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„Resisting monophony: Collectively plaiting together
voices as decolonising Oceanic feminist strategy in four
Wan Smolbag plays“

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1. Introduction

The perseverance of colonial and Christian patriarchal structures characterises most postcolonial nations, including the Oceanic archipelago of Vanuatu. Entwined with local oppressive structures and beliefs, these discriminatory patterns lead to long-standing problems such as gender-based violence, sexual harassment and stigmatisation, public shaming, teenage pregnancy, generational and gendered conflict as well as alcohol and drug abuse that is tightly linked to the postcolonial and global issues of immense (youth) poverty and unemployment. These pressing issues inspire creative and subversive counter narratives, as most illustratively shown by the postcolonial community theatre group Wan Smolbag, which was established only nine years after the country's independence in 1989 by Jo Dorras and Peter Walker in Vanuatu's capital Port Vila. The group's close dialogue with the community about what topics to discuss in plays enables a multifaceted and uniquely participatory community-based engagement with the above mentioned issues in the safe space of community theatre. Wan Smolbag undermines oppressive patriarchal and colonial structures by centrally including the otherwise often sidelined and silenced voices of women and other marginalised groups in the play's productions, performances and post-play discussions. In this thesis four plays will be comparatively analysed with a focus on the interweaving of a complexity of different and conflicting explicit and implicit voices that are emitted by, surrounding and influencing the characters in order to subvert the combined oppressive force of patriarchal colonial and indigenous traditions and power structures of present-day Vanuatu.

The struggle to reconcile tradition with modernity is a key characteristic of Vanuatu as a postcolonial nation that is most explicitly illustrated in the *kastom* (Bislama for “custom”) category. *Kastom* is a colonially imported term that is used to refer to 'inherently' local traditional practices or “a whole way of life” (Forsyth 76). Used since independence as an anti-colonial and uniting category for the over 80 diverse islands of Vanuatu, it reproduces colonial binary understandings of homogenous national communities that disguise the existing polyphony and complexity of ni-Vanuatu¹ in order to maintain colonial structures for the benefit of local men. As will be explained in greater detail in the course of the thesis, the vague and “misapplied” (Molisa, “Custom” 390) use of *kastom*, such as striving for communal harmony at the cost of individuals' well-being (Forsyth 109), continues the patriarchal colonisation of women and suppression of their voices (see Jolly, *Place*; Bolton,

1 Ni-Vanuatu is the name of Vanuatu's indigenous population, which makes up 99% of the population (Vanuatu National Statistics Office, “2020 Census”).

Moon; *Solid Sistas Documentary* 5:05–5:20). A central claim of this thesis is that Wan Smolbag contributes to the ongoing decolonising struggle of Vanuatu by illustrating the untenability of monophonic patriarchal concepts such as *kastom* that require the belief in colonial and Christian binaries for their existence. Plaiting together a variety of explicit, implicit and absorbed voices in the plays is a creative community theatre approach that applies Wendt's (*nuanua* 3) definition of “the *post* in post-colonialism [as] [...] not just mean[ing] *after*; [...] but also [...] *around, through, out of, alongside, and against*” (italics in original; see also Gilbert and Tompkins 11–13; Tiffin) to theatre. As will be shown, Wan Smolbag's plaiting together of voices in the plays similarly emphasises the fluidity and interweaving of present and past colonial situations and binaries.

Plaiting is an embodied and empowering Oceanic practice that is well suited as a lens with which to investigate the interweaving of voices in the plays as it highlights the importance of women, dialogue across binaries and differences, and the equality of all voices in communities. Plaiting is mostly done by women in Vanuatu who learn the trade by watching and embodying the movement of older generations (see Bolton, *Moon* 116; see also Hazelgrove Planel; Kelly; Keller). In plaiting, the alternative use of equally valuable and active male and female-termed pandanus leaves (Kelly 260–262; Keller 7) creates a literal and metaphorical safe space for women to discuss existing gender relations while (re-)connecting to the community, place and each other (see Kelly 260ff.; see also Hazelgrove Planel 144–153; Bolton, *Moon* 124, 151). As a practice that creates, maintains and embodies social relationships (see Bolton, *Moon* xiii), it highlights the importance of dialogue, interacting and negotiating existing meanings and knowledges as a group. By comparatively analysing four plays in this thesis, I will use plaiting as a way to understand Wan Smolbag's interweaving of communal voices, stories and themes within and beyond the plays as an inclusive postcolonial community theatre strategy.

In my analysis I will also rely on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony to analyse the diversity and autonomy of explicit and implicit voices in the plays. Bakhtin's use of polyphony refers to the simultaneous existence of equal and autonomous voices in novels (*Dostoevsky* 5–6). The existence of many, also highly contradictory, but equal voices is a necessity for dialogue and the negotiation of meanings in the plays for which I will draw on Bakhtin's related discussions of the open-endedness of meaning and the importance of dialogue. As the analysis below will show, the polyphonic structure of the postcolonial community theatre plays resists and subverts monophonic interpretations of local and foreign binary structures, such as man–woman, tradition–modernity, past–present, fiction–reality,

audience—actors, colonial—postcolonial, and does not predetermine meanings and knowledges but lets the audience and actors negotiate them themselves. The drawing on Bakhtin's discussions of polyphony and dialogue will emphasise that the polyphony in Wan Smolbag's plays is an inclusive, non-didactic and decolonising strategy as it reflects the community's reality of non-monophonic voices and meanings.

In order to discuss the strong presence of women's voices in the plays, I will make use of Oceanic feminist examinations on the prevalence of patriarchal colonial and Christian structures in Oceania and, more specifically, Vanuatu. Similar to plaiting, Oceanic feminism is a deeply locally rooted, yet equally dynamic practice that has developed and changed through contact with other islanders and foreigners. Speaking of the “pandanus mats of our current struggles” in the *Charter of Feminist Principles* (2), feminists from Oceania, much like Wan Smolbag, acknowledge the interweaving of issues, while nonetheless valuing the diversity and autonomy of their voices and the necessity for dialogue to reimagine them. By giving equal space to women in plays set in a nation with deeply engrained patriarchal values, Wan Smolbag is part of the greater Oceanic feminist movement of decolonising and empowering women to speak their voices as well as enabling a space for them to get heard. As the below discussion of the voices in the plays will illustrate, Wan Smolbag practices inclusive Oceanic feminism by plaiting together male and female voices in a common endeavour for equality. They show that many of the issues women currently face in Vanuatu stem from entangled patriarchal monophonies, especially between misogynist *kastom* and colonial Christian structures, such as public shaming of women, gender-based violence, STIs, teenage pregnancies, poverty and substance abuse. Oceanic feminism is a suitable lens through which to deepen the analysis of the plaiting together of polyphonic voices in the plays as an encouragement towards inclusive and empowering togetherness regardless of gender that, nonetheless, maintains awareness of and a critical eye on existing gendered and discriminatory structures.

