. In 1906, these differences turned inherently political with the institution of the French and British Condominium government, an agreement between the two nations to rule and occupy Vanuatu jointly. They had a joint legal system, a British legal system, and a French legal system, and each citizen had to decide which of the latter two legal systems to subject themselves to—naturally, this was determined based off of the language that they spoke. This led to complex issues in the decade leading up to Independence, which will be explored later in this chapter.

1.2 Bislama: Origins and Evolution

Bislama is a Pidgin English that is now one of the national languages of Vanuatu and the language is spoken by almost all of the Ni-Vanuatu population. It borrows extensively from English vocabulary and incorporates native grammar and dialects. Despite being

spoken and comprehended by almost all Ni-Vanuatu people, Bislama's origins are unsettling. Beginning in the 1860s, Pacific Islanders were taken from their home islands and brought to work in unfavorable conditions for very low wages on Australian sugar plantations—this practice is known as blackbirding. To gather workers, recruiters usually went to the shores of islands and used fabrication and rhetorical tricks to cajole islanders onto the ships (MacClancy 54). Once the workers arrived at the plantations, they were treated as if they were slaves. Resentment for the white men grew, but so did their ability to communicate with one another. Upon eventual return to Vanuatu, the laborers brought back with them the Pidgin English that they had used on the plantations. Employing this broken English on plantations in Vanuatu led to a blend of English words with native and French grammar, giving birth to Bislama (Jarraud-Leblanc 2).

With recruitment from all over the archipelago, Bislama began to grow. However, it also came to be viewed “as the language of social deviants and troublemakers, both by missionaries and the members of the local communities” (Crowley 64). Evidence of this prejudice remains to this day. While I was speaking with Rebecca Olul, a current Ni-Vanuatu unpublished author, she commented on Bislama. She mentioned that, when she was young, she and her peers were slapped in school if they were caught speaking Bislama. Her parents discouraged her from speaking the language as it was seen as “dirty.” Because of this, she developed impeccable English and studied in New Zealand. Now, she feels disconnected and out of place in certain situations. When visiting outer islands for work, she is unable to communicate with other Ni-Vanuatu people as effectively as the white Peace Corps volunteers because of her limited Bislama language capacity. She also stated her confusion with the recent decision by the Vanuatu Ministry

of Education to conduct the first three years of primary school education in Bislama. “We need to decide what we want as a nation. We need to decide what is important to us and stay with it. No more flip-flopping.” This is only one example of the contemporary discontent with Bislama.

The current state of Bislama is conflicted. It began on plantations where Ni-Vanuatu men were taken advantage of and exploited. It was shunned by the education system and students were actively discouraged from using it; rather, they were supposed to use English or French, depending on which colonial power’s school system they attended. In some schools, these practices are still employed despite the national mandate. Many parents still do not want their children speaking Bislama at school. On the other hand, it is the only language that the entire nation can use to communicate with one another. There are nearly 100 local languages, the most widespread of which is spoken by nearly 5,000 people. Most people only become proficient in either English or French, and that is only if they make the effort while in school. The majority of the English-educated Ni-Vanuatu people in Port Vila with whom I spoke had extremely limited English speaking ability and could speak no French at all. This limited English proficiency reinforces the idea that the Independence literature that we visit in Chapter 2 was intended for the colonizers and those involved in politics, not the locals. Some local people, however, are fluent in English, but graduating from an English-speaking secondary school does not equate to English fluency. Therefore, the necessity of Bislama for inter-island communication is elevated. In many cases, it is the only language that one can use to communicate with Ni-Vanuatu people from different islands or villages. This is why

some artists choose to use Bislama in their literature or music: it has the power to spread a message and unite the local population.

Interestingly, I noticed that many English-educated Ni-Vanuatu speak to one another in Bislama. French-educated Ni-Vanuatu, however, almost always communicate in French. This may comment on the quality of language instruction in Francophone schools, or on the sense of pride that is instilled towards the French language in Francophone schools. Regardless, this linguistic difference is present, even today. It shows that even though almost all Ni-Vanuatu people can speak and understand Bislama, not all of them use it as their language of choice.

To combat the negative stigma surrounding Bislama and the overall indifference towards reading and writing, I worked with Further Arts to establish an online, Bislama newsletter composed of creative writing, such as poetry, short stories, and song lyrics. In addition to my conversations with Rebecca Olul, the clearest example of the resistance to Bislama occurred during a conversation with a primary school headmaster. I went with Further Arts director Bobby Shing to explain our initiative to the headmaster. When we mentioned that the writing would be in Bislama, she stopped us. “You want me to ask the children to write in *Bislama*?” We told her that we were considering accepting submissions in English or French, and then translating them, but she voiced her concerns. She told us that the children could write poetry in English, but that the parents and other staff would be very against them writing in Bislama. “I like the idea,” she said, “but many of the parents are traditional. They would not be happy that we are encouraging Bislama in the school.”

When Rebecca heard about the newsletter initiative, she wrote a poem in Bislama that criticized Bislama as a language, calling it a tool of the colonizer. After speaking to her about it, she said she would tell her writer friends about the newsletter. She reported back to me with the following anecdote.

I told a friend about the idea, and she was very interested at first. Then, she asked me what language she had to write in. I told her Bislama, and she laughed and said “Hell no.”

In other words, we found resistance to the use of Bislama. However, authors such as Rebecca see the potential value in redefining the language and experimenting with its use.

Overall, there is no easy answer to the language question. It seems necessary that a national language be accessible to the entire nation, and there is little chance of the entire nation adopting either English or French due to the historical development and politics associated with the two. Also, it cannot be expected that the nation will adopt any of the smaller village languages. Bislama as a national language makes the most intuitive sense because it is already used and understood by almost everyone. However, the negative stigma limits the language’s use and stifles its growth. If the Ni-Vanuatu people can overcome the language’s dark past and repurpose it, it seems hopeful that the language can continue to grow into something separate from English or French. The Bislama vocabulary already grows rapidly, but a more positive public perception and more creative uses of the language would expectedly promote further development.

1.3 Connectedness in the Region

I refer to Vanuatu as a nation, which it is; the common definition of a nation, however, is limiting. The Ni-Vanuatu people do not see themselves as the inhabitants of a small nation in a vast sea. Michelle Keown discusses this in *Pacific Islands Writing*, using supporting comments from Pacific Islander novelist and academic Epeli Hao'ofa:

Westerners have commonly conceptualized the Pacific as a constellation of tiny 'islands in a far sea', remote from European colonial centres of power and dependent on 'First World' nations for their socio-economic survival. While acknowledging that many Pacific Islands are geographically 'small' and often reliant upon overseas aid to bolster their fragile economies, Hau'ofa nevertheless asserts that Indigenous Pacific oral traditions and cosmologies figure Oceania not as an assemblage of tiny, far-flung islands, but rather as part of a universe comprising not just land surfaces, but also 'the surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse and exploit it, the underworld with its fire-controlling and earth-shaking denizens, and the heavens above with their hierarchies of powerful gods and named stars' (4).

The Pacific Islanders therefore view the sea as a connecting force rather than as a separating force. Marcel Meltherorong, Francophone author and one of Vanuatu's only contemporary published authors, confirmed this sentiment while I was speaking to him in Port Vila. As an author born in New Caledonia and living in Vanuatu, he is aware of the artist's role in the Pacific. He claimed that they do not view the islands as separate; they are creating art that unites rather than alienates.

This sentiment of connection was reflected again and again throughout my experience in Port Vila. On old buildings and on streets, people have spray painted “Free West Papua.” West Papua identifies as Melanesian, but is currently a part of Indonesia. At a kava meeting with active community members, Bobby Shing pulled me aside, “Devlin, I need to tell you something that you won’t hear anywhere else in the world. There are very bad things happening in West Papua.” He explained that genocide was occurring there, and that Indonesian men were killing innocent West Papuan citizens. Despite this, the events are getting no media attention. He invited me to Facebook pages that document some of the atrocities, and he explained that many Ni-Vanuatu people feel very passionate about these issues because they view Melanesians as their brothers.

Bobby continued by citing Father Walter Lini’s independence speech, where Lini claims that Vanuatu is not free until all of her brothers are free. Because of this, many Ni-Vanuatu people feel strongly about West Papuan and New Caledonian continued colonization. The sense of brotherhood and unity transcends the sea, and it transcends nationhood. Connectedness in Oceania is growing, and citizens in these Melanesian nations are vibrantly aware of the prosperity and suffering of their brothers and sisters. This explains why the art festivals held in Vanuatu, discussed in chapter 3, bring so many groups from around Oceania. Artwork is being created to share with other islanders—to demonstrate one’s own customs and display those customs to interested kin. Therefore, the contemporary Ni-Vanuatu artist has a new role. Whereas authors contributed to divisions in the independence era, authors now must foster connections. They must acknowledge the boundary-breaking sense of unity and communion.

1.4 Kava and Oral Culture

Kava is a root crop native to the Pacific Islands, and it is turned into a brown liquid. The drink is extremely popular and it is an essential part of Ni-Vanuatu culture. Although prepared differently in different nations, it has a sedative effect that leads to a sense of clear-headed well-being in the consumer. Consumption reduces anxiety and may induce sleepiness, which gives way to more vivid than usual dreams. If too much kava is consumed, the consumer becomes “kava drunk,” and motor functions are impaired, depth perception is skewed, and vomiting will likely occur. In Vanuatu, the kava roots are harvested, and then they are skinned and mashed on a board created for this purpose. The mashed roots form a puree, which is mixed with water. The liquid is then separated into buckets and delivered to the *nakamals* for sale and consumption. The strength of Vanuatu kava is so strong due to this process; the kava is consumed fresh, as opposed to other neighboring nations, such as Fiji, that grind and dry the root before using it to prepare their kava. The Ni-Vanuatu people pride themselves on the strength of their kava. At the point of sale, consumers drink the kava from a half of a coconut shell, and, therefore, one drinks a “shell” of kava, rather than a “cup” or “glass.” It is consumed in social environments and it is used as a social lubricant.

My experiences with Vanuatu kava began on the day of my arrival. Bobby Shing picked me up from the airport and drove me to where I would be staying. Our conversation drifted to kava, and he mentioned that he currently only drinks kava on special occasions; he then asked me if I would like to drink kava with him and his friend later that evening to celebrate my arrival. They picked me up after sunset and we drove to the other side of the bay.

After arriving at a quiet location on the water, we parked the truck and Bobby Shing took out kava, papaya, and sugar cane. He began speaking about the practices associated with the kava drinking: “You usually take your first shell right before the sun sets,” he explained as he was lining up all of the items in the bed of the pickup truck. “Some people believe the shell will be extra effective if you finish it at the exact moment the sun dips below the horizon.” He then explained the history of the drink—how it used to be drunk only by the village chiefs, particularly when they were meeting with one another. “The kava would soothe the chiefs and make them more open. The kava helped them be honest and speak their minds.” Once Bobby Shing had poured the shells full of kava, he mentioned that he likes to do a toast before drinking the first shell. He said a few words about my arrival and our newsletter initiative, and then we all quickly drank the brown, earthy tasting liquid. After finishing the shell and feeling my tongue go numb, Bobby Shing explained *washemout*, which are light food items typically chewed or eaten after drinking a shell of kava to remove the bitter taste from one’s mouth. He introduced me to papaya, and handed me fresh sugar cane to chew on.

