

A Dialogic Introduction

**Subramani
Teresia Teaiwa**

*The following conversation between the Editor of this volume, Subramani, and Teresia Teaiwa, a Fijian writer and academic at Victoria University, New Zealand, introduces this Special Issue of *Fijian Studies* on recent writings in Fiji. The discussion covers a range of issues that emerge from the contributions such as problematics of writing in English and recent trends and developments in Fijian writing.*

Subramani: You have been working away from Fiji for a number of years. Can we begin by talking about your own writing?

Teresia: I've been in Aotearoa/New Zealand for 14 years, now Subra. And a lot has happened to me as a writer. I was fortunate to be invited to attend the 11th International Festival of Poetry in Medellin, Colombia in 2001, where I was exposed for the first time to a cultural context for poetry that had a potent revolutionary potential—in Medellin, visiting campesinos, street cleaners, salespeople, preschool teachers, prisoners, actors, and bankers could all discuss and exchange poetry with each other, and did so, passionately. Poetry was a force that could bring them together across social divides. I was grateful for this experience and insight because in Wellington, where I'd moved in 2000, poetry seemed to have quite an elitist and very individualistic character. The experience in Medellin helped me see how the approach to poetry we had been promoting with the Niu Waves Writers Collective in Suva in the late 1990s was moving in the right direction. In Wellington, I missed that camaraderie and the sense of using poetry to break down barriers from my Niu Waves days. And the most sig-

nificant outcome of that sense of displacement was a feeling that I had lost my voice as a writer. It took me a few years, and it also took resorting to formulaic structures at first, and then being open to mentoring by other writers that helped me recover a unified sense of myself as a writer. I didn't realize that migration would be so disruptive to my sense of self. For the first few years I was performing a kind of ventriloquism, recycling work that I had written in Fiji. I self-published two pamphlets of poetry Heart Broken/Broken Gilbertese pamphlets, hand colouring and hand decorating them—this was something that I had picked up from Medellin—a fervour to share writing by any means at hand, rather than waiting for the validation of a publishing industry. That was very liberating. In 2000 we also launched a CD of poetry featuring mine and Sia Figiel's work, titled 'TERENESIA'. This had been produced by Richard Hamasaki and Doug Matsuoka in Hawai'i, and that project really kick-started my own enjoyment of the alternative medium of audio. So instead of coming out with a second collection of poetry in print, my next solo effort was a CD of poetry titled 'I can see Fiji' which was released in 2008. It featured my brother-in-law, Des Mallon, on percussion and was sound-engineered and produced by my poetry mentor, Hinemoana Baker. We launched the CD in Wellington, and in Suva at the Oceania Centre. Our good friend Epeli Hau'ofa was a bit circumspect about the 'sound' of the album. He felt it wasn't 'Pacific enough'. When Hawaiian literary scholar Ku'ualoha Ho'omanawanui reviewed the CD in the journal *The Contemporary Pacific*, she also commented on how the sound did not conform to typical imaginings of Pacific culturescapes. I take that as a compliment. Living in Aotearoa/New Zealand has opened me up in a way. Although I was happy and excited about the work I had been producing in Fiji, and certainly long for the familiar metaphors and emotional landscapes at times, I think what's happened to me as a writer in Aotearoa/New Zealand could be described as an 'unsettling' rather than a 'resetting'...and I'm okay with that.

S: Writing in the diaspora has been extensively theorized in other so-called Third World literatures. There is now a Fijian diaspora in terms of literature. Your poem *diasporic achar* emerges from that experience. As there are writers in this volume who are, in one way or another, re-defining the boundary of Pacific and Fijian writing, do you get the sense there is a global space in which you are writing? We had a more sequestered feeling when we started.

T: When you say 'sequestered', Subra, do you mean that you think Fiji writing was more parochial, or inward-looking in its earlier phases? One of my favourite essays of yours was published in 'Boundary 2' in the late 1990s and the image that you conjure of yourself as a child in rural Labasa thumbing through the golden covers of National Geographic magazines always struck me as a beautiful emblem of the way that people from Fiji have long been interested in the world. I grew up listening to Radio Fiji News announce itself as 'Fiji and the World', and the Fijian language news programme on FBC similarly had the call signal 'Viti Kei Vuravura.' I've been curious for some time now about the ways that Fiji and people from Fiji have historically imagined and interacted with the wider world. Migration and diaspora are not the only ways of achieving a relationship with the world, but they are increasingly becoming the ways for many. I did find it interesting that there are a number of contributions to this volume that reflect experiences from the Fijian diaspora. Praveen Chandra's 'A very happily married woman,' Satish Rai's excerpts from his novel 'A life in Exile', Pranesh Prasad's 'A half-baked life' come to mind. But as an already diasporized people, it doesn't come as much of a surprise to read Indo-Fijians writing about experiences of diaspora. What is quite telling is that some of the few contributions by iTaukei writers in this volume speak to a different imaginary altogether—rather than the themes of 'world enlargement' and liberal empowerment that can come with the experience of diaspora, the iTaukei writers tell stories of confinement and repression. We really must read 'Between Walls' by Seruwaia Vukivou; 'The Haunted Womb' and 'Unwanted I was born' by Ana Rarasea; and '102 Days' by Sakiusa Basa Viaviaturaga as signalling a powerful counter-narrative and providing necessary counter-weights to the post-colonial literary critics' preoccupation with diaspora. It's a pity, though, that this volume does not have any writing that reflects iTaukei experiences of diaspora. Because one of the things we do know is that the rate of emigration by iTaukei has increased significantly in the 21st century. We can no longer assume that of all of Fiji's citizens, Indo-Fijians have the monopoly on the diasporic experience.