Using the term “Oceanic feminism” instead of Pacific or indigenous feminism emphasises Wan Smolbag's plaiting practice of polyphonic voices within a uniting, rooting but constantly moving community like the ocean (see Hau'ofa; Marsh, “Ancient banyans”, “Migrating feminisms”; Jolly, “Women's Rights”, “Beyond the Horizon”; Griffen, “Local and Global”). The ocean needs the diversity of species—voices—for it to survive and prosper, much like Wan Smolbag's plays require communal polyphony and dialogue to continue their work of (re-)imagining Vanuatu society in more inclusive terms. The vastness of the ocean and diversity of the community also provides the needed space for disagreements and

conflicts that highlight the polyphony of meanings and interpretations that are central for both feminists from Oceania and Wan Smolbag. The unquestioned connectivity and familiarity of the ocean creates the safety needed for necessary discussions about difficult topics. At the same time, the simultaneous rootedness and movement that the ocean emphasises metaphorically stands for the constant engaging with both local and foreign forms of resistance against patriarchal rule that Wan Smolbag structurally and thematically performs. Using Oceanic feminism as a central theoretical frame when analysing the plays further emphasises the decolonising approach of dismantling colonial and Christian binaries that Bakhtin's polyphony and Oceanic plaiting have already implied. By embedding themselves within the global feminist movement, feminists from Oceania claim space for their voices to get heard, decolonising and reimagining simplistic conflation of feminism with certain western strands (see also Marsh, "Migrating feminisms" 668, *Black Stone Poetry*; Naepi 14 ff.; Griffen, "The Pacific Islands", "Local and Global"; *Charter of Feminist Principles*; Jolly, "When She Cries"). Wan Smolbag similarly creates a shared and decolonised space for marginalised women's voices to get expressed and heard. The analysis below will show that their Oceanic feminist plaiting together of polyphonic voices dismantles existing (neo)colonial structures in Vanuatu society and emphasises Wan Smolbag's postcolonial and decolonising theatre practice.

Wan Smolbag, while established and known in Vanuatu and Oceania, has received limited attention from postcolonial literary studies so far, arguably due to most of their work being performed in Vanuatu's national language Bislama and the general blind spot on theatre and Oceania in postcolonial studies. Existing research has mostly revolved around Wan Smolbag in terms of Theatre for Development (TfD). Diana Looser briefly mentioned Wan Smolbag and their practice in her monograph, *Remaking Pacific Pasts*, on theatre in Oceania, while Rebekah Woodward carried out an in-depth analysis of the play *Zero Balans* in her master's thesis in order to expand the understanding of TfD and applied theatre to include scripted plays. Similarly, Andrea Baldwin, and Gaskell and Taylor have analysed Wan Smolbag's theatrical practice within an applied theatre and TfD context, looking at audience response and aesthetic strategies employed. While these projects have focused on Wan Smolbag in terms of theatre as a developmental and educational strategy, this thesis aims to frame it within a postcolonial community theatre practice, thus focusing on the company's grassroots approach during the entire production process that results in the diversity of voices, viewpoints, stories and characters in the plays.

As postcolonial community theatre, Wan Smolbag's scripts are written to be performed, making it hard to access the largely unpublished material. Most of their plays are written in Bislama, instead of the former colonial languages English or French, which is both a decolonising and feminist strategy as women were excluded from learning this uniting language previously (see Jolly, *Place* 8, 12, 89). This inclusive strategy allows more ni-Vanuatu to understand the plays and more actively engage in post-plays discussions, while also resulting in a narrowing down of potential academic discussions. Aware of the difficulty of accessing published literature from Oceania in Austria, the initial laboriousness of finding unpublished community theatre scripts was not surprising. After contacting Wan Smolbag, Jo Dorras—Wan Smolbag's scriptwriter—was kind enough to send me a recent play on reef management, *Twist mo Spin*, and *Heart Problem*, a play that addresses the interweaving of the lack of jobs, sexual exploitation and clashes of modernity and tradition in contemporary Vanuatu. Being unable to find any additional scripts online, I reached out to Diana Looser after having read her monograph *Remaking Pacific Pasts* and seen many of Wan Smolbag's plays cited in the appendix. She was kind enough to quickly reply with several plays at her disposal, including *It's Cold*, one of the plays chosen for my thesis. Eventually, after a long and unsuccessful internet research, I discovered that several of Wan Smolbag's plays and other resources, such as comics and music guidebooks for their film and theatre productions, are published on the self-publishing website Yumpu. It was there I found my fourth text for the analysis of this thesis, namely the script for *Solid Sistas*, one of Wan Smolbag's most successful plays of which there also exists a great documentary I had already seen.²

After having surveyed all scripts at my disposal and being confronted with a great variety of topics, including democracy, STIs and a history of Vanuatu, it soon became clear that the varied but manageable diversity and similarity of voices, themes and characters in *It's Cold* (1998), *Solid Sistas* (2004), *Heart Problem* (2018), and *Twist mo Spin* (2019) will be a suitable scope for this thesis. All of the plays address generational conflicts, the difficulty of navigating modernity and tradition, male monophonic dominances over love, place and relationships, teenage pregnancy, sexual and other violences, substance abuse and the stigmatisation and public shaming of women in myriad ways. Through the varied and dynamic use of song and chorus in each play, the characters' voices and themes addressed reach additional depth and polyphony. The wide time span between the four plays also serves to show not only Wan Smolbag's relentless and consistent commitment to working with

2 The documentary can be watched both through Wan Smolbag's YouTube channel and ProQuest's Alexander Street, which, adequately for this thesis, has at its mission “to “make silent voices heard.”” (<https://alexanderstreet.com/page/about-us>).

similar, changing, yet enduringly relevant themes in different ways, but also the ongoing need for decolonising and feminist counter-narratives in light of ongoing and new colonial and patriarchal pressures. The comparative analysis of the polyphonic voices in the plays below will show Wan Smolbag's diversity in plaiting together content and form that stems from their embeddedness in the community and participates in Oceanic feminists' movement to subvert and reimagine the "mats of our current struggles" (*Charter of Feminist Principles* 2) in inclusive terms. By showing how the polyphonous voices in the plays all subvert patriarchal monophonic structures in their diverse ways, I will illustrate the plays' polyphonic complexity that is necessary to subvert the intricate entanglement of past and present patriarchal structures in Vanuatu (see Jolly, "Save"; Marsh, "Migrating feminisms" 675–676, "Ancient banyans" 116; Molisa "Custom", "Colonised People"; Bolton, *Moon* 55ff.).