Within the hour I completely understood how useful such a drink would be at a meeting of chiefs. I felt completely at peace in the new environment, and the three of us were sharing stories about our cultures and lives; they told me about *nagaemas*, or black magic, which is a practice that the Ni-Vanuatu community believes in and is wary of. They also told me about the stereotypes that exist in Vanuatu based on the different islands within the archipelago: those on Tanna are usually assumed to be troublemakers, and those on Ambrym are usually assumed to be involved in sorcery. The stories and cultural exchange were abundant. They even taught me a handshake that young people

use in Vanuatu after somebody makes a joke: one person puts out his index and middle fingers curved like a hook. The other person places his index finger, also curved like a hook, between the two fingers, and then they pull their fingers apart from each other. The knuckles rub against one another and make a popping noise. In all, the kava led to an openness that was completely natural and clear-headed, unlike anything else I have ever experienced.

My awareness of kava's role in the community solidified after getting invited to a kava bar, or *nakamal*, by John Lynch, a retired, distinguished professor from the University of the South Pacific who also served as the Director of the Linguistics Department. I emailed him, hoping to discuss my research and volunteer work with him, and he invited me to Seaside Maewo Nakamel that Friday evening. When I arrived, I was introduced to many other current and retired professors—I discovered that they had been meeting and talking over kava at this location for the last 30 years. As has been echoed to me many times while in Port Vila: “if you want to make change in Vanuatu, you will spend most of your time at *nakamals*.”

Kava, however, was not always so accessible to everyday Ni-Vanuatu citizens. Lindstrom discusses the changing role of kava in Vanuatu society; he observes that there “has been a brisk transformation of kava from sacred substance to recreational drug.” In the past, kava was used to ease tensions between chiefs. Now, men and women from all walks of life, especially in Port Vila, commercially consume the drink. Also, the drink is accessible by all; a typical shell is 100 vatu, the equivalent of \$1 USD.

Overall, kava is very unique to Oceania, and Vanuatu employs a kava preparation practice that is not used anywhere else in the world. The drink is discussed in some of the

Independence literature, placed in favorable contrast to the wine and whiskey of the West, and in turn highlighting its importance in Vanuatu society. Kava's recent commercialization has resulted in open, honest socialization, and even during my single month in Port Vila I participated in many eye-opening discussions. It is a tool that facilitates change, and it leads to many conversations that can serve as the bases for works of art.

1.5 Francophonie and French Empire in the Pacific

The Francophone presence in Vanuatu is complicated, mainly because of Francophonie, a politically motivated spread of the French language. At the center of Port Vila is *Alliance Française*, a community organization dedicated to spreading the French language. They provide language classes, workshops, and Francophone publishing to the community. However, this mission is controversial. As Cecile Vigouroux notes in "Francophonie," "La Francophonie cannot be separated from worries about the vitality or . . . the endangerment of French as an imperial language in the face of the spread of English," and people "have wondered whether La Francophonie is not a new excuse for perpetuating French political influence on its former exploitation colonies" (380). Hence, purposefully spreading the French language is a calculated political move. The issue of French political influence and France's "holding on" to former colonies is especially salient in Vanuatu, where France did not want to relinquish colonial control and the Ni-Vanuatu people were separated by the colonial language that they spoke.

Of the people I met in Vanuatu, Howard van Trease is the most vocal critic of the Francophone presence. As a scholar of Pacific history and politics since the early 1970s, he has seen and experienced France's unwillingness to relinquish their influence in

Vanuatu. His primary complaint was that “people don’t talk about it,” referring to the events of independence. He notices that there is still tension between Anglophone and Francophone Ni-Vanuatu people, and he retold several anecdotes. For example, children frequently break out in fights at football games between an Anglophone school and a Francophone school. Afterwards, the children often comment that they were fighting, but they don’t know why. His most compelling anecdote was about his time on a committee that was purposed to oversee the creation of a Vanuatu history book that the whole nation could use so as to have a regulated history curriculum. The French man on the committee who was tasked with the translation of the selected book into French made extreme changes to the content surrounding independence. When the committee addressed the changed content, the man argued and verbally assaulted the committee. He proceeded by trying to print and distribute his version of the textbook to Francophone schools without the committee’s approval. Because of issues such as these, Howard argues that “it’s always about independence,” and that local people need to start talking about these issues if they are ever to get better. He said that if you try talking about the issues between the Francophone and Anglophone Ni-Vanuatu people to members of the community, they will immediately state that it is over with and there is no reason to talk about it. I found this to be the case when attempting to broach the conflict with those that I had established a relationship already in the community.

Therefore, the continued propagation of the French language in Vanuatu is a politically charged and contentious issue. While Francophone Ni-Vanuatu take pride in the language and do not hesitate to use it when speaking to one another, it is impossible to ignore the conflict that originated from these linguistic barriers, especially surrounding

independence. Much of the independence poetry discusses this conflict, but the conversation was abandoned and the issue is left unresolved. *Alliance Francaise* continues to push the French language as much as possible, and many Francophone schools continue teaching only in French, not finding it necessary to promote fluency in English. Perhaps Howard is right, and Ni-Vanuatu citizens, both Anglophones and Francophones, must discuss these issues and historical grievances in a healthy way, so that the nation can unite and grow from the divisive past. This is an example of an issue that can be further explored through art, discussed in national music and incorporated into the ever-evolving *kastom* stories that we address in Chapter 3.

1.6 Anglophone-Francophone Divide and Vanuatu Independence

The division between Anglophone and Francophone Ni-Vanuatu became antagonistic in the decade leading up to independence. The Anglophone *Vanua'aku Pati* (VP) originated in the early 1970s. While it initially attracted Anglophone and Francophone Ni-Vanuatu people, “the Francophones [very soon] broke away and formed their own political organizations” (Regenvanu 101). The members of the VP were the sole advocates for Vanuatu independence. The Francophone parties all pushed for prolonged dependence on France. In the Anglophone sphere, it is unanimously acknowledged that the high-ranking Francophone Ni-Vanuatu political figures were bribed by French officials to ensure that their parties complied with France’s desires. The decision-makers in France wanted to maintain control over Vanuatu because of their desire to maintain empire in the Pacific; they did not want to lose New Caledonia, which provided them a rich source of nickel (MacLellan & Chesneaux 73). They also saw this independence movement as a threat to *francophonie*. Therefore, the Ni-Vanuatu people

were used as pawns in the global chess game of empire and influence. The official Francophone rhetoric is that Vanuatu was not ready for independence, and that they needed to remain dependent until this readiness was achieved.

However, after multiple protests and violent confrontations, the *Vanua'aku Pati* finally achieved independence for the nation on July 30th, 1980. While this finally led to a sovereign Ni-Vanuatu administration, the issues between the Ni-Vanuatu people were not completely soothed. The decade leading to Independence bred much anti-other sentiment and vocal protests of the other's ideals. Both sides were accused of blindly following their respective colonial power, and many of the Francophone people felt as if they had lost.

These barriers between the Francophones and Anglophones came as a natural consequence of a form of Western contact that is unique to Vanuatu. The Ni-Vanuatu people were forced to learn different languages, adopt different religious denominations, and remain in their geographical locations. Now that the entire archipelago is forced to work together as a nation to progress, these issues must be grappled with and overcome. While tensions are eased, and it is not unusual for Francophone and Anglophone Ni-Vanuatu people to be friends, it is crucial that the historical conflicts are discussed, especially since they seem to always lie just beneath the surface.

This is why the literary and artistic scenes are so important to the future of Vanuatu. The artists are sparking conversations of national identity and direction, and they are bringing key issues such as these to the public sphere. With so many foreign influences and investments, it is in the hands of the Ni-Vanuatu to shape their country into an entity that resonates with them. They earned their independence, but the thinkers

and critics are vibrantly aware that this is not the sovereignty that they envisioned. Without common ground and clearly defined cultural values, Vanuatu will struggle against foreign influences and political corruption. Again, Ni-Vanuatu art has the power to guide people into accord with one another, and it is a medium for participating in national debates and critiques.

Chapter 2: Literature and Theory

In this chapter, I discuss the origins and evolution of Vanuatu publishing and literature, demonstrating the unique role that these institutions hold in Vanuatu society. After outlining this trajectory and using primary texts to support my claims, I offer my observations of the contemporary atmosphere surrounding literature in Vanuatu. I continue by situating Vanuatu in the critical debates surrounding World Literature, demonstrating that the Ni-Vanuatu Independence literature is written in English so that it is accessible to the colonizers and political opponents, not so that it can participate in the battle for international literary legitimacy. Even though these authors are writing in a language that has a rich literary past, they choose to begin their literary tradition in the 1970s, denying influence of the Western canon and refusing to write with concern for the global commercial marketplace. This picking-and-choosing of Western influence may have played a role in the cessation of Ni-Vanuatu publishing after the Independence era, but it is more important that, against many barriers, this literature was able to live and grow in the first place.

2.1 Early Publishing in Vanuatu

Long before Ni-Vanuatu poets began writing and attempting to get published, European forces introduced writing as a medium of communication. As far as we know, written languages were not used in Vanuatu before European contact. Using an alphabet to “draw” language is an inherently foreign concept in a Vanuatu context, and this has much to do with why contemporary Vanuatu is slow to take up this practice. Before writing was employed as a creative form of self-expression, it was introduced as both a religious and informative tool.

The first known printed materials arrived in Vanuatu with the missionaries in the mid-1800s. Church officials and teachers used printed hymnbooks to reinforce their lessons. On some islands, much effort was put into the development of printed religious material in the native languages, which required the missionaries to develop and teach a standardized version of the spoken language. This early introduction of the printed word focused on comprehension rather than creation. It was employed as a method to spread Christian beliefs, and it did not contribute to indigenous Ni-Vanuatu literary production.

The earliest non-religious publication in Vanuatu is the *British Newsletter*, published by the British Information Office from the 1960s until 1980s. This publication is in black and white, with photographs, on A4 paper. It also sold ad space, including many ads for airline, cigarette, and alcohol brands. It initially only published in English, but the office was responsive to community needs; they accepted letters from Ni-Vanuatu people and made their decisions accordingly, eventually including Bislama content and changing the name to the *New Hebrides News*.

The letters to the editor are held in collections at the University of Auckland's Western Pacific Archives, which I visited before my arrival in Vanuatu. In the collection of correspondence, I found many unpublished letters from Ni-Vanuatu citizens to the British Information Office—a large number of them engaged in a debate about whether or not Bislama is a formidable, stand-alone language and whether or not it should be used in official capacities. They demonstrate the passion and controversy surrounding Bislama, and, furthermore, they provide us with some of the earliest written texts by educated Ni-Vanuatu writers. Many defend Bislama, or Pidgin as they still called it in the late 1960s. They recognize how essential the language is to communication and Ni-

Vanuatu unity. As John William Simbolo states in his undated letter circa 1968: “if we by some means succeed in destroying Pidgin, then . . . it will form some sorts of separations amongst the people” (1). He claims that the language enables Ni-Vanuatu people to be friends with one another despite their different mother tongues, and he proceeds by asking “what would happen to those who could not speak either English or French? How could they take their shares in the development?” (2). Simbolo recognizes that Bislama is a glue, holding the Ni-Vanuatu islanders together and keeping them informed about the events occurring throughout the nation. Judah Butu, in a separate letter, echoes this sentiment: “Pidgine is the only gateway to communications” (2). Bislama is, unarguably, the only language spoken by a vast majority of the population, and the islanders do not wish to lose this valuable means of communication.

The most eloquent and detailed piece surrounding this debate, however, is that by a Ni-Vanuatu man named Gérard Leymang. Initially attending school in the Francophone Ni-Vanuatu education system, he excelled and was able to attend secondary school in New Caledonia and university in France. Due to his high level of education, he became a Catholic priest, politician, and journalist in Vanuatu upon his return. Therefore, he has a unique set of experiences to his local counterparts, and it is evident in his unpublished article that he sent to the *British Information Office*. He opens by claiming that Bislama “is too poor a language to be able to rise to a respectable intellectual level” (Leymang 1). He takes the side of those who claim that Pidgin is merely a knock-off of English, and that it is solely a step towards learning a more advanced language. Leymang makes a point, however, that is unmentioned by his peers: Ni-Vanuatu people should learn English or French because it “brings the ideas (whether good or bad) of the rest of the

world within reach” (1). Here, Leymang expresses implicit value in connecting with the outside world. He views access to foreign ideas as something positive, insightful, and worthwhile. As the Ni-Vanuatu version of Pidgin is unique to itself, it would be very difficult to consume outside media without a grasp on the foreign languages employed.