S: Before I proceed to the next topic, which is the main point of our discussion, can I ask have you been able to keep up with development in Fiji's literatures?

T: Even in this age of the internet, nothing can replace being there, can it? In my fourteen years away, I've been fortunate to return to Fiji at

least every other year. Whenever I go home, I make a ritual visit to the USP Book Centre where I check up on the latest publications, and pick up things that are not easily available in bookstores in Wellington.

I managed to catch Larry Thomas' play 'The Visitors' when it was staged in Suva after the cast had returned from debuting it at the Pagonago Festival of the Arts in 2008. So when I read the extracts from the play published in this volume along with Ana Rarasea's review of the play, I had my own memories of the play to draw on as well. Because Larry is a close friend of mine, I keep fairly up-to-date with his various projects. I spent six months in Fiji during a sabbatical and that also allowed me to acquaint myself with the poetry slam scene that was burgeoning at the time. It was really great to see performance poetry embraced so enthusiastically by younger audiences, and the confidence that many of the performers brought to the stage was very impressive. I recall that a CD of spoken word and music by USP and Fiji-based writers was released in 2010, and it was great to see young and emerging writers explore this medium for publication.

The closure of the Institute of Pacific Studies as a publishing house surely has had a detrimental impact on access to publishing by not just Fiji-based, but all writers in the USP region. The Pacific Writing Forum out of the Department of Literature and Language was able to fill the gap for a while it seemed, publishing a few collections of poetry—several by Mohit Prasad, and the debut collection of Cresantia Frances Koya-Vaka'uta, as well as a couple of issues of the journal *Dreadlocks* this century. But it too has clearly fallen victim to budget cuts, as has the Institute of Education, which produced children's books in a range of Pacific languages. What's been heartening to see is that the iTaukei Trust Fund Board has made a commitment to developing iTaukei literature, and in 2010 they supported the production of *Lakovi*, the first contemporary Fijian language play which was authored by Larry Thomas and Apolonia Tamata. Although I wasn't able to see the play performed, myself, I was able to obtain a copy of the professionally-shot DVD the producers made, and the script has now also been published.

I feel like my sense of the literary scene in Fiji is fragmentary, for sure. And given the establishment of two new universities to compete with USP this century, the University of Fiji in Lautoka, and the Fiji National University (FNU) with its main campuses in Suva, I expect that these will eventually contribute to changing the landscape of literature and publishing in Fiji. This is a volume of *Fijian Studies*, after

all, isn't it?

What were you hoping to achieve with this compilation of recent writing from Fiji, Subra?

S: The point of departure for me is to try and clear the misconception that writing for some reason has come to a pause or standstill after the initial breakthrough in the 1970's, 80's and 90's. I don't believe that there is any danger of stagnation. The volume includes a range of writing as evidence. Writing has been going on throughout the difficult years. The matter of quality is something else; we might consider that later. At this stage we are taking stock. I have also been trying to assess trends and directions.

An exciting development appears to be the number of writers from the older generations who have published or are writing autobiographies. I can easily count a dozen. A few are represented here. I wonder if this is an identifiable direction? An autobiography was launched in Sydney recently, another published in Toronto, Canada. A Fijian musician is in the middle of writing about his musical journey. A Catholic sister has written the first chapter of her life story. And of course there are those who claim they have a story to tell but will never settle down to write. Some of us have been exploring the possibility of an eBook for them where they speak about their life on tape.

T: That sounds like a viable idea! It sort of bridges the genres of oral history and audio-books, doesn't it? I think it's a real pity that oral history never really took off as a method of research in Fiji. The late Mr. Tevita Nawadra probably had the largest and most ambitious undertaking with his interviews of veterans of the Malaya Campaign, which he eventually wrote up as *Ai Matai* a massive historical volume published entirely in the iTaukei language. Unfortunately, the over 250 cassette tapes from the interviews Mr. Nawadra conducted were never publicly archived for posterity. As I understand it, many wonderful vernacular and locally-produced radio programmes, documentary featurettes that were produced for radio in the second half of the 20th century have not been archived either. But if we started collecting oral histories now and edited them for publication as audio-books, the danger of losing archives is somewhat ameliorated by internet publishing, isn't it? Your idea sounds very promising! We certainly do have an obligation to enquire about the experiences of an older generation and attempt to record them, where possible, and share them where appropriate.

S: In the 1990's with the Niu Wave revival of writing, it seemed that strong young voices will appear. It's disappointing they haven't really made any distinct impression. I wonder if it has to do with global decline in reading of books, especially among the new generations who are brought up in this new technological age. It is distressing for me personally to see how the book shops are closing down. While the new technology has made books more accessible, it doesn't seem to have produced avid readers of literary works. I'm saying this from my experience as a teacher. I'm assuming of course that writing comes from extensive exploration of literature.