The first chapter of the thesis provides an overview on the historical, political and social context of Vanuatu (2.1.), before offering an insight into the polyphonous work of Wan Smolbag Theatre (2.2.). As their theatre practice will be framed within a community theatre approach, the third subchapter (2.3.) offers a compact overview over central characteristics and developments of postcolonial community theatre in Oceania. The subsequent second chapter, "Theory", discusses the theoretical pillars used in the following analysis. Firstly, Bakhtin's polyphony is explained and its relation to dialogue and meaning established before focusing on other scholars' use of this concept when discussing drama, postcolonial work and feminism (3.1.). Secondly, the Oceanic practice of plaiting as a communal, feminist and polyphonous act that interweaves and subverts binaries of place, genders, people and temporalities will be introduced (3.2.). Lastly, the development of Oceanic feminism will be overviewed and central strategies identified that are used in the subsequent analysis of the plays. In the analysis chapters I will focus on the above outlined polyphonous variety of implicit, explicit and absorbed structural and thematic voices in the plays that reflect the complexity of the postcolonial situation in present-day Vanuatu and critically address and reimagine (neo)colonial binaries to further a collaborative, community-centred liberation of the mind (see Hau'ofa).

The plays' structures create various forms of voice that are grouped together in the three analytical chapters of this thesis. In the first chapter (4.1.) the focus lies on women's emplaced polyphony that is expressed in direct voices. Women in the plays subvert patriarchal monophonic definitions of literal places such as the road, church and island, and reimagine their symbolic meaning by dynamically rooting themselves in them through voice. These voices dismantle existing ideas of belonging, unlocking gendered exclusions of literal

and symbolic places, instead creating a more inclusive understanding thereof both within and beyond the plays. After discussing these overt voices, the second chapter (4.2.) addresses another layer of polyphony that is expressed in implied and in-between paravoices. Looking at 'past', repetitive and embodied voices is intended to emphasise the magnitude such marginalised voices have in influencing other characters, as well as showing the polyphonic counter-strategies they entail. The final chapter of the analysis (4.3.) concentrates on the monophonic violences of 'not listening' and 'physical violence' and discusses the decolonising Oceanic feminist strategies of the plays that subvert them. The transition from explicit, implicit to so-called 'absorbed' voices gives an insight into the many layers of the interrelated thematic and structural plaiting of polyphonous voices in Wan Smolbag's plays and simultaneously honours their postcoloniality by trying to reflect the comprehensive polyphony of voices that exists "not just [...] *after*; [...] [but also] *around, through, out of, alongside, and against*" (Wendt, *nuanua* 3, italics in original) everyone.

This thesis is inspired by and will continue the plaiting practice of feminists from Oceania and postcolonial community theatre by analysing the polyphonic voices in the four plays and plaiting them together to show the united subversive force emanating from them. Wan Smolbag's community-centric process demonstrates the dialogic, polyphonous Oceanic feminist decolonising plaiting practice that is necessary for the ongoing decolonisation and reimagining of young nations such as Vanuatu. Plaiting together dialogue, song and chorus shows the interrelation of contemporary pressing themes and how they are linked to patriarchal monophonies. The different forms within which the voices express themselves are collaboratively and dialogically worked on which, together with use of Bislama, underlines their rootedness within the ever moving community. The plaiting done within and across the plays and Wan Smolbag's entire practice is what makes my comparative methodology most suited to exploring and honouring their practice. Instead of focusing on individual plays, I will respect their polyphony by showing how their continuous plaiting together of diverse voices in the four selected plays exposes, challenges and reimagines existing monophonic inequalities in Vanuatu.

2. Context

2.1. Vanuatu

Vanuatu is the name of a collection of more than 80 islands in Oceania, located between Fiji, the Solomon Islands and New Caledonia. The islands of Vanuatu were first settled around 3000 BP by Lapita people (see MacClancy 11; Bedford; Bedford, Spriggs and Regenvanu). These seafaring people originating from Taiwan had first settled in “Near Oceania”—the islands of and surrounding today's Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands—between approximately 40,000 and 10,000 years ago (see Flexner, Bedford and Valentin 405)—before daring to travel further into the then unknown “Remote Oceania” circa 3000 years ago to what is today called Vanuatu, Fiji, Samoa and many more Oceanic islands until reaching Aotearoa 700–800 BP (see also Buckley et al.; MacClancy 11; Lightner and Naupa). In the course of their travels, the ancestors of today's Oceanic population settled in many different places at different times, deciding to travel both backwards—creating “Polynesian Outliers” in Vanuatu (see Flexner, Bedford and Valentin)—and forwards to lands they did not yet know existed. It was in the course of these non-linear travels of groups of varying sizes that the great diversity of languages and cultures that is characteristic of much of Oceania today developed.

Once the first travellers had settled on Vanuatu, they continued to travel to the spread islands of today's Vanuatu and the neighbouring Solomon Islands and New Caledonia (see Bolton, *Moon* 67; see also Taylor J., *Other Side* 46–52). During these encounters³ of ongoing dialogue with other cultures, people exchanged both material goods, such as pigs, baskets and textile patterns, as well as knowledge of rituals, songs and other techniques of various kinds (see Taylor J., *Other Side* 47; see also Jolly, *Place* 247–258; Huffman). A variety of people settled on Vanuatu at different times resulting in distinct social, political and cultural structures and practices that often correlate with distinct and unintelligible languages (see Jolly, *Place* 252). With European influence, these differences were simultaneously intensified and levelled by creating a new sense of collective identity (see Jolly, *Place* 252–253). While a broad distinction between northern graded societies (see Jolly, *Place* 211ff.; Bolton, *Moon* xxxi) and southern hereditary and elective chieftainships can be presumed, in reality combinations and variations of these systems were the norm (Forsyth 62–63). The main difference between the extreme poles of the continuum between hereditary and attained rank was that in the latter system, status was gained mostly by the selling of pigs, textiles and

3 Jolly and Tcherkézoff (14) understand “any encounter” as “mov[ing] through a dialogical process [...]”. Similarly, Choi and Jolly (6) characterise encounter as “creative interaction, resistance, transformation, even indigenisation”. See also Douglas (“Voyages” 712) who sees encounters “as ambiguous intersections of multiple personal agencies, both indigenous and foreign.”

similar items of monetary value (Jolly, “Politics of difference” 67; Taylor J., *Other Side* 47–48; Forsyth 62–63) and both men and women were part of secret societies and able to hold positions of power (see Bolton, *Moon* xxxii; see also Forsyth 121; Jolly, “Politics of difference” 67). Even though the myriad variations and implementations of these social systems cannot be reconstructed today, it is certain that the social life in the archipelago has always been extremely diverse.