Leymang proceeds by qualifying his claim about why Ni-Vanuatu people should learn Western languages. He states that these languages “should be a means of wider contact with the rest of the world, but not an essential goal which would culturally uproot the New Hebridean, leav[ing] him floundering in a cultural no man’s land” (3). In other words, the Western languages are merely tools—not aspirations. One need not abandon his own values in favor of foreign values; as Leymang argues, “It’s not a question of turning the New Hebridean into a Bossuet or a Shakespeare . . . We must not overburden the mind of the New Hebridean student with classical authors, and dates and historical events which have nothing to do with his milieu and aspirations” (3). Therefore, it is not necessary to study the foreign classics or mindlessly repeat facts about a culture that is not one’s own. Emulation is not the goal. Ni-Vanuatu culture need not bend to that of the West, but even Leymang notices that this is only possible to a degree: “For a New Hebridean it is necessary to assimilate a European culture . . . this does not constitute a denial or a disparagement of his condition as a ‘native,’” and Leymang then clarifies by stating that nobody should “servilely and passively copy a foreign culture” (4). This necessity of foreign assimilation is likely due to the power structure that is established by the British and French condominium government: the Ni-Vanuatu no longer have freedom to operate completely free of outside influences, but they do have the capacity to be aware of their assimilations and to retain the qualities that make them unique.

Leymang even criticizes Western culture as “tinselly” and “ephemeral,” implicitly creating a binary that situates Vanuatu culture as steadfast and permanent (4). To end his article, he asks whether or not “the West, confusing technical evolution and human culture, [will] continue to consider itself as the ultimate and necessary standard of all progress” (Leymang 6).

Overall, Leymang’s unpublished article is confused at some points and clear at others: he does not find Bislama to be a substantial language on its own, but he does not think that Ni-Vanuatu people should give up their customs and languages in deference to those of the West. Western languages are useful for consuming outside ideas, but one must not forget one’s own culture and place within the world. He is critical of the West, but a product of Western higher education. He finds the use of Bislama “intellectually backward” (1), but also claims that the education system should not employ a “condemnation of this language which links the islands” (5). Therefore, even within the mind of one Ni-Vanuatu intellectual, we see the struggle of coming to terms with Bislama. It is necessary for communication, but limited in its vocabulary and potential to express abstract ideas—this is the same debate that weathers on the minds of the Ni-Vanuatu intellectuals today.

J.S. Tari sums up the sentiment underlying the language debate in a letter of his own: Bislama is here to stay. He states that

There are many better ways in which you can help us New Hebrideans than just telling us to forget our language. It is not an easy thing for a Frenchman or an Englishman to forget his language. Therefore it is a waste of time talking against Pidgin. (1)

Tari identifies with Bislama, and he considers it his own. It is hard to argue against the role that Bislama plays in Ni-Vanuatu society. The nation is evolving and the people are communicating with people outside of their villages. Bislama has been the language of choice for doing so, and to disparage the language or highlight its intellectual failings proves unfruitful. It is a language of utility, and it has the potential to grow into something more. Languages evolve. We are not speaking Old English in the same way that tomorrow's Ni-Vanuatu citizens need not be speaking Pidgin English. Bislama has its limitations, but it is continuously changing, growing, and evolving.

This unofficial debate via unpublished letters made its way into the official stream of decision-making—the advisory council. In the December 28th, 1971 newsletter, an article titled “Use of Pidgin” outlines the 22nd advisory council session on whether or not Pidgin should be used in news and media. As if to respond to the debate, they discussed whether or not the language should be viewed as transitional or freestanding; some thought that it should be an officially recognized language while others thought that it was an indispensable means of communication, but nothing more (“Use” 9-10). The debate began with the people, and it escalated to a point where it would have real consequences on the policy.

Years after the debate began, the effects came into fruition. On January 22, 1974, the first “Bislama Nius” section debuted in the previously English-only newsletter. It includes news in Bislama from 8 different islands, and it is about topics ranging from crime to politics. However, in a letter from 1969 when this Bislama-English side-by-side innovation was first mentioned, the British Information Officer points out that “people who can read Pidgin must have been taught to read either in French or English – other

wise they wouldn't even understand the letters," therefore, there is "no need for a Pidgin translation" (Letter to Mr. Ludgater 1). This is a valid argument, and the Bislama innovation may have still left many citizens without access. However, if the reader had learned the alphabet through Western primary school, it would likely be easier for him to read Bislama than English, as Bislama would be, generally, spoken more frequently. Additionally, it enabled educated Ni-Vanuatu to read the news aloud to any listeners who may not have been able to comprehend one of the Western languages. So, even though many Bislama speakers would have had difficulty reading the letters, this monumental decision demonstrated the administration's acceptance of the language as an official form of communication.

While the unpublished letters to the *British Newsletter* are insightful, the published content has its merits as well. It contains local stories about crime, politics, law, and the economy. Some issues include features on important foreign heads of state that visited Vanuatu; these are usually headline events, including extensive commentary with many pictures. In a single issue from Nov. 20th, 1973, the newsletter included a "Poet's Corner" containing the first non-religious poem published in Vanuatu, and it is written by "A New Hebridean Traveller." In the typical, short-line Ni-Vanuatu style, the poet compares Melanesian life to the busy-city Western life:

In Melanesia
 The life
 is simple and
 the pace
 is s-l-o-w
 And men are
 Willing
 To help their
 Neighbours.
 Better than in

London
 Or New York
 Where men and
 Machines
 Are alike
 And people die
 Before
 They have lived.

While it is unclear whether or not this poem is written by a Ni-Vanuatu native or a foreigner who has visited Vanuatu, it offers a biting criticism of the West and establishes multiple binaries that favor Vanuatu: the people in London are dead, unhelping machines whereas those in Melanesia are kind, living humans. The ambiguity surrounding the author's identity, however, makes it difficult to draw conclusions about national pride and identity: the poet could be a New Hebridean who has travelled outside of the islands, just as Leymang did. It could be that, like Leymang, this poet criticizes the ephemerality of Western culture, demonstrating his pride for his steadfast, local culture. On the other hand, it could be a Westerner who is relaxing in the Pacific, enjoying the break from his busy life. The short verse style of the poetry favors the former, as this is characteristic of Vanuatu poetry from the Independence era, which will be demonstrated later in this chapter. So, acknowledging the author's ambiguity, it is noteworthy that the *New Hebrides News* did offer its readers a creative sample of work early in the 1970s.

Overall, the *New Hebrides News* did not provide much creative content for its readers, but it did serve as a rich source of information on politics and local happenings. The staff responded to the desires of the newsletter's readership, and the readers were active in supplying feedback to the Information Office. This apparently mutually beneficial relationship may not have directly promoted creative writing, but it did

familiarize its readers with the act of reading, and consuming news media is popular and widespread in Vanuatu today.

2.2 Institute of Pacific Studies

The British Information Office's shortcomings in the creative sphere were compensated for by the 1968 introduction of the Fiji-based University of the South Pacific (USP), which greatly facilitated indigenous literary endeavors. More importantly, the South Pacific Creative Arts Society (SPCAS) and the Institute of Pacific Studies (IPS) formed at the USP in 1972, both of which were devoted to promoting writing, reading, and publishing in the Pacific. They created a newsletter entitled *Mana*, which features creative writing from nations served by the USP, including the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. The 1975 anthology of Vanuatu poetry, *Some Modern Poetry From Vanuatu*, is sourced exclusively from this newsletter.

Additionally, father of Pacific literary criticism Albert Wendt began teaching creative writing at the USP in 1974. In one of his most famous works, *Towards a New Oceania*, Wendt calls for an artistic uprising in the Pacific. He claims that "Any real understanding of ourselves and our existing cultures calls for an attempt to understand colonialism and what it did and is still doing to us" (50), and he follows this by stating that "Self-expression is a prerequisite of self-respect" (58). Therefore, he is pushing Oceanic people to creatively explore the oppression they must encounter and the cultures that they represent; he advocates artistic self-expression as a method to enact one's agency. Consequently, his presence at the USP was a driving force behind literary movements, and he pulled in much funding for literary causes. Michelle Keown, author

of *Pacific Islands Writing*, notes how central the USP was to Anglophone publishing in the 1970s:

Many of the best-known writers and critics of the contemporary Pacific—including Epli Hau’ofa, Satendra Nandan, Subramani, Konai Helu Thaman, and Albert Wendt—have been connected with USP at some point in their careers, and Wendt’s first two anthologies of Pacific writing, *Lali* and *Nuanua*, are almost exclusively focused on writers from Fiji and other nations served by the USP.

(117)

Because of the USP’s connection to many islands around the Pacific and the IPS’s clear mission to promote writing and publishing, these institutions were essential for the Anglophone literary uprising in the Pacific. They provided an outlet for writers to have their works read, while also exposing readers to creative writing from other nations in the region.

However, the literary uprising in the 1970s and early 1980s quickly lost traction. While in Vanuatu, I often spoke to Howard van Trease about why this may have been the case, as he was the director of the Institute of Pacific Studies for 12 years. He said that during the 1970s and early 1980s, funding kept flowing from regional grants and university awards from Australia and New Zealand. Into the 1990s, however, funding quickly came to a halt. The drop in funding was accompanied by organizational changes at the USP, and the decision-makers began directing funds at technological innovation rather than promoting creative content. He claimed that the hype surrounding literary production was directly tied to the hype surrounding independence.

The decline in organizational hype mirrored the decline in local enthusiasm and literary production. The heat surrounding the national debate of Independence led to heightened passions: the pro-independence *Vanua'aku Pati* (VP) members understood the importance of sovereignty—they viewed it as the first step towards regaining their agency. When France as a Western power attempted to retain their foothold in Vanuatu, it angered the VP and pro-independence Ni-Vanuatu citizens. When the Francophone Ni-Vanuatu people, however, began also advocating prolonged dependence, the Anglophone Ni-Vanuatu and VP were outraged. Instead of combatting a Western, exploitative hegemon, they realized that they were also combatting their brothers; their Ni-Vanuatu counterparts were pursuing a policy that was counter to their very identity as a nation and a people. This sense of betrayal and these high passions led to a surge of poetry leading up to and soon after 1980. Those involved in the independence movement were involved wholeheartedly: they published poetry, planned public demonstrations, attended conferences at the United Nations, and explained their cause to the Ni-Vanuatu islanders on dozens of different islands. This is why, soon after independence and the dying down of these anti-colonial and anti-other passions, the impassioned literature soon died down as well.

The Independence era literature, however, has its merits. Multiple writers from Vanuatu were able to publish work while the Institute of Pacific Studies had resources and funding. Since much of this work was completed surrounding Vanuatu independence, it is a product of the first wave of postcolonial literature: almost all of the poetry is blatantly anti-colonial. For example, both Grace Mera Molisa's *Black Stone* and the anthology *Some Modern Poetry From Vanuatu* demonstrate the anti-colonial

sentiment and the schism between Ni-Vanuatu people due to the political and linguistic divide.