T: I'm not sure I'd agree with you, Subra, about strong young voices not making a distinct impression. I guess I would have to ask, 'Not making a distinct impression upon whom?' The internet and social media have provided forums for younger voices to reach further and wider audiences than previously imaginable. Combined with the diasporic phenomenon, this information technology holds enormous –and as yet untapped potential for Fiji writers. But as you point out in your essay on Fiji filmmakers in this volume, the medium does not guarantee an audience. You reflect on how the films of Satish Rai, Anil Mani and Vimal Reddy have not gained much popularity. I can see parallels in the ways that the few YouTube videos featuring spoken word and poetry from Fiji or about Fiji average a few dozen views. If you search YouTube with the key words 'Fiji poetry', the most popular spoken word poems you'll find are by Victoria Tagicakibau [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_1p7H7xQtU], which has garnered over a thousand views since I last checked, and 'Judai Mot Hoti Hai, Sad Urdu Poetry' posted by Fiji CAMRNS [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-lqFXaSMPs>]. I'm not sure about the latter, but the poem by Victoria Tagicakibau is evidence of a young iTaukei voice from the iTaukei diaspora in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The poem was filmed as part of an Auckland Museum project, and shows what could be achieved by younger Fiji writers, with appropriate levels of institutional support, editorial guidance and excellent production values.

S: Literary criticism in Fiji will have to come to terms with the 'cultural gap' that exists between the two major communities, reflected in levels of literary achievement. I wonder how we can address this. Writing in the vernacular doesn't appear to be an option. The volume of writing in the iTaukei language remains meagre. The language itself

hasn't evolved in any noteworthy way. As for Hindi, the young people do not read and write much, and because they cannot handle Devanagari script the whole world of literature in Hindi is closed to them. I always believed that writers who are bilingual, and writing at the intersection of languages, with the advantage of two world views and literary traditions, have something special to give to world's literature. You will understand as you have worked bilingually. It is not very likely that Fiji, or the South Pacific, will produce many bilingual writers.

T: I'm more optimistic, Subra. Perhaps it's my relative youth? Haha! It's true that I have strived to write bilingually using both my native English and my indigenous Kiribati tongues. But my prognosis for the vernacular languages of Fiji has been profoundly shaped by the fact that in Aotearoa/New Zealand this year, 2013, the Human Rights Commission and the Ministry of Pacific Islands Affairs inaugurated Fijian Language Week. The variety in the programme of events that took place in Wellington and other parts of the country was astonishing. There were, of course, the expected church services and ceremonies of *veiqaravi* with yaqona, but there were also events like a film festival featuring Fijian language documentaries and the 1959 classic 'Two men of Fiji'; postgraduate student panels; and a language camp for school children. At the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, I participated in a series of workshops which offered youth from Fiji opportunities to express themselves through different artistic media. I offered a workshop on poetry, acclaimed director Nina Nawalowalo offered a workshop on theatrical illusion, and beloved pop musician Jimi Nathu conducted a workshop on the musical heritages of Fiji. The workshops culminated in a public showcase production in which participants shared their poetry, performed a devised piece of drama directed by Nina, and sang along with Jimi. It was a wonderful occasion. And it was great because Jimi had the participants singing a trilingual song in English, Hindi and Fijian; and Nina had them thinking about the language of symbolism and material culture. I honestly think that our educational institutions in Fiji have a lot to answer for if the love of language, the love of reading, the capacity to express oneself in writing is waning. Young people will seize the opportunity to express themselves if it is presented to them in a truly encouraging way. I hope that the work that the iTaukei Trust Fund Board is starting in the area of producing and publishing plays and other literature in the vernacular continues to grow in strength. I sus-

pect that if there is any stagnation in the Fijian language it is because we are persisting needlessly with the hegemony of Bauan. I have no doubt that there is a wealth of riches in the over 250 other dialects of the Fijian language. We need to be encouraging those to be used in contemporary media, too. That is certainly a theme that came up in the discussions during Fijian language week that we had at Victoria University of Wellington, where I teach.

It's a great regret of mine that I did not learn enough Fiji Hindi to become conversant during my years of growing up and living in Fiji. I will have to trust your assessment of the state of Fiji Hindi literature, then, although I hope that the outlook is more promising than you suggest. Indeed, I know that if you did not believe that Fiji writers were saying something worth paying attention to, you would not have worked so hard to collect the contents of this volume. Thank you for inviting me to review the submissions and participate in this reflective exercise on the state of Fiji literature. Vinaka vaka levu! Bahut dhanyabhaad!

S: In August this year (2013) we witnessed the tragic death of Umanand Prasad. He has left behind a rich legacy in the Medical School at the University of Fiji. Less known are the two books he had written, *In a World of the Broken Hearted*, a book of poetry, and *I Remember Mai Fiji*, an autobiography.

He was working on a number of stories, he told us. Sadly they will remain unfinished. We have dedicated this special issue of *Fijian Studies* to him.