Even though *kastom* communities today are led by so-called *jifs* (Bislama for “chiefs”), these present-day titles were colonially introduced and hardly resemble earlier leadership structures and positions (see Bolton, *Moon* 19; Bolton, “Chiefs”; Lindstrom). The original system was more flexible, varied and self-regulated by giving individuals limited authority (see Forsyth 80–83; see also Bolton, “Chiefs” 180). It was working well until missionaries and colonial officers in the 19th and 20th centuries manipulated power structures to suit their interests. By attributing greater respect and superiority to converted locals, they “undercut the local system” (Bolton, “Chiefs” 182; see also Forsyth 83; Lindstrom; Flexner 20). Such interferences of foreigners in leadership structures show that present-day *kastom* structures cannot be investigated without unravelling external influences that have been woven into their current form (see Forsyth 84). The more individualistic and identity-based structure of externally influenced contemporary *kastom* has caused disputes, confusion and uncertainty about who has the right to leadership and an increasing decline in trust and respect of such positions (Forsyth 114–116). As leadership figures have had a vital role in guiding young boys, the uncertainty existing today and lack of respect has resulted in boys acting out and feeling left behind, which often has disastrous consequences for ni-Vanuatu women.

Similar to the mismanagement of chiefly titles, present-day gender issues have deep roots in missionaries' influences and the creation of a binary between tradition and modernity in the form of *kastom* versus *skul* (Bislama for “school”). Missionaries of many different denominations have been a fairly steady presence on various islands since the London Missionary Society first landed on the southernmost island of Aneityum in 1839 (see Jolly, “Christianity and Cloth” 445; Douglas, “Christian citizens”; MacClancy 28–29). As opposed to French and British colonisers later on, missionaries closely interacted with rural communities and were thus able to influence and engage with them to a greater extent than the colonial officers who mostly stayed in towns (see Bolton, *Moon* 9–10). Upon arriving with their missionary and Victorian convictions intact, missionaries tried to 'enlighten' islanders' alleged 'darkness' which they saw manifested in their ways of dress, women's work outside the house, male violence and a presumed lack of agency (see Bolton, *Moon* 10–12;

Marsh, “Migrating Feminisms” 671–672; see also Douglas, “Provocative Readings”, “Christian citizens”, “Voyages”; Choi and Jolly; Jolly, “Christianity and Cloth” 452; Jolly, “Sacred Spaces”, “Save”; Langmore).⁴ Missionaries grouped all local practices and beliefs they disagreed with under *kastom* while *skul* referred to their own teachings they deemed superior (see Jolly, “Birds” 341; see also Jolly, *Place* 247–258; Bolton, *Moon* 10–12; Forsyth 76–77). Even though the missionaries' homogenisation of the many varieties of traditional practices and beliefs under this singular, foreign-imported category of *kastom* which assumed the existence of 'right' and 'wrong', as the following paragraph will illustrate, islanders actively engaged with foreign ideas, plaiting them together with their own.

After initial difficulty, missionaries soon gained dominance and “[b]y the mid-twentieth century most ni-Vanuatu identified as Christians [...]” (Douglas, “Christian citizens” 18). Before the first missionaries came to Vanuatu, the spiritual beliefs of most ni-Vanuatu were closely connected to ancestors (Jolly, “Politics of difference” 67). They were “animist-based” and interwoven with all other aspects of life, communal practices and place (Forsyth 11). The reason for the eventual and ongoing success of Christianity in Vanuatu was the recruitment of other islanders as missionaries (see Jolly, “When She Cries” 359), the effort missionaries invested into learning and noting down local languages (Langmore 84; see also Choi and Jolly 22–23) and the similarity between existing and new deities that was actively interwoven by islanders themselves (see Choi and Jolly; Taylor J., “Troubled histories”). Christmas and traditional new year celebrations, for instance, were around the same time of the year, making the weaving together of the two an easy matter (MacClancy 44). As a result of their similarity, many took on the Christian faith in addition to *kastom* beliefs (Forsyth 11; see also Taylor J., “Troubled histories” 419). Islanders, used to being in contact with foreigners, negotiated, selected and rejected aspects of this new religion, and plaited them together with existing understandings and practices, a process made official with independence when Christianity was defined as an indigenous religion in the constitution (see Douglas, “Christian citizens” 5; Jolly, “Christianity and Cloth” 452; Jolly, “Beyond the Horizon” 139–140; see also Flexner 7; Hess).

Before the missionaries and other colonists came to Vanuatu, aside from encounters with nearby islanders, only de Quiros in 1606, Bougainville in 1768, and Cook in 1774 had come to the islands, the latter naming the archipelago the New Hebrides, a name it was to

4 Especially Douglas and Jolly emphasise women's agency in encounters with missionaries and their plaiting together of local and foreign ideas, traditions and clothings (see also my brief discussion of the island dress below (4.2.3.)). I also want to highlight the many different experiences islanders had depending on church congregation and individual missionary's' behaviours (see Bolton, *Moon* 11; Langmore 84).

keep until reaching independence in 1980 (see MacClancy 21–22; see also Jolly, “Voyages”; Douglas, “Slippery word”). These explorers did not stay for long and their contact with the population was limited to those living near the coast (see Jolly, “Voyages”; see also Flexner et al. “Beginning Historical Archaeology”). With the discovery of sandalwood, greater interest in economic and political dominance of the region and its labour force came, leading to a boom in sandalwood trade between the 1820s and 1860s (see MacClancy 23–27; Taylor J., *Other Side* 52ff.). With the increase of economic and political interests, the presence and dominance of Europeans increased, leading to the limitation of islanders' travels and the exploitation of their labour force (see *Sugar Slaves*; Jolly, *Place* 23–34; see also Shineberg; Taylor J., *Other Side* 64; Horne 33–47).