2.3 Vanuatu Independence Literature

Vanuatu's Independence literature reflects the turmoil, anger, and hope during the years leading up to and soon after the nation's official sovereignty. The political atmosphere necessitates the literature, but some authors champion multiple causes. Grace Mera Molisa, for example, the most well-known poet from Vanuatu, pursues women's rights while also criticizing the colonial influence. There are three sentiments, however, that permeate all of the Ni-Vanuatu poetry from this era: the poets criticize the colonizers harshly, but, as previously mentioned, they also criticize their Francophone Ni-Vanuatu counterparts. Surprisingly, though, some of the poetry reflects a deep sense of hope and unity, and these poems call for a sense of national direction so that the nation can move forward from this turbulent era in its history. Throughout this section, I explore all of these sentiments and include extensive primary-source material to demonstrate the core of the Ni-Vanuatu Independence literature.

As Grace Mera Molisa was highly involved in the *Vanua'aku Pati*, much of her poetry is an extension of her political thought, as in her poem "Victims of Foreign Abuse," where she comments that

Vanuatu
suffered
the unique
horror
of a Condominium
Colonialism
for seventy years.

Her natives
stateless

on their own land
 while
 exploiter
 Colonisers
 milked her
 dry
 of prime resources
 and derived
 benefits

Molisa makes no effort to mask her contempt for the Condominium government, characterizing the colonizers as exploitative parasites that are milking Vanuatu dry. She relates the nation to a mother getting milked of her resources by unwelcome foreigners. This parasitic imagery is a common motif in the Independence literature, also seen in Molisa's "Insurgent Rebellion": "Master exploiters / sucking my being / dry of my life blood." Moreover, Molisa draws an extended parasite metaphor in her poem "Marriage," where the "male" can be read either as the literal male in Vanuatu society, or, more abstractly, as the colonizer in the male/female, colonizer/colonized binary:

Matrimony
 the grafting
 of a male
 to a female.

The parasite
 saps and smothers
 the female
 so to flourish
 and bloom
 in resplendent glory.

...

Marriage
 terminates
 growing
 thinking

independence
identity.

...

The commendably
courageous
defy
insurmountable
odds
to choose lovers
and have children
forfeiting
the dictatorship
of a Husband.

Therefore, the parasite not only exploits the host, but it “smothers” and dictates the host as well. This brilliant poem skillfully criticizes two forces with a single metaphor: she equates mother Vanuatu with a human wife, and she evokes the image of the Husband as the image of the Colonizer, effectively arguing *for* freedom and *against* foreign control. In other words, women should be free to choose just as Vanuatu should be free to choose.

However, Molisa’s poems are not the earliest examples of literary resistance to colonial rule. Some of the poems included in the anthology *Some Modern Poetry From Vanuatu* had debuted in *Mana* as early as 1973, and some of the poets take much more aggressive approaches to anti-colonial criticism. Beginning on the tamer side, Donald Kalpokas comments on “The White Bird”[’s] arrival in Vanuatu:

He flutters in from the western sky
Seeking fame and riches in an empire.
The Black Bird peeps out of his hole confused.
Like a rolling wave the White Bird invades
And kidnaps black mother earth.

Here, Kalpokas uses the word “flutters” to emphasize the ephemerality of the West’s occupancy of Vanuatu, similar to the aforementioned criticisms of the West offered by Leymang. Whereas the Vanuatu traditions have grown for thousands of years, the West has occupied the island nation for less than a century. In these five simple lines, Kalpokas paints the picture of colonial conquest, using the word “kidnap” to signify the unwelcome intrusion and overtaking of the Black Bird’s land. He presents the Ni-Vanuatu man as a “Black Bird” to reference the blackbirding of the 1800’s—he is aware of the dark colonial past, even though he was not alive to experience the earlier atrocities. Furthermore, Kalpokas evokes this white/black contrast that is found throughout some of the other Independence poetry.

Specifically, the white/black contrast is frequently employed by Albert Leomala, an author that is featured extensively in this anthology of poetry. Notable in Leomala’s poetry is his extreme distaste for the colonizer—sometimes advocating violence as a response. Beginning with “Black is Me,” we can see his identification with blackness and his antipathy for foreigners:

black is me
 lonely in the mountains
 watching my land
 being forced

 to swallow
 stubborn frogs
 drunken beefeaters
 lecherous kiwis
 and money-sucking kangaroos

In these stanzas, it is clear that Leomala views the land as belonging to “black,” which he identifies as. He then evokes a visceral response in the reader because of what the land is “being forced / to swallow.” The speaker’s land is metaphorically

choking on these stereotyped foreigners: Frenchmen, Englishmen, New Zealanders and Australians.

When discussing how to reclaim the black's land and once again thrive, Leomala states in "How is it Brothers" that him and his brothers can accomplish their goals "Provided we chase out all / The white men / And send them back to / Where they belong." In "Culture my Culture," he asks that his culture "destroy the western / stop him growing / burn him down / for he's killing you." Finally, in collaboration with Kali Vatoko, he states:

I belong to the land
 I love the New Hebrides
 Nouvelles Hebrides is mine
 If chance strikes
 I'll kick your arse ("I'm Not Sorry Any More")

Overall, Leomala expresses his distaste for the colonizers, and in turn the white men, by requesting their ousting from Vanuatu, which belongs to the black men. He advocates "burn[ing]," kick[ing]," and overall physical resistance to reject the Western presence. While his language is more physical than ideological, the anti-colonizer sentiment is present and the ideological component is there. He claims the New Hebrides twice—once, as the "New Hebrides," and again as "Nouvelles Hebrides," telling both colonial powers that the land belongs to his people, not to the West.

Perhaps one of the most foreboding and violent poems from the period is written by Kalkot Matas Kele. In "Palpitations," he asks:

How would colonialists breathe
 If like criminal rapists
 They were hung by their necks

How would forgiveness be
 If like a dried stream
 It ceased to flow

Kele implies a causal relationship between the two stanzas, implying that if the Ni-Vanuatu ceased to forgive the colonialists, they would be hung “like the criminal rapists” that they are presented as. He implies that up until this point, forgiveness has been running like a “stream.” It represents the rising tensions and brutal awareness of the nation’s colonial past. The intellectuals at this time are aware of the suffering that their land and people have undergone, and they are expressing via literature that they are at their breaking point.

Not all Independence literature, however, includes anti-colonial sentiment. Some of it is directly targeted against other Ni-Vanuatu people; particularly, it is targeted against the Francophone groups that pushed for prolonged dependence on France. Grace Mera Molisa’s poem “Insurgent Rebellion” features examples of this anti-other Ni-Vanuatu sentiment:

extremist political factions
 by sleight of tongue misnamed
 Union of Moderet Parties
 led by unthinking
 and explosively high spirited
 hot blooded pig headed
 youngsters bullied
 and egged on by cunning
 Self-interested foreigners
 exploiting the naivety
 and gullibility of minds
 closed to the treachery
 of intellectual domination
 and cultural colonialism.

Therefore, she makes the claim that the “Union of Moderet Parties,” which was a conglomeration of Francophone Ni-Vanuatu political parties at the time, is led by

ignorant and gullible youngsters that are manipulated by outside interests—a common argument that came up in the political discourse leading up to independence. She states that the party itself was misnamed by “sleight of tongue.” Whereas “sleight of hand” refers to physical dexterity, Molisa refers to the verbal dexterity of the Francophone leaders in masking their true extremist objectives. To continue, she claims that the French and their Francophone Ni-Vanuatu “puppets” are directly opposing the ideals that they are supposed to represent:

liberté, égalité, fraternité
 the same principles forgotten
 by numerous Frenchmen
 dans les Territoires Outre-Mer
 and their cohort francophone
 proteges and puppets
 intellectual stultifications
 imbued with dirty French wine
 blind tools of French colons
 mesmerised by mere bubbles
 of effervescent champagne.

Here, the anti-Francophone sentiment is more pronounced. She directly refers to the Francophone Ni-Vanuatu as “intellectual stultifications” and “blind tools of French colons,” as many Francophone political leaders were accused of being bribed with French wine. Again, these excerpts highlight the unique situation that Vanuatu had to face in its quest for independence, and it speaks to why the nation’s independence may have come so late compared to other colonized nations. Those fighting for independence not only had to face their colonizers, but they also had to struggle against their fellow Ni-Vanuatu people.

Finally, the Independence literature calls for a sense of national direction and, eventually, expresses hope for the future. During this time period, there was a

sense of mass confusion among the Ni-Vanuatu people: a sense of unity was required to combat the anti-independence forces, but the Ni-Vanuatu linguistic and political schism made this unity seem unachievable. Poet Mildred Sope expresses this directionlessness in several of her poems:

My body is tired
 My head aches
 I weep for our people
 Where are we going mother

Why are there two divisions
 Why do you bear two different people
 Can't they all follow your steps
 Where are they leading us to mother ("Motherland")

Sope refers to the two divisions in government and, also, among the Ni-Vanuatu people. They are beleaguered with a stark internal division, imposed upon them from the outside, that tears them apart and renders a sense of national identity difficult to achieve. Sope also makes this struggle personal, literally "weep[ing] for [her] people" because of the lack of direction. She asks this question differently in "Act":

People of the earth
 Where are you going
 Fast
 Faster
 Faster yet
 Where is the limit
 To what end do we rush

Again, she notices that despite the quickness with which political movements are occurring, there is a lack of direction. The nation needs to identify "to what end" it rushes, and this implies a necessity for all citizens to be in accord. This feeling of "quickness" is unsurprising, especially considering that the nation is forced to adopt

rapidly a Western system of politics—the Ni-Vanuatu people had a system of law and power that worked for them for generations, but, with the arrival of the West, this system was delegitimized. Now, for international legitimacy, the people are expected to unite under a parliamentary system that was incubated and developed thousands of miles away, in a completely different time and space.

However, Mildred Sope also expresses hope. At the end of the previously quoted poem “Act,” she states a desire to make change:

Action
 One word that can be said
 Accomplish
 Get it done
 Reality we can
 See
 Feel
 Touch

 An end to the misery
 Push away the mountain
 Do
 Act
 Achieve
 When do we start

Therefore, rather than lose themselves in the realm of words and debate, she realizes that concrete actions must be taken for any real change to occur. Her optimistic “When do we start” is the equivalent of holding out her hand to her Ni-Vanuatu brothers and sisters—they are in this together, and they will have to make real, consequential changes to materialize a future that will result in a better physical reality for the Ni-Vanuatu people.

Perhaps the most powerful image of hope and unity is offered by Grace Mera Molisa in “Black Stone.” She claims that the black stone, which is “Molten lava /

solidified,” is also the “eternal essence / of immortal soul’s / steadfast fixture / founding Man’s / physical cosmos.” In other words, the solidified molten lava represents the deep, spiritual life-force of humankind. Her imagery surrounding black stone’s formation is a metaphor for the potential unity among the Ni-Vanuatu people:

Black Stone
 flowing free
 from depths unknown
 a viscous form
 coagulated.

...

Black Stone
 immovable
 immobile
 Black Stone

Her first stanza reflects the diverse lineages and backgrounds of the Ni-Vanuatu people: there are countless families and over 100 languages, all flowing free from the depths of the ocean. However, this “viscous form” flowing deep from the ocean “coagulate[s],” effectively mirroring the potential coagulation of the Ni-Vanuatu people finally coming together as a single “immovable” force. The poets recognize this necessity for national direction—they realize that sovereignty is only half of the battle; the other half is ensuring that they have goals to move towards with their newfound and long-awaited freedom.

Therefore, this period in Vanuatu history bred rich, politically motivated poetry, some of which begged for the nation’s brighter future. Considering the heated political atmosphere and deep sense of separation between the Ni-Vanuatu people, the ability of poets to voice these sentiments and find their way into print is impressive, but

unsurprising. This combination of passion and available funding led to a body of literature that provides a snapshot of the national sentiment at a turbulent time in Vanuatu's history. The passion and sense of political duty led these authors to conduct their poetry in English so that their colonizers had access to their voices, an idea that I explore further later in this chapter. However, despite this initial literary production, the contemporary atmosphere around print literature is not as favorable, and there is no recent literary equivalent to the impassioned production of the 1970s and 1980s.