A way to bridge differences in the newly established plantations was Bislama. This pidgin language was necessary for communication among the islanders, missionaries and traders as well as other ni-Vanuatu later on (see MacClancy 39; see also Forsyth 8; Taylor J., *Other Side* 9; Crowley). As it was mostly the men who worked on plantations and were engaged in trade, women were for the most part excluded from learning Bislama. In fact, Jolly (*Place* 8, 89) reports from her fieldwork in Vanuatu that women who spoke Bislama, thus able to engage with islanders beyond their village, were seen as *women blong rod* (Bislama for “sex workers”). Only after independence, when Bislama was made Vanuatu's national language, did its status as the language of male-dominated “expatriate employment” (Bolton, *Moon* 53) and tainted with colonialism improve to include women (Jolly, *Place* 12). The 2009 census (Vanuatu National Statistics Office) records that 34% of ni-Vanuatu “used Bislama as the main spoken language in their households” (127) and 74% are literate in it (xii). However, similar to the new national category of *kastom*, not all ni-Vanuatu identify with Bislama as rooting them to their place. Taylor J. (*Other Side* 11) for instance reported from his fieldwork with Sia Raga⁵ that they consider Bislama to be foreign and unsuitable for their understanding of the “conjuncture of person, place, and language”, preferring to use their local languages instead. Nonetheless, it is exactly the interweaving of many languages, the increasing balance between male and female users and the intelligibility it allows throughout the archipelago that makes Bislama—in its reappropriated form—a powerful and decolonising tool.

Before independence French and English were the two official languages of the so-called Anglo-French condominium of Vanuatu. Because the French were in the majority at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, the British feared they would annex the islands to further extend their colonial realm in Oceania (see van Trease 8; see also

5 A people living in North Pentecost.

MacClancy 40–41). After establishing the Joint Naval Commission in 1887 in a first attempt to handle disputes, the condominium was established in 1906, allegedly to ensure fairer land dealings and to counteract the ongoing violence and lawlessness that characterised the New Hebrides (see MacClancy 50ff.). Due to underfunding and the creation of two judicial, educational, health, prison and police systems (see Bolton, *Moon* 7), the overall situation in Vanuatu did not really change. Instead of unifying anything or even encouraging dialogue, ni-Vanuatu were further divided along francophone and anglophone lines (see Bolton, *Moon* 7–8; MacClancy 50 ff.; van Trease 9ff.; see also Forsyth 9–10). Since each colonial power's court was responsible for their own citizens, the lawlessness and alienation of ni-Vanuatu's land continued (see van Trease 9, 12ff.). Even though the British had allegedly agreed to establish the condominium in order to protect islanders' rights, ni-Vanuatu were stateless, resulting in neither court feeling particularly responsible for supporting them, especially in their struggle to protect their land (see van Trease 9ff., see also MacClancy 51–52).

Land to ni-Vanuatu has had an entirely different value and meaning than to the colonists, including missionaries. Contrary to western use of land, for ni-Vanuatu land was *ples* (Bislama for “place”) and thus part of their identity and belonging: “people and land were merged in indigenous conceptions of the place” (Jolly, “Politics of difference” 67; see also Rodman 68; Bolton, *Moon* 67–77; Taylor J., *Other Side* 12; Forsyth 7). In a circular movement similar to plaiting, people are part of the land, being born on it, feeding from it, only to eventually return to it (see Taylor J., *Other Side* 12; Kelly). Wan Smolbag's theatre practice mirrors this by being based in the community, drawing stories and characters from its members to dialogically and collectively plait alternatives to the status quo. Similar to understandings of *kastom* as flexible and dynamic, *ples* as a social practice in Vanuatu's volcanic region is one of constant rooted movement (see Bolton, “Place” 44).

The ongoing struggle of land rights was one key aspect that led to independence on July 30th 1980. Ever since the 1960s the emerging, foreign-educated, ni-Vanuatu elite saw independence as the logical next step (see van Trease; MacClancy). The struggle for independence ran along French–British and Catholic–Protestant lines (see Bolton, *Moon* 12–14; see also van Trease 15ff.). While the British supported independence, wanting an easy and cheap way out, the French, afraid of what a withdrawal from Vanuatu would mean for their other colonies in Oceania, opposed it (see van Trease 15ff., 40, 57). Eventually, after stamping down the French-backed anti-independence secessionist movement Nagriamel (see van Trease 19 ff.; MacClancy 75ff.; Bolton, *Moon* 12–18; see also Bolton, “Chiefs,” 188–189), the British and French left behind a sharply divided nation (see Arutangai; see also van

Trease 40–58; MacClancy 75, 85–89; Bolton, *Moon* 7–8). The leaders of the independence movement sought to be devoutly anti-colonial, while simultaneously weaving together Christian and *kastom* values in the constitution. Walter Lini, Vanuatu's first president, sought to emphasise local “values of sharing, “communalism,” and (Christian) religiosity, [while] denigrating “western” “materialism, individualism, and a narrow, insensitive brand of organised religion” (qtd. in Douglas, “Christian citizens” 8–9). This inspiring objective of interweaving the most desirable aspects of *kastom* and Christianity proved easier said than done.

In order for *kastom* to fit the independence rhetoric of being an 'authentically' indigenous and anti-colonial national identity category, it needed to be kept vague and undefined, ignoring the fact that *kastom* practices and beliefs had been strongly influenced by encounters with colonists and missionaries (see Jolly, *Place* 247–258; Bolton, *Moon* 10–12; Forsyth 75–80). By using *kastom* in such a binary way, the colonial and missionary mindset of 'us–them' that always requires 'the other' in order to work was reproduced. Due to its vagueness, *kastom* was left vulnerable to be misappropriated by the men in power to continue colonial and missionary gender hierarchy (see Jolly, *Place* 257). Grace Mera Molisa, the late ni-Vanuatu poet and former secretary and member of parliament of the first independent government, soon realised how *kastom* was used to maintain the patriarchal status quo and continue the discrimination of women in the new nation. In her poem “Custom” she wrote that it had been “misapplied / bastardised / a Frankenstein / corpse / conveniently / recalled / to intimidate / women / the timid / the ignorant / the weak” (Molisa 390; see also Marsh, “Migrating feminisms” 676; “Ancient banyans” 110–115; Black Stone Poetry; Bolton, *Moon* 55ff.; Jolly, “Politics of difference”). Importantly, Douglas (“Christian citizens” 17) notes that male appropriation of *kastom* was not a new, independent occurrence but, already “[f]rom before independence, men have often opportunistically used an insular conception of *kastom* in support of arguments against women’s participation in the public sphere”. Thus, the attempt at continuing pre-colonial *kastom* traditions in the new nation was inherently flawed and, by disregarding its interweaving with patriarchal colonial and missionary structures, it perpetuated the discrimination against women.

Today Vanuatu is characterised by “a weak state, considerable poverty, ethnic tensions, high youth unemployment in urban areas, poor governance, an exploding population and significant socioeconomic change” (Forsyth 1) that is linked not only to urbanisation but tourism, foreign aid dependency and also the disintegration of formerly well-working and still necessary *kastom* structures (see Forsyth 4, 81, 95–137; see also Bolton *Moon*, 74–77; Jolly

“Kastom”). In rural areas, the national identification and belief in the state is limited, as “[i]t is widely seen as divisive, corrupt” (Douglas, “Christian citizens” 17) and useless as it does not provide jobs, opportunities or otherwise improve the lives of ni-Vanuatu (see Forsyth 3; Taylor J., *Other Side* 24). The lack of trust, respect and the mismanagement and corruptibility of politicians, in addition to dwindling respect of chiefs evokes the image of a mat that is plaited on by ever-changing untrustworthy individuals who have missed their connection to the community and place and who all have different patterns in mind. What is left of their plaiting attempt is an unfinished mat full of holes and ripped off threads. As the vagueness and misappropriation of *kastom* has proven, the mat needs to be unraveled, the entanglement of foreign and local forms acknowledged and a new mat collectively plaited through dialogue and listening, in order to work beyond the superficial category of *kastom*.

Instead of a national identification with a vague *kastom* category, ni-Vanuatu have a strong identification with their island. This identification can be compared to *kastom* in its superficiality and vagueness, as “[m]any [...] youths [are] born and raised in Port Vila [...]” (DeBlock 551) and have never even seen the home islands they may romanticise (see Forsyth 6). Just like many other allegedly 'pure' local structures, the island as a marker of identity was constructed in the course of colonial contact (Jolly, *Place* 253). Before that, villages and *ples* were more narrowly defined. This identification with islands that often have never been visited also finds its way into politics, where island-based nepotism dominates over focusing on community issues and the well-being of the nation as a whole (see Forsyth 9–10; Bolton, *Moon*; see also Douglas, “Christian citizens” 17). This “endemic” political instability (Forsyth 9) is also due to the poor interweaving of state and *kastom* structures in present-day Vanuatu.

One central area in which the interweaving of *kastom* and state has been wanting and where a certain patriarchal understanding of *kastom* has been causing considerable harm is criminal matters. *Kastom* solutions have been vital for dealing with crimes in the many villages where police presence is “scarce” (Forsyth 113). Traditionally, when acts of violence are reported to a community leader, a meeting is called for everyone involved to discuss the matter and reach a solution that re-establishes communal harmony (see Forsyth 71–75). Yet, this system is all but ideal, as Tahi, the director of the Vanuatu Women’s Group has noted: at *kastom* meetings it happens that “women talk but they are not heard” (Forsyth 121). The devaluation of women and their voice is especially dramatic in cases of sexual or gender-based violence where women are often the ones to be blamed on principle (Forsyth 121–122). The “Vanuatu National Survey on Women's Lives and Family Relationships” by the Vanuatu Women's Centre (VWC) in 2011 revealed that “[t]here are very high rates of all forms of

violence against women across all provinces, islands, age groups, education levels, and religions” (55). The focus on communal above individual well-being and believing in the idea that “what happens in their home is their personal business” (*Solid Sistas Documentary* 17:42–17:46) has led to the devaluing of the mental and physical well-being of women (see Forsyth 109; see also Biersack; Jolly, “When She Cries”).

High levels of gender-based violence that are linked to an entwining of local and foreign patriarchal structures remain a pressing issue in Vanuatu, as it is still considered “a private issue” (see Cupples and McDowell 187), even though a lot has already been done to sensitise and explain the injustice of gender-based violence, linking it to structural issues and less to individual wrongdoings (see Griffen, “Local and Global” 109). When reporting gender-based violence women are often getting accused of being traitors to their culture (see Jolly, “When She Cries” 368; Taylor J. “Social Life”), which results in women not reporting such crimes because they feel “an undue sense of shame and heavy familial, communal and church pressures, even threats of being ostracised from communities” (Jolly, “When She Cries” 368). A Wan Smolbag actress sums this up by saying that “[p]eople will just say you caused that on yourself and you asked for it” (*Solid Sistas Documentary* 23:41–23:46). As “the roots of violence are cultural” (Tahi qtd. in Jolly, “Women's Rights” 182–183), they also need cultural responses such as in the form of Wan Smolbag's play productions where men and women are encouraged to talk and listen to each other. Inclusive community-based solutions are needed to tackle community problems: “collective values must be changed, [...] social norms which legitimate violence must be transformed by women and by men acting in concert” (Tahi in Jolly, “Women's Rights” 182). Just as plaiting is a holistic communal practice where patterns, colours and techniques change through dialogue with others, so too can and must *kastom* and attitudes surrounding gender relations improve over time. In order to not use existing *kastom* structures in misogynist ways, Forsyth advocates for a critical evaluation and dynamic, suitable plaiting together of existing *kastom* and state structures in order to counteract the mistreatment of and support women. Wan Smolbag is joining in the reimagining of misappropriated *kastom* structures and encourages communal discussions in order to decolonise voices and plait them together in an equal and inclusive way.

2.2. Wan Smolbag Theatre

At its outset in 1989 Wan Smolbag Theatre was, as the name suggests, a small group of actors who travelled around the islands of Vanuatu with a small bag of props to perform plays and sketches that mostly revolved around health issues. Funded by NZAid, Oxfam and AUSAid,

the organisation has come to be a fixed part of Port Vila's, landscape. While the group has retained the name and is still setting up several plays a year, including one that travels to villages, it has expanded over its thirty years of existence to producing the Pacific-wide popular TV programme *Love Patrol* (2007–2016),⁶ as well as many films, such as *George and Sheila* (1994), *A Piece of Land* (2003), *Talemaot* (2017), and *Tears I Foldaon* (2020).⁷ In addition to these artistic explorations, Wan Smolbag offers a great variety of computer, sports and other educational classes and programs intended for the many ni-Vanuatu youth who are neither in school nor in employment. The selection of courses reflects youths' interest to provide a “space where youth feel they have a right to be and a right to be heard“ (Walker qtd. in Simpson 9; see also *Wan Smolbag Theatre: Youth Documentary and Interviews*). Another focus has been on environmental projects and the deteriorating health of the community that is tackled in nutrition classes, plays and workbooks.

From its inception onwards, a central focus of Wan Smolbag has been talking about the silenced topics of sex, teenage pregnancy and STI. Because of the lack of government-run health clinics, the family planning clinic *Kam Pusum Hed* was added to Wan Smolbag's theatre house in Port Vila, together with the support of the ministry of health (see Simpson 8). Part of this clinic is the peer education project where members of the community talk to individuals of the same age and with similar experiences and upbringings about STI-related issues, making dialogue about these frowned upon topics easier (see Edkins; Looser, *Remaking* 38; Taylor and Gaskell 15, 17–18; see also Simpson 6–9). Wan Smolbag also produces a considerable number of workbooks and other additional material each year that often accompany a film or theatre production. They contain excerpts from dialogues and songs and are followed by exercises that teachers, workshop or community leaders can try out with their groups, providing a great way to further engage the dialogue surrounding issues addressed during productions. As the use of the *Music Resource Workbook* for *Solid Sistas* ten years after the last staging of the play shows (see Brimacombe), the themes addressed have an ongoing relevance to the community.