2.4 Cultural Views on Reading and Writing

While in Vanuatu, I participated in many conversations with local people. The majority of these conversations took place while volunteering at Further Arts, riding on the buses, walking down the streets, and eating lunch at the local market. Much of this happened naturally: for example, one time while walking from my residence to the main road to catch a bus, a group of 20-something-year-old Ni-Vanuatu men approached me and said "Hello," then asked me if I smoked. I told them that I did not, but I accepted their invitation to hang out and talk. Two of them spoke limited English, but I made efforts in Bislama and, in some cases, the other man would translate. They discussed fishing, America, and the weather, but, curious about their experiences with the topics I was studying, I directed the conversation towards education, reading, and writing. They told me that they had to read and write in school, but that they only do so now for texting, news, or social media.

In most of the conversations that I had, people were not familiar with Grace Mera Molisa and neither reading nor writing were a common practice for them outside of social media and schoolwork. I passionately spoke about the *Vois blong Vanuatu* newsletter

initiative, which is discussed at the end of this chapter, but the idea of creative writing did not seem to appeal to those with whom I spoke. Obviously, due to my limited sample size and lack of a formal survey, I cannot draw any large-scale conclusions about what this says about Vanuatu or Port Vila society as a whole. My personal perception based off of my experiences while there, however, is that creative reading and writing are not common practices.

This perception was compounded by the absence of bookstores and the dearth of people at the Port Vila public library. The only book vendor that I learned of was based in a local café, where patrons could buy used books from a shelf and bring back finished books as credit towards a new book. I would estimate that there were approximately 200 books in total on the two shelves. Even though the bookshelf is based in a café that caters to tourists and upper class Ni-Vanuatu people that have jobs in the city, the books are much more affordable than their brand-new counterparts at *Alliance Française*. However, four dollars can still be a formidable amount of money to spend on a novel for a Ni-Vanuatu laborer who is only making several dollars per week. Furthermore, each time I visited the Vanuatu public library, I had only seen elementary-aged students, and never more than a few at once. I did not see widespread evidence of a public literary culture.

While speaking with Marcel Meltherorong, however, I was expecting a different response to the concept of reading. Knowing that he was one of Vanuatu's only published authors and that I would be working with him, I purchased a novel in New Zealand to bring to him. In my first meeting with him, I mentioned the book and was prepared to tell him about it. He responded, however, by telling me that he does not read much, and that he does not read in English at all. It may have been that the novel was in English, but he

did not seem interested in giving it a try. Coming from the West, I had the expectation that writers were also avid readers; this proved to not be the case.

In contrast to these indifferent attitudes towards reading, Port Vila local Rebecca Olul is passionate about both reading and writing. She told me about a collaborative play that she had worked on several years back as part of a community event against violence towards women. She also mentioned a series of essays that she had written called *Untold Stories*, also addressing the injustices against women in contemporary Vanuatu society. In her first part of the series, which she dedicates “to the women who continue to remain silent and to those who have not found a sympathetic ear to listen,” she details a scene of domestic abuse in vivid detail:

He had begun to beat me in the taxi on the way home. I had waved to a male friend making a public display of myself – this was his reasoning – and thus embarrassing him . . . He quickly hailed his cousin’s taxi, manhandles me inside and begun punching my face and head with his fist . . . I am crying for help even as the taxi pulls away and heads towards home. His cousin does not help because of course he cannot help – this was our domestic issue . . . My heart is beating like crazy and I can hear the pounding of my blood through the punching of my head. Home is not a good place right now. I cannot go home! Please help me God! He will beat me to death when we get home. I am yelling for help even as I go in and out of consciousness.

The story speaks for itself; violence against women is a pressing issue in Vanuatu, and I explore this further in Chapter 3.

Rebecca Olul is using literature as an outlet for her frustrations about women's status in Vanuatu. She is facing difficulties, however, when attempting to disseminate this literature and have her voice heard. Publication outlets are almost non-existent. There are some annual or semi-annual publications that publish work from the Pacific, but competition for this limited space is harsh due to the large number of countries that the publications serve. Rebecca has submitted to many of these journals, and on one occasion had her work sent back to her with suggested edits. After she made the appropriate edits and returned the corrected version, however, the journal's editor did not respond. This demonstrates the sheer difficulty of publishing in English as a Vanuatu citizen.

This difficulty for Anglophone authors is part of the reason why Rebecca Olul and some of her colleagues are attempting to revive Grace Mera Molisa's Black Stone Publications, which is the name that Molisa operated under when she was publishing in the 1980s and 1990s. Olul and her colleagues are in contact with Sela Molisa, the late Grace Molisa's husband, about receiving rights to use the name, and, as evinced by *Untold Stories*, they are working on texts with similar feminist and pro women's rights motifs as Grace Molisa herself. They also hope to publish Molisa's unpublished works, which are currently held by Howard van Trease. While in Vanuatu, I visited his office and he showed me the wealth of material that she had written: over 100 poems, many political in nature and written in the same short-line verse, that dated through the 1990s; an autobiography that details her life growing up on Ambae, a small island in Vanuatu; and a self-written history of Vanuatu politics. These pieces would have been insightful for my research, but van Trease did not allow me to take any photos or look at the pieces outside of his office; he claimed to be in the process of having the pieces published, but

he has been in possession of them since Molisa's death in 2002. A resurgence of Black Stone Publications would be a likely outlet for these pieces to meet reader's eyes. However, lack of funding is a critical barrier to the revival of the publishing house. The requisite publishing infrastructure is inaccessible without adequate funds, and the leaders of the initiative are in the process of locating regional grants. On top of raising money for the project, the women involved have full-time jobs necessary for supporting themselves and they are unable to dedicate themselves entirely to the Black Stone Publications. Nonetheless, if this project were to succeed, it would offer a powerful Anglophone publishing outlet and would, once again, give life to Vanuatu print literature.

As far as other publishing routes are concerned, the contemporary publishing scene in Vanuatu is limited to news media and *Alliance Française*. There are many newspapers, with three of the largest being the *Independent*, the *Daily Post*, and the *Vanuatu Times*. Whereas the *Independent* offers news in all three official languages: English, French, and Bislama, the others usually offer a combination of Bislama and one of the Western languages. The owner of the *Daily Post* informed me that over half of his readership accesses its news online, commenting on the technology literacy within the nation and the viability of consuming media electronically. Furthermore, the newsletters sometimes feature creative works, similar to the "Poet's Corner" in the early *British Newsletter*.

As far as strict creative publishing is concerned, *Alliance Française* is an organization in Port Vila dedicated to spreading the French language, and these alliances are all over the globe. In addition to language classes, this organization provides Francophone lectures, performances, and readings. It also sells novels and reading

material. Because of its international presence, this organization has funds to publish and a market for published works.

With its funding and international market, *Alliance Française* has published two authors from Vanuatu, including Marcel Meltherorong. On the first day I met him, I walked with him to *Alliance Française* and purchased his novel, *Nagaemas*, from a small display of approximately 20 books that were for sale. His novel is printed on A5 paper with full-color cover artwork. I paid the equivalent of \$10 USD for the novel, which would be a fairly steep price for a Ni-Vanuatu consumer. As this price outmatches the weekly income of some locals, the novel is intended for foreigners or islanders with professional jobs in Port Vila: new novels are luxury items in the local economy. Meltherorong's work is not circulating within the local community, but it may be circulating on the international Francophone stage. Even though he is a local author, the community does not have access to his novel. So, while there is a single creative publishing outlet for Francophone Ni-Vanuatu authors, the end product is prohibitively expensive and it is not intended for a Ni-Vanuatu audience.

Therefore, literary efforts are being made. However, most of my observations in Port Vila reinforced the idea that the society at large either is not interested in or cannot access written literature. The apparent lack of habitual reading and writing is not necessarily a barrier in itself to a literary culture, but the public attitude of indifference and general lack of funding is not contributing to literary production. My studies were not comprehensive and I did not collect quantitative data, but besides my interactions with Rebecca Olul and my understanding of *Alliance Française*, I did not notice any positive responses to print literature.

2.5 Cultural Copyright

The Ni-Vanuatu intellectual property laws also play a role in the near-absence of literary production from the nation. These laws prohibit anyone from sharing traditional knowledge unless they have explicit permission from the chief of the village from where the knowledge originated. In this sense, cultural knowledge refers to:

knowledge that is created, acquired or inspired for traditional economic, spiritual, narrative, decorative or recreational purposes; and whose nature or use of which has been transmitted from generation to generation; and that is regarded as pertaining to a particular indigenous person or people in Vanuatu. (Marahare)

Therefore, if the knowledge has been passed down generationally in Vanuatu, and if the knowledge is used to serve a particular purpose, including creative ones, then the knowledge is protected under these acts. This proves catastrophic for an aspiring writer who would like to include a unique element of his culture in the novel he is writing.

Professor Don Marahare discusses these copyright laws in his article published in the *Journal of South Pacific Law*:

the cultural rights attached to the expressions of culture includes economic rights . . . comprising the right to produce, reproduce, publish, [and] distribute works . . . infringements upon rights conferred amount to an offence (for example, reproducing an indigenous carving), if the person doing the act is not one of the custom owners of the expression; has not been sanctioned or authorised by the custom owners to do the act in relation to the expression or has not done the act in accordance with the rules of the custom. Moreover, a civil action in the Supreme Court is available to the custom owners . . . if they can show that the infringement

falls within any of the . . . criteria [stated] above. Thus, a custom owner could institute a civil suit against any person who has been convicted for reproducing a traditional carving without the owner's authorisation.

This explains that the custom holder has total economic rights over any traditional knowledge that his people hold. Consequently, these laws play a role in Ni-Vanuatu literary production. If the aspiring author wants to incorporate traditional knowledge into his novel, then he must receive permission to do so from the custom owner. Sometimes, the custom owners are entire families, or groups of families. If the novel is produced and one of the custom owners feels as if his cultural knowledge is being violated, then he would be permitted to try the author in Vanuatu's Supreme Court. These laws are good for defending the nation's cultural knowledge from exploitation, but these laws hinder creativity—they narrow the scope of what an author can write about.

For example, a Ni-Vanuatu child may grow up hearing many different *kastom* stories, participating in various cultural festivals, and learning a slew of songs that have been passed down for generations. Some of these forms of expression are restricted to the family within which the child is born, and it is taboo to share them with people outside of the family. As the child grows older and potentially chooses to write a novel, he must be very careful not to include or expose these practices. The copyright law places a form of embargo on translating a cultural practice into print form, especially if the print form will be disseminated. The author cannot draw off of his cultural artistic experiences—an entire aspect of his experience is off limits to him. It would be as if an aspiring U.K.-based artist were forbidden to include anything that resembles Eliot, Dickens, or Shakespeare.

2.6 A Contemporary Case Study: *Vois blong Vanuatu*

Despite the numerous barriers and widespread lack of concern for creative print-based literature, I arrived in Vanuatu hoping to help give literature a chance to flourish. My primary project while there was to work on an online newsletter titled *Vois blong Vanuatu*. Months before my scheduled departure date from the United States, I discovered Further Arts and sent them an email, introducing myself and telling them about my desire to work directly with the community while in Vanuatu. After discussing my previous experience, the project manager stated that Further Arts had wanted to start a newsletter for quite some time, and she suggested that I spearhead the initiative.

During my first few days on the ground in Port Vila, I spoke extensively with Bobby Shing and Marcel Meltherorong about our vision for the newsletter. We had a kava meeting with the director of the Daily Post to discuss the feasibility of our plan, and he suggested we publish it in an electronic format due to the large percentage of the nation's population that accesses their news online. Additionally, it would significantly reduce the financial barriers that come with printing. With this model, we could provide and collect content free of charge, granted that the authors and readers had access to the Internet.