By focusing on many issues that primarily negatively affect women, such as teenage pregnancy, sexual and emotional abuse, public shaming and gender-based violence, Wan Smolbag shows that these 'women's issues' are, in fact, community issues. As noted in the previous chapter, women's voices are often silenced or sidelined in contemporary patriarchal structures of the state, *kastom*, church and society. During Wan Smolbag meetings, however,

6 For a detailed discussion of this series impact on educating on and preventing HIV in the Pacific, see Drysdale (2014).

7 *Love Patrol* and Wan Smolbag's films are available to watch on their YouTube channel.

women actually tend to talk more than men (Wan Smolbag, “Annual Report” 9) which shows that Wan Smolbag's goal of “[c]reating awareness, dialogue and empowerment” (Wan Smolbag, “Annual Report” 12) and “enabling dialogue and reflection on sensitive and potentially stigmatising issues” (Simpson 9) through theatre is achieved. This is not an easy task even though Wan Smolbag has managed to establish itself as a company that frequently “open[s] another bag of rotten potatoes that most of us would rather not even smell”—one of Wan Smolbag's best reviews yet, according to co-founder and director Peter Walker (Al Jazeera English 3:40–3:51). Wan Smolbag's theatre practice is an interactive “critical mirror” (Looser, *Remaking* 34) through which to practice engaging with and talking about difficult issues.

Close communication with the community is enabled by writing and performing much of their work in Bislama as that creates and permits a greater familiarity, reach and engagement with members of the community during production, performance and post-performance. Looser (*Remaking* 37–38) notes that “theater has come to play an important role” in Vanuatu, reaching a wider audience in a nation where, though 74% are literate in Bislama (Vanuatu National Statistics Office, “2009 Census” xii), access to, resources and time for acquiring or reading poetry or prose is limited. Using Bislama as the language of most performances is more personal than English and is the only language that has the possibility of uniting the vast diversity of ni-Vanuatu who speak many different languages that often include *either* English *or* French. Considering that women were long excluded from speaking Bislama, it is also a feminist act that supports women in speaking up for themselves (see Jolly, “Politics of difference” 71; see also Jolly, *Place* 8, 11, 89). Wan Smolbag thus demonstrates that it is all of the community's voices in dialogue that count.

Wan Smolbag creates a safe space for discussions to occur, both with the actors in the production process and the audience during performances. Themes and stories for scripts stem from the community, sometimes get developed in workshops and are written down to “give their ideas play form” by Jo Dorras, Wan Smolbag's scriptwriter (*Wan Smolbag: The First Five Years* 15:27–15:35). Scripts are then handed back to the actors to check if the stories and characters are relatable and realistic (*Wan Smolbag: The First Five Years* 16:15–16:45; Al Jazeera English 10:55–11:17; Woodward-Hanna 234). By drawing the themes, stories and characters of the plays from the community, the feeling of “It's us on stage” (Woodward 136) emerges, interlacing audience and actors as is typical for community theatre (see Durden). Similar to plaiting where a differentiation between plaiter and plaiting is illusionary and impossible, so too is any clear-cut division between actors–audiences–characters in

community theatre. In addition to the actors being ni-Vanuatu who have often experienced the issues they perform onstage first hand: “The part I play in *Solid Sistas* was me when I was young”, “So when you see me act, it’s natural. It’s me” (*Solid Sistas Documentary* 8:12–8:18; 8:20–8:24), the warm-ups and post-play discussions encourage the audience to express their opinion and feelings relating to what they have seen performed. This collaborative creativity is a form of plaiting as it creates and maintains relationship, as well as encouraging a dialogue *about* social relationships, temporalities, identities and serves to (re)connect to place through movement (see Keller 10–11; see also Bolton, *Moon* 124, 151; see also Taylor J., “Troubled histories”). The voices from the communities are plaited together in and beyond the space both in pre- and post-production to empower especially marginalised ni-Vanuatu. By doing so, both audience and actors are first and foremost seen as members of the community which encourages an ongoing dialogue about social relationships and issues within the shared space.

Wan Smolbag's practice incorporates many approaches that have led others to group their practice under the category of applied theatre, edutainment, discussion theatre, activist theatre and many more, with most research focusing on Wan Smolbag as theatre for development (TfD). Theatre for development is “employed for socially-directed, instrumental outcomes” (Taylor and Gaskell 11; Gibbons; see also Simpson; Woodward-Hanna). Taylor and Gaskell (9) define TfD as theatre that “aims to disseminate knowledge and thereby helps to modify attitudes and behaviour in regard to various social problems”. Woodward conducted the most extensive study so far on Wan Smolbag as TfD in her master thesis where she argued for one of Wan Smolbag's scripted 'big plays', *Zero Balans*, to be considered participatory theatre, regardless of its scriptedness. This, she argues, is possible due to Wan Smolbag's focus on creating an aesthetically inspiring theatre experience that considers fun and emotional investment by the audience a necessary prerequisite for any further involvement with the often demanding issues of the plays (see also *Wan Smolbag: The First Five Years*).

Similar to Woodward, Gaskell and Taylor, and Taylor and Gaskell stress the importance of aestheticism in theatre that aims to encourage awareness, arguing that an important message packed in bad acting is not going to reach many. Even though they describe Wan Smolbag's play as having a persuasive form and content, they note that complex characters give “multiple perspectives” on the issues shown (Gaskell and Taylor, “Results and Discussion” section). Taylor and Gaskell (22) clarify that “if there is an [sic] distinct overt “message” in their performances directed to the audience, it is simply to: look; listen; and to enjoy.” Characters argue and discuss their points of view in the performance space and, by

keeping the plays open-ended, the audience is invited to join the discussion (Gaskell and Taylor, “Results and Discussion” section) . The chorus here serves to “set[...] up events and comment[...] on the action” while music helps reinforce the main issues (Gaskell and Taylor, “Performance Style and Tone” section). Instead of being “alienating” (Simpson 10) by focusing on the informative content of the plays, Wan Smolbag are “audience-centred rather than agent-centred” (Taylor and Gaskell 12) by engaging with the community and their concerns above everything else.