We also came to the consensus that the newsletter would include creative writing published only in Bislama, such as poems, song lyrics, short stories, and more. Since Bislama is spoken by almost everyone in the nation, it seemed as if it would be beneficial to promote creative writing in the language, allowing it to grow and continue evolving from its colonial roots. This led into discussions about the name for the newsletter, and we eventually decided on *Vois blong Vanuatu*, which means "Voice of Vanuatu" in

Bislama. Since the content would be in Bislama, we figured that it only made sense for the title to be in Bislama, too. There is also an additional layer to the name. In the independence era, there was a foreign-operated newsletter titled *Voice of Vanuatu*, and Grace Mera Molisa heavily criticized this publication in one of her early poems, “Victim of Foreign Abuse”:

the
so-called
“Voice of Vanuatu”
owned
edited
and published
by expatriates
have been
systematic
in their
scrupulous
efforts
to ridicule
and portray
Vanuatu
in the worst
possible light

Therefore, *Vois blong Vanuatu* is a critical reclaiming of *Voice of Vanuatu*. The initiative intended to re-establish the voice of Vanuatu, creating a newsletter in the people’s language with the people’s content, free-of-charge to access and free from foreign abuse and exploitation. The language of the newsletter, however, proved to be one of our largest sites of resistance.

There are two notable instances that demonstrate the resistance to writing creatively in Bislama. The first occurred with the school headmaster mentioned in Chapter 1. When Bobby Shing and I approached her to request Bislama creative writing submissions, she informed us that traditionally minded parents would be upset if they

learned that their students were being encouraged to use Bislama in the schools, and she said that many of her colleagues would be outraged at the idea.

This sentiment surprised me, especially since the Vanuatu Department of Education recently decreed that, nationwide, the first few years of instruction would be in Bislama; the purpose of this is to help students ease into speaking English, rather than being forced to learn concepts in a foreign language without previous exposure to that language. As we found out that day, though, many schools are not following this decree. The headmaster explained that it is not practical at her school: many of the students are expatriates whose families have recently moved to Vanuatu; she cannot expect Chinese, Australian, or New Zealand students to learn Bislama.

Also, as discussed in Chapter 1, Ni-Vanuatu author Rebecca Olul struggles with her Bislama proficiency, and she feels self-conscious because of this. When she suggested that one of her literary-minded friends attempt contributing to *Vois blong Vanuatu*, her friend said “Hell no” when learning that we were only accepting submissions in Bislama. As I found out, this resistance to Bislama in both the educational and creative communities proved to be a barrier to our newsletter that we were not able to overcome during the single month that I was there.

If I were to spend more time in Vanuatu and continue working on this initiative, I have several ideas that may contribute to the newsletter’s success. First, rather than trying to force a change in perception surrounding Bislama, the newsletter could accept submissions in all languages. Since the nation is made up of almost 100 languages, *Vois blong Vanuatu* could mirror that. Just because every reader will not understand every poem does not mean that poems from other languages should not be included; Vanuatu is

multilingual, and the newsletter initiative should not diminish that. I realize that we may have become caught up in the political ideology behind decolonizing the language: we were pushing it to grow into something beyond its colonial roots, but this push may be uncalled for. The creative use of Bislama could change the people's perception of the language, but writing in Bislama should be an option, not a prerequisite for creative contribution.

Additionally, discussing the newsletter initiative on the radio would be a powerful way to spread awareness about the initiative. Many Ni-Vanuatu citizens, especially those outside of Port Vila, listen to radio programming for news and entertainment. Even though I began discussing potential airtime with the Vanuatu Cultural Center, I did not have enough time to follow through with the necessary contacts and carry out this plan. Given more time, I expect that this avenue could potentially generate interest in the newsletter. Overall, though, the newsletter initiative did not succeed and only several poems were collected during the month of collection—my partners were unable to continue the initiative after my departure due to the other, more pressing projects that the organization had to complete in order to receive funds necessary for continued operation.

2.7 Vanuatu and the World Literary Stage

Therefore, there is no dispute that Vanuatu literature is absent from the global stage and that the contemporary literary scene is struggling. Despite initial funding for literary endeavors, a history of passionate literary critique of colonial rule, and an unparalleled degree of linguistic and artistic diversity, the creative publishing scene in Vanuatu is nearly nonexistent due to the aforementioned barriers. However, institutions with similar roots did not meet the same fate as Vanuatu—a Nigerian literary initiative at

University College, Ibadan (UCI), for example, shares many similarities with the movement in the Pacific, but there are key differences that have contributed to the one's international literary success, and the other's international literary absence.

The UCI movement began with a student-run newsletter, *The Horn*, in 1958. Already, the timing is more conducive for the African writers' success. They were publishing in the first wave of independence movements, and because of the changing attitudes towards decolonization, the British government began funding the creation of new universities and allowing students to attend universities for free (Suhr-Sytsma 42). Therefore, students in Ibadan were not barred from attending by tuition prices. They were provided access to and instruction on the canonical "great" English literature, and they received instruction from esteemed European professors due to its proximity to the continent. As evinced by Gérard Leymang's article, there was a Ni-Vanuatu resistance to the classics—they viewed the Western canon as a colonizing force rather than a source of creative inspiration.

Furthermore, the University of the South Pacific opened in Suva, Fiji in 1968. Trailing UCI by 10 years and even physically further on the global periphery, the USP did not have as much funding to offer potential students. There were some British and French scholarships for Vanuatu residents to attend universities in Europe, but the Pacific creative center was in Fiji. Furthermore, whereas the UCI received indirect funding from the Central Intelligence Agency, the USP received no equivalent that we are aware of (Suhr-Sytsma 44). So, since the UCI had access to more funding and higher quality instruction, while also having fewer barriers to entry, it was easier for creative-minded people to attend the university and expose themselves to Western classics and theory.

Those in Ibadan had increased access to the literary metropole, whereas those in Vanuatu are far on the periphery. Therefore, it is no surprise that names such as Achebe, Adichie, and Soyinka are common in Western universities, whereas names such as Molisa, Wendt, and Hau'ofa are left unmentioned.

A common difficulty that both those in Africa and the Pacific must face, however, is the prejudice against “provincial” poetry. These poets, not directly connected to a global literary center, such as London or Paris, and often not speaking English or French as a first language, must face assumptions “that their regions [have] perilously thin traditions of poetry . . . even if behind these lay much longer histories of poetry, performance, and song in languages other than English” (Suhr-Sytsma 43). Their creative literary output is automatically judged against the Western canon, as it is often assumed to be the only lens with which to view a poem. This makes it easy to discount the poetry as weak or lacking depth, even when the poet is drawing on their own provincial histories to enrich their text.

Despite this overall cultural ignorance, Anglophone literature from Africa has maintained its appeal to an international audience. Sarah Brouillette argues that “the postcolonial writer knows about this consumer” who “choose[s] genres like ethnic autobiographies or travel writing about ‘other’ places to ‘expand their own cultural horizons’” (16). In other words, successful writers in Africa are aware that many of their readers choose to read African novels because they want to learn about “exotic” African culture. The reader “glories in her own ignorance of the reality behind the exotic image” (Brouillette 17-18). It is easy for the reader to assume authority over the knowledge of a foreign nation when the act of reading provides a manufactured exoticism that is intended

to provide the reader's desired effect: an experience that is just familiar enough for the reader to continue consuming the material, but "other" enough for the reader to feel as if he or she is learning about the culture from which the novel is produced. These African writers offer "authentic" and "foreign" cultural knowledge in their works because they are aware that the international market has fetishized this knowledge, eager to learn more about Africa without actually visiting and experiencing it for themselves. Moreover, the authors do this in a way that draws on Western literary traditions, appealing to their audiences both with content and form.

The past literary production from Vanuatu, for the most part, does not adhere to or comment on Western tradition besides employing English as the language of choice. As Leymang notes in his article, English is merely a tool to connect with the outside world. The Independence poets do not adopt Western literary traditions or practices. They reject the continued foreign influence, employing short-verse, straightforward language to criticize their colonizers simply and harshly in few words. The Independence poets were not writing for an international market—there is no evidence of this appeal to foreign fetishization. They use English because they want their voices to be accessible by their colonizers and political opponents, not because they are accepting Western culture as superior to their own.

Additionally, in contrast to the well-known authors that participated in the Nigerian literary uprising, the Ni-Vanuatu Independence poets reject the classics as a valid source of inspiration. As Casanova comments, "The classics are the privilege of the oldest literary nations, which, in elevating their foundational texts to the status of timeless works of art, have defined their literary capital as nonnational and ahistorical" (15).

Whereas she is acknowledging the presumed nonnationality of the Western canon, the Ni-Vanuatu do not agree. They understand the diversity of the English language, especially since so much of it is borrowed to form their own version of English: Bislama. For them to consider a text a timeless work of art, it must arise from their own milieu and socio-historical space—they do not blindly defer their own artistic authority to the authority of a foreign nation, especially one that has been delegitimizing their own culture for nearly a century. However, since these authors are denying this influence and in turn denying the stylistic and formal concerns that dictate taste in a given language, they are effectively disqualifying themselves from international literary legitimacy. Since “the literary heritage of a language is linked also to a set of techniques devised over the course of centuries,” the Ni-Vanuatu Independence authors re-initiate this literary heritage (Casanova 18). They devise their own techniques without regard to the already established techniques that are respected and appreciated in Western English literature.

Therefore, the “literary past” with which the Ni-Vanuatu author “arms” himself in the “international [literary] competition” is the literary past that they initiate in Vanuatu in the 1970s, not the literary past of the English Western canon (Casanova 40-41). Ni-Vanuatu Independence authors do not fight for international literary legitimacy; they fight for international accessibility. They invite their colonizers to hear their voices, their critiques, and their threats. And, while we will see in Chapter 3 that the contemporary non-literary art scene is, for the most part, intended for indigenous and regional audiences, Ni-Vanuatu literary production can be summed up, to date, as the colonizer’s tool reappropriated by Ni-Vanuatu intellectuals—they adopt the English

language and grow it in the way that they so choose, disregarding the already established literary norms and classics.

However, Rebecca Olul's contemporary, unpublished *Untold Stories* complicate this idea with two allusions to the Western canon. As she was educated in New Zealand, she likely exposed herself to and studied the classics: an opportunity unavailable to the writers of the 1970s and 1980s. Her stories do not draw on traditional *kastom* stories or other traditional arts—she focuses solely on the violence against women in her society, describing it in gruesome detail and outlining the cycle of abuse and forgiveness. In Part IV of her *Untold Stories*, she comments that “Time seemed endless. Time seemed to have come to a standstill. Like in ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’, a day is 24 hours long but seemed longer,” and in Part V, “Of course he was cheating on me. How could he not?! It was written in the books. I have read the story and know it like the back of my hand. The ‘green-eyed monster’ of old that Shakespeare writes so eloquently about in his tragedies.” These surface-level allusions demonstrate Olul's familiarity with the classics, but not an appropriation of their techniques. She uses them, however, to support her emotions and find meaning in her struggles.

Perhaps by rooting her feelings in the Western classics, Olul is favoring Western tradition to Ni-Vanuatu tradition. This would make sense considering her disgust towards the historical injustices against women in Vanuatu. She equates the Ni-Vanuatu artistic traditions with the traditions of violence against women, rejecting them both in turn. After seeing some of the *kastom* stories, particularly one mentioned in Chapter 3 that highlights the dismemberment of a woman who cheats on her husband, this idea is not far

fetched. However, these brief allusions to Western literature could also signify early attempts at appealing to an international market.

If viewed as an attempt to appeal to an international literary marketplace, we see the first example of Anglophone efforts from Vanuatu to do so. Instead of criticizing the West, Olul grounds her feelings in the classics—a sharp contrast from the method adopted by the Independence poets. She is compelled to address the problem of domestic abuse in her society, but she also has goals of transporting this work to readers outside of the nation, potentially offering women who are suffering elsewhere an outlet to relate and process their feelings: to know that they are not alone. Even though her works are currently unpublished and she is not finding success accessing even the regional literary scene, her acknowledgment of the Western canon is a sign that future Vanuatu literary production may further incorporate and comment on the age-old English literary traditions. Marcel Meltherorong's Francophone novels likely provide further insight into this contemporary phenomenon, especially since his works are being distributed in other nations via *Alliance Française*.

Therefore, Rebecca Olul's early allusions to Western classics and her abandonment of the literary forms of the Independence authors signifies what Michele Keown identifies as “the 'new wave' of Indigenous Pacific creativity—featuring increased numbers of diasporic and women writers” and “experimentation with postmodernist aesthetics” (10). Her focus is neither on the Independence-era issues nor the internal political struggles that the nation faced immediately following Independence. She exercises her creative freedom to criticize a different aspect of Vanuatu society, and she chooses to draw on the works she is familiar with due to her time at university in New

Zealand and her passion for reading English literature. Even though her literature has not yet found access to the international market, it marks a notable, potential turning point in Ni-Vanuatu literary efforts.

In conclusion, the core of Ni-Vanuatu literature situates itself in the Independence era. Much of this literature is in English, judged as weak and lacking depth due to its 'provincial' status, yet serving a powerful role for the Ni-Vanuatu intellectuals who employ it. These poets express distaste for the colonizer, apathy for the Francophone Ni-Vanuatu 'traitors,' and desire for a nationwide sense of unity. The literature is in English so that their opponents have access to their material, and the poets invent their own literary traditions, disregarding the traditional English classics. Recent literary efforts are showing potential for future incorporation of the Western canon, but the contemporary literary scene is currently starved of both resources and interested local readers. Also, as we will see in the next chapter, there are many other mediums of creative expression that the local community involves itself with, and much of it draws on generations-old artistic traditions that have developed organically. If future Ni-Vanuatu authors mingle this diversity and richness of cultural expression with Western literary tradition, they will likely present the international literary marketplace with texts that are unlike any other, incorporating cultural knowledge and practices that very few are aware of outside of the nation.

Chapter 3: Vanuatu Art

What Vanuatu lacks in printed literature is made up for in performative, visual, and oral arts. Much of the material art serves a clear purpose in Ni-Vanuatu society: elaborately carved clubs, beautifully chiseled *tam tam* drums, and meticulously designed masks. While this chapter will address these material art forms briefly, I focus in large part on the performative and oral forms, such as song, dance, and storytelling. These modes of expression carry with them overt narratives; they are devised to tell and pass on stories. While this holds true for almost all of the traditional art, contemporary movements in performance and music break away from this paradigm: they offer societal critique and spark important discussions about national direction, just as some of the literature did during the Independence era. And, while some of the contemporary music is *technically* accessible to an international audience because it is on YouTube, the scene's use of Bislama and attention to national direction reinforces its focus on a Vanuatu audience.

3.1 Physical Kastom Art and Art with Purpose

The physical art in Vanuatu is abundant. It is created using materials from the environment—from trees, plants, spider silk, fruits, and more. The end products are as diverse as the materials used to make them. For example, some communities carve massive drums for performances. Others carve clubs, which are used to kill pigs during public ceremonies intended to honor a man when he moves higher up in the traditional social caste system: the more ornate the club, the higher the grade that is being taken. Women create *pandanas* mats that serve a wide array of purposes, both ceremonial and

practical. The key commonality among the traditional physical arts, however, is that they serve a purpose. As Crispin Howarth comments, “traditional arts from Vanuatu are physical creations that carry purpose—they are not made as art for art's sake” (14).

Therefore, art is not created solely for aesthetic reasons, as is the case with much Western art. Even though beauty is not the primary aspiration, however, does not mean that beauty is not considered when creating an object. An object’s visual appeal usually corresponds to the significance of its purpose. For example, if a man is reaching the highest grade in his society, he will commission an extremely beautiful statue. Such visual displays are not necessary at the lower ranks, and therefore a highly skilled craftsman or artist will likely only undertake such a task when the situation calls for it.

This purpose-driven art is found throughout Vanuatu, and it is not limited only to physical pieces. We find it throughout the different mediums. Traditional songs and *kastom* stories pass down historical events from generation to generation. Contemporary music calls for a sense of national direction and offers critique of Ni-Vanuatu society. Even Grace Mera Molisa and her contemporaries used poetry to criticize colonial rule and advocate independence. Art is created with a purpose, and beauty comes as a byproduct.

3.2 Kastom Stories

Vanuatu’s *kastom* stories are the form most similar to printed literature in that they have a narrative arc, a beginning, and an end. They are oral stories that would likely entertain any listeners. To assume that a *kastom* story is simply a read-aloud, however, is a mistake. These stories are passed down within Ni-Vanuatu villages and families continuously, and this has been the way since *kastom* originated, presumably soon after

the arrival of man in Vanuatu. As a consequence, these stories are constantly changing, adapting, and evolving: likely never the same at two distinct points in time. They evolve for different purposes. Some stories carry with them morals, helping guide the listeners to a certain way of action or moral code. Others pass down history or genealogy, detailing the origins of a certain clan, naming system, or humanity itself.

Additionally, a sense of place is crucial in understanding and accessing the stories. Many of them deal with specific place names: of islands, landmarks, and rivers. Furthermore, they often do not spread outside of the communities within which they originated countless generations ago. A village's *kastom* stories can only be shared with someone outside of the village with permission from the chief, and, as Kirk Huffman points out in his preface to *Nabanga*, "knowing your proper *kastom* stories are the traditional way to prove your land ownership" (11). This practical demonstration of the stories' power emphasizes their connection to place, man, and history.

When considering the *kastom* stories in a print form, outside of their original contexts, it is necessary to note the risks associated with analyzing these impartial representations of the stories themselves. The previously mentioned *Nabanga* is an anthology of hundreds of *kastom* stories collected and compiled by Paul Gardissat in the decade leading up to Vanuatu independence. As Huffman emphasizes, however, "writing down a *kastom* story actually results in only a partial version of it—these stories did not develop to be written down; they are part of an ancient, complex, living tradition that is passed down by word of mouth and should continue to be so" (12). Therefore, even though the print-based, translated form makes these stories accessible to an Anglophone readership, it is difficult to access the story as a Ni-Vanuatu listener would grasp it in its

proper context. The print form eliminates all meaning imparted by tone of voice, vocal pacing, facial expression, and physical gestures. It presents the story devoid of any accompanying song, dance, or geographical features that may be present in its proper context.

So, despite the very real, serious, and powerful role that these stories hold in Vanuatu society, their contents can sometimes seem baffling to a foreign audience. For example, “Ulunwel and the devils” is a story from Pentecost about the origination of tribal dances (Tabigerian 61). It outlines the story of Ulunwel, a man who hears a *tam tam* drum in the distance and travels to find its source. He is greeted by dancing devils who promise to teach their dances to Ulunwel and his people. On his way home, two single girls follow him and then hide outside so that Ulunwel’s mother does not see them. When his mother finds him in the bushes with the girls, she becomes very angry, and one of the girls proceeds to kill his mother and run away. Ulunwel then marries the girl that remains, and then he teaches his village the dances imparted by the devils. The story concludes by stating: “This is how certain traditional dances, passed down from generation to generation, originated” (63). The seemingly irrelevant subplot about the two girls may appear obfuscating at first read, but this could likely serve as a moral message accompanying the origination story. Depending on how that part is told, it could reinforce in its listeners a respect for one’s parents, a fear from courting two partners at once, or it could even be a warning sign to parents about getting too involved with the affairs of their children. In other words, it is difficult to approach the stories as print literature because of how much is lost when translating the story onto paper, and it is

wrong to assign judgments about narrative cohesion without access to the oral story in its proper context.

Taking into account these limitations, there is still a real value in the printed *kastom* stories, particularly concerning their origination narratives and seemingly overt moral messages. They offer insight into the Ni-Vanuatu common experience within these communities. For example, the origination stories show the reader how a particular practice is justified within a community, such as the traditional dances passed down by Ulunwell in the aforementioned story. Furthermore, the morality stories exemplify the discourse that supports a particular way of life. *Nabanga* contains multiple *kastom* stories about how women should act. Two of them are particularly disturbing to a Western reader: “The Namalao Cave” from Santo pg 37 and “The life and death of Mol Malamala” (pg 53) from Malo. The first of these stories details a married woman who has feelings for another man. She tricks her husband into going down a *namalao* cave, but after three months he finds his way out. He tells his uncle what she did, and then the uncle rounds up all the men from his village. The men go to where the deceptive wife is living, and they kill every man, woman, and child in the village. They continue to cut off each of the wife’s limbs before eventually cutting off her head. In the second story, an older rich man marries a younger wife. The wife refuses to do housework, and she only wishes to relax. This upsets the older man, and he proceeds to sing a song before drowning himself in the ocean in front of her eyes.

These *kastom* stories highlight the attitude towards women that are unfaithful or undutiful. An anecdote from John, the host of the home I stayed in during my time in Port Vila, demonstrates how saturated these ideas are in the Vanuatu public consciousness.

One day, a woman came to him frantically asking for help, as someone in a nearby village had been murdered. My host, an Australian expatriate who has been living in Vanuatu for 17 years, grabbed a machete and ran to the village. Upon arriving, he noticed that everyone was calm, sitting around or going about their daily tasks. He asked where the girl was and why nobody was doing anything, and some villagers explained to him that she had cheated on her boyfriend, nonchalantly disregarding that she had been beaten to death. When the police arrived, they explained, again, that the woman had cheated on her boyfriend. The police nodded their heads and then left the scene. Clearly, this upset my host. Even though he had lived there for so long, he had not grown up with the Vanuatu customs or their stories. He holds different values, and in turn, he felt frustrated, knowing that it was not his place to change the way that things are in a country that is not his own. There is a belief in Vanuatu that if a person is wronged, then he has the power to make it right; it is not the police's place to do so. In turn, it is a massive wrong for a woman to have relations with anyone other than her boyfriend, and it is the boyfriend's right to deal with this wrong as he pleases. These wrongs arise in Rebecca Olul's contemporary literature that is detailed in the previous chapter, and righting these wrongs takes on a new sense of urgency after understanding the deep saturation of the attitude towards women as less-than and passive recipients of violence.

Therefore, the connections between the *kastom* stories and contemporary life are present. Even if the *kastom* stories do not directly affect everyday actions, they show the entrenched values that the society continues to propagate orally. Whether the stories explain the origins for how people came to the earth, offer explanations behind certain

place-names, or emphasize desirable morals, they offer crucial insight into Ni-Vanuatu history and values.

3.3 Contemporary Vanuatu Music

Vanuatu's contemporary music scene is thriving and vibrant. There are many musicians in Port Vila, and some of them are very well known in the local scene. Even though Vanuatu does not have a large literary elite to discuss social issues and issues of nationhood, it does have an involved, passionate body of musicians and songwriters. In large part, this is art as activism—most of the musicians with whom I interacted were able to articulate the social and political goals of their pieces: goals that arose from personal conflict and critical observations about the state of Vanuatu.

Bobby Shing is very involved with the music scene, as were many of the other employees and volunteers at the NGO. Shing often spoke about the role that music plays in Vanuatu—it gives artists a voice to discuss what is troubling themselves and, in turn, the nation. For example, he has multiple music videos on YouTube under his stage name Tujah Nalainuja. This is not common for Ni-Vanuatu musicians, as it requires advanced video-editing skills and expensive camera equipment to produce an end product. Shing, however, receives funding for these videos from different sources based off of the cause that the music is supporting, and, furthermore, himself and his associates at Further Arts are able to edit the videos.

One of the music videos that he worked on while I was there, entitled “Resilient,” deals with the aftermath and Ni-Vanuatu response to Cyclone Pam, which was the most devastating natural disaster to occur in recent Vanuatu history. This is an extremely personal catastrophe for Bobby, as he vividly remembers being at his home when the

hurricane winds began intensifying. Within the hour, his roof was torn from his house, and he remembers looking up and seeing the black sky. He told me that when the storm was over, after seeing the countless razed buildings and strewn-about belongings, he decided that he wanted to do more with his life; the experience shocked him out of complacency and led him to his journey of community involvement and musical exploration.

Therefore, Bobby turned this jarring experience into a music video that represents all of Vanuatu—demonstrating that even though they “came face to face with a cyclone,” “Vanuatu gonna stand our ground” (*Tujah Resilient*). The video features video clips of the Cyclone Pam destruction, smiling Ni-Vanuatu people, and rebuilding efforts. The purpose of the video is clear: demonstrate that no matter what the people of Vanuatu are faced with, they will remain resilient—they will survive, rebound, and thrive. As Tujah’s subheading states, this is indeed “music with a purpose.” Furthermore, he posted a Bislama music video entitled “Fasin i jenis,” which translates to “Ways Are Changing” and is about the encroachment of tourism and the diminishment of traditional Ni-Vanuatu culture. He laments the changes that are taking place: the movement towards an easier, simplified way of life that results in the loss of traditional ways. The constant refrain is “Wea nao rod?” which means, “Where is the way now?” This is reminiscent of a 1991 political pamphlet from Grace Mera Molisa, entitled *Raet blong Pipol: Wea Rod?* meaning *People’s Rights: Where is the Way?* Bobby was unaware of this connection, but it echoes the desire for a national direction. Contemporary music is now the outlet for these discussions about nationhood, change, and direction.

Much of this music was performed at the annual Independence festival in Mele village leading up to July 30th, the date of Vanuatu's independence. Musicians performed on a stage set at the side of a large football field, and the opposite side of the field was lined with food and dessert vendors. On stage, musicians and bands showcased their music, much of it dealing with issues of sovereignty and national direction. The audience response, however, was surprising for me as a Western viewer. There was minimal clapping. The viewers seemed borderline uninterested. While attending this spectacle, I could not help but reflect on Bobby's observations that "most people don't know what the independence celebration is about any more. They just see it as an excuse to get drunk." It was not apparent whether or not the issues being grappled with on stage were translated into the minds of the onlookers.

However, the contemporary music attempts to send a strong message to Ni-Vanuatu and foreign viewers alike, and this is the case with almost all of the Ni-Vanuatu music I was exposed to. There are locals who care about the fate of their nation—not for monetary or political reasons, but for ideological ones. Not everybody participates in the conversation, but the conversation is occurring. Also, the medium for this conversation is not print literature. As would be expected based off of the nation's strong oral traditions, the conversation surrounding national direction is playing out in music, on the stage, in front of prospective future participants.

Not all music, however, is "music with a purpose." Bobby noted that the social activism aspect of the music is generally tied to the reggae scene in Vanuatu. This is evident in Bobby's music videos and the music scene at large. Some of the music is almost indiscernible from reggae without listening to the lyrics. Furthermore, many Ni-

Vanuatu musicians tote the red, yellow, and green colors, and Bobby has stated that Bob Marley and the reggae culture have heavily influenced them. It is possible that the influence is caused by a perceived shared experience to those in Jamaica, but this connection is worthy of deeper study. As a matter of fact, Bobby is contact with an academic who is currently researching the reggae movement in Vanuatu. Overall, the reggae-influenced artists are often the ones grappling with issues of society, politics, and nationhood. Their music is a form of activism, and it begs for a nation-wide sense of direction.

3.4 Traditional Vanuatu Song

Traditional song in Vanuatu serves many purposes: it passes on stories, traditions, and customs, and it often accompanies other performances. As Lamont Lindstrom discusses in “Arts of Language and Space,” there is a ritual exchange festival on Tanna where “song accompanies all dance, and each local group possesses a treasury of songs. These serve in part as historical archives that preserve the names and deeds of the group's ancestors. As people dance, they sing” (126). So, the a cappella singing serves a rich cultural purpose, and it is not crafted only to entertain. Instead of documenting history via print, the living, breathing history is documented via a trove of passed-down songs, similar to the way that information is passed down via *kastom* stories.

A distinct difference between traditional song and contemporary music is the connotation carried by each. Whereas contemporary music is not restricted by history or tribal customs, traditional song is inextricably tied to the community and context from which it arose. The contemporary musician has freedom to draw from a range of inspiration—he or she can critique the cultural changes, praise Vanuatu as a nation, or

even discuss a recent trip to Australia. Traditional song, however, does not arise from an individual's will. It conforms to the traditional theories surrounding artistic production, requiring the "artist" to acquire the creation from an authoritative, external source. In Lindstrom's article on Tannese art, she observes that Ni-Vanuatu "do not cite individual intellect, brilliance, aptitude, flair, or personal talents to give their artistic products authority. Instead, . . . [they] cite several types of external authoritative sources to explain and legitimate novel artistic productions" (128). In effect, this limits the scope of traditional song. A villager may be highly critical of a specific cultural practice, but they dare not sing of it unless it comes to them from a source other than one's own thoughts.

This phenomenon is demonstrated in *Tanna*, a 2015 film based in the Yakel village on Tanna. Based on a true event, it outlines the Romeo and Juliet-esque story of two forbidden lovers within a small Ni-Vanuatu community that eventually poison themselves because they could not be together. All actors come from within the community, and many of them hold the same roles in the film that they do in real life. As such, the film carries with it a high degree of integrity. In multiple locations throughout the film, the leaders of the tribes sing to their people, claiming to have received the songs from the "spirit mother." For example, after the two lovers commit suicide, the three tribes on the island meet at the Kastom Roads. One of the chiefs rises to speak, and he tells the others: "I called you here to tell you I received a song from the Spirit Mother. It touched me deeply" (1:34:58). He proceeds by singing the song:

Since the beginning of time, the chiefs have arranged marriage along the Kastom Roads, but two lovers chose to walk a different path. Now hear their words: You

saw our love was strong. We showed you how we felt. You denied us life together. We had no choice but to say goodbye forever. (1:35:16)

This song, comprised of words passed on by the deceased lovers, is received by the community as such. The chief does not present the song as an artistic creation; he presents it as an actual message from the grave. This demonstrates the deference to external forces and the foreignness of individual creativity. While this does not help print-based literary creation, it grounds *kastom* in forces higher than the individual. As demonstrated in the film, the tribes, no matter their qualms with one another, respect the voice of the spirit mother.

Beyond the insight into traditional song, this contemporary cinematic example demonstrates the melding of Western literature and cinematography with traditional culture. Western viewers can appreciate the Tannese story as that of *Romeo and Juliet*, but it is presented in a foreign context—foreign belief systems, a foreign language, and a foreign geographical location. However, since it drew on elements that are familiar to Western audiences, it was able to receive international acclaim. The film was nominated for an Oscar for best foreign language film and 17 other awards. This immense success foretells the potential of future Vanuatu success in the global literary marketplace. By combining these interesting, completely unique Vanuatu traditional stories with the Western canon and form, authors can find large audiences, just as the Ibadan authors did when they appealed to their Western readers.

3.5 Contemporary Performance

Wan Smolbag is an extremely popular organization based in Port Vila. In addition to organizing sporting events, offering reading classes, and instituting health clinics, the

organization hosts local Bislama plays in its theatre. I was fortunate enough to attend *Hotel Kalifornia*, a play named after the hit Eagles song, twice during my time in Vanuatu. The play, featuring only Ni-Vanuatu actors, grappled with political corruption, violence, and manipulation. It had many funny scenes that had the audience bursting with laughter; however, many of the jokes went over my head due to my limited Bislama fluency. The content of the play, however, was easily understood. It followed a local Big Man, or politician, on his journey to oust another politician for his own financial gain. Both nights that I attended, every seat in the theater was full. The acting was superb, and the audience was very responsive to what transpired. This is in sharp contrast to the audience response at the Independence Day festivities. These theater performances, however, are popular in the community and enjoyed by those who attend. The cost of admission is only the equivalent of 50 cents: much more affordable than purchasing a novel. Overall, it is striking that the performances carry such heavy critique. As Vanuatu has recently been struggling with political corruption, *Hotel Kalifornia* is a contemporary response to these struggles. It packages these severe issues in a format that is easily digestible by the community, offering both entertainment and critical engagement.

Furthermore, there are massive community performances in Vanuatu each year that bring participants from all over Oceania. In November 2014, Further Arts launched the Emyo Tinyo Dance and Music Festival, a festival hosting 30 traditional performing arts groups from throughout Melanesia. Additionally, Fest'Napuan is the largest music festival in Vanuatu, also bringing musicians from throughout the region. These festivals are spaces where extremely diverse cultures can share their practices and traditions with one another. More a form of cultural exchange than cultural critique, these events provide

a glimpse into the extreme diversity of the region. Their existence demonstrates the appreciation for diversity that has been fostered, and the respect that the Melanesian nations have for one another.

3.6 Conclusion

Clearly, there is no dearth of art in Vanuatu. However, the nation's artistic production is extremely dependent on cultural context and, as opposed to artistic and literary uprisings in other developing nations, few efforts are made to appeal to Western audiences. The oral *kastom* stories, for example, often do not spread outside of the communities from which they originate; some of them are even protected by local copyright laws—never to be shared outside of their appropriate contexts. On the other hand, the Vanuatu music scene is swelling and musicians are sparking crucial discussions. Literature is not the only medium for artistic expression and critique. The discussions about nationhood are just beginning, and a sense of national direction is imminent. It is important to remember that Vanuatu is young as a unified nation, and many people in the community are vibrantly aware of this, voicing the nation's need for discussion, resolution, and direction. They are already exploring these issues through art, and they are doing so in a way that empowers them. Bobby Shing sings his most powerful critiques in Bislama. The music scene chooses to appropriate from Jamaican culture rather than from the West. Plays and films from the nation use local actors and local languages. Even though Great Britain and France reigned over the Ni-Vanuatu people for a century, they are finding their own way and, to a degree, they are resisting neocolonial forces by searching for a unified national voice. The people of Vanuatu are resilient, and so is their art.

As far as the future of Vanuatu literature is concerned, Rebecca Olul's unpublished text discussed in Chapter 2 incorporates Western classics and potentially marks the beginning of the 'new wave' of Vanuatu literature, taking the focus away from Independence politics and employing new creative techniques that are not dependent on actual historical events. To bring attention to the issues that face women, Olul employs vivid imagery; she includes internal dialogue of her main character, and she uses fictional events to mirror the violence that women must undergo every day in Vanuatu. If this trend holds and authors continue to experiment with form and topic, there is a promising future for Vanuatu in relation to the world literary stage, especially if they continue to familiarize themselves with and incorporate Western classics. If this does not happen and the authors choose to support their texts with only Ni-Vanuatu traditional 'classics,' such as well-known *kastom* stories or songs, then the authors will likely suffer in terms of monetary compensation and international readership. However, these works would likely affect the local artistic community in unforeseen ways and potentially contribute to the quest for national direction—a quest that plagues even the most developed nations. Ni-Vanuatu artistic production does not depend on Western approval for it to flourish, but, if and when Ni-Vanuatu authors choose to create and share their work with a Western audience in mind, the Western audience has the most to gain.

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