In this thesis, while acknowledging that Wan Smolbag plaits together many traditions and approaches, the focus will be laid on community theatre in order to emphasise their strong emplacement and involvement within the ni-Vanuatu community. It is this community-centrality that appears to differentiate Wan Smolbag's practice from many other educational and more overtly didactic theatre forms. By keeping the four plays discussed here open-ended, polyphonous, the characters dynamic and the storylines elaborate and multiplex, simplistic and monophonic didacticism, as well as a paternalistic and neo-colonial approach are avoided. In the following chapter, the choice of focusing on community theatre will be further elaborated on.

2.3. Postcolonial community theatre in Oceania

Performance practices have a long tradition in Oceania. Exchanges of material and immaterial cultural texts with islanders as well as Europeans and other foreigners in later years have always also included rituals, stories and performances. As a result, new forms and practices have continuously been plaited together to create performances that suit ever-changing contexts and circumstances. Wendt's (“New Oceania” 52) image that “[l]ike a tree, a culture is forever growing new branches, foliage, and roots” succinctly sums up the ever-existing impossibility of indigenous or colonial illusions of purity. His tree metaphor is similar to plaiting which is a never-ending rooted but dynamic practice that reconnects community and place, creating a space of critique, discussion and dialogue. It is exactly these qualities that characterise postcolonial community theatre. In the following, after emphasising the existence of many performance traditions in Oceania, the inclusivity that is characteristic of community theatre in terms of merging differences between actor–author–audience–character, fact–fiction and precolonial–colonial–postcolonial will be explained as well as what makes it a postcolonial feminist practice and thus suitable to use as a frame for Wan Smolbag's plays.

Oceanic storytelling plaits together time and place through various performance practices, such as Samoan *fale aitu*, Ratak Islanders’ *eb*, Mangaian *pe’e manuiri*, as well as

Māori *whare tapere* and Cook Islanders'/Tahitian *laelae/raerae* practices.⁸ While these practices vary in terms of content and form, they all root and interweave the performance with the community, negotiating identities through critically engaging with (post)colonial realities from a localised, emplaced perspective (see Looser, “A Piece” 521; *Remaking* 1; Betz 186–187; Balme 271). This tradition of community-based performance that opens a reflective and critical space is continued with the interweaving of local and foreign performance traditions today. As noted by Rotimi (12), the dramatic form is familiar to local African cultures as opposed to other literary forms, such as the novel. This is echoed by Looser (*Remaking* 3) who clarifies for the Oceanic context that “oral narrative, dramatic performance, ritual, dance, and song” have a long tradition—it is only the written kind of drama that is new. Yet, as community theatre is written to be performed, the script itself matters little—it is the interaction that counts.

Community theatre is very similar to plaiting as it presumes equality between different performance traditions—thus being decidedly 'impure' (see Looser, “A Piece” 521; Balme)—, as well as focusing on practicing communal dialogue and participation in order to reach a more inclusive togetherness. It is a localised “social practice deeply embedded in the experience of the people who live the stories it dramatizes [...]” (Green 475; see also Looser, “A Piece” 521; Balme; Durden). “Syncretic” plays, to use Balme's term, essentially revolve around a “balancing act between tradition and innovation, between old meanings and new functions [...]” (Balme 65; see also Hereniko qtd. in Betz 26). The centrality of local audiences is emphasised by the critical embedding and interweaving of theatre forms (see Balme). Seemingly binary oppositions between actors, characters and audiences are plaited together on stage as a multi-layered and polyphonic practice that encourages a critical reimagining by and with the community (see Looser, *Remaking* 18; see also Durden; Green). Instead of copying they “quote” local traditions, thus showing respect, equality and critical engagement with problematic, colonially infused 'indigenous' structures, such as *kastom* (see DeBlock 551–552). In order to keep this balancing act suitable, communal theatre practices have to continually move in its rootedness in the community, responding to and reflecting the ever-growing tree and ever-continuing plaiting to remain relevant for and in dialogue with the community (see Green 488).

8 A variety of indigenous theatrical forms exists in Oceania, such as *fale aitu* (Samoan comic theatre), *eb* (Ratak Islands performances that included “a narrative plot, sustained characterization, sung dialogue and narration, musical accompaniment, costumes, and props” (Looser, “A Piece” 532), *pe'e manuiiri* (Mangaian's visitor's song), *whare tapere* (Māori place of storytelling, dance, music, games) and *laelae/raerae* (Cook Islanders/ Tahitians drag) practices.

Music, dance and song have a central place in the plaiting of postcolonial community theatre as a continuation of Oceanic cultural and performative practices. What makes music and song unique in comparison to dialogue is that it can “create a special level of emotional intensity unattainable by other means” (Balme 150). The interweaving of music and song with dialogue is characteristic of syncretic postcolonial community theatre as it corresponds to local traditions that have never differentiated between theatre and musical productions (see Balme 203). As will be shown below in terms of Wan Smolbag's plays, songs give another facet of meaning to what is being said and can help highlight certain aspects of a play as they “reveal rather than state emotions and actions” (Scheub qtd. in Balme 149). Similarly, the interweaving of a chorus that comments on the action, provides additional knowledge or an insight into a character's thoughts, highlights the complexity of postcolonial nations that is thus represented on stage. The polyphonic interweaving of chorus, music and song with dialogue emphasises the embodiment and rootedness within the community.

As this brief note on verbal and non-verbal musical voices indicates, language in community theatre includes but is not limited to verbal languages. Language includes embodied knowledge and communication (see Gilbert and Tompkins 203–255; Taylor D. 1–52; Scheub) that forms and (re)establishes relationships on and off the stage between the members of the community. It encompasses bodily movements, gestures or a lack thereof as well as paralinguistic signs such as sighing or laughing that are all used to play with and emphasise the polyphony of postcolonial communities (see Balme 146–166; Gilbert and Tompkins 203–255; Looser, *Remaking* 15; Scheub). As such, theatre is unique in enabling us to notice the body as the important and ever-changing signifier it is (see Balme 167–200; Taylor D. 26). (Re)creating knowledge and emphasising the openness of meaning through languages and voices is a central aspect of postcolonial community theatre.

Decolonising the communal space of theatre requires the upheaval of an actor–audience hierarchy which is linked to acknowledging islanders' agency and the impossibility of a distinction between reality and fiction. Just as “[d]ecolonization is process, not arrival[...]

” (Tiffin 17), and plaiting an ever-ongoing practice of rooted movement, so too is community theatre about the process of cyclically engaging with and being based in the community pre-, post and during performances, thus rendering such linear divisions meaningless. The agency that is thus attributed to the community in what issues are discussed, reflects the overall decolonisation of historical narratives that have tended to not see islanders as the vocal agents they have been throughout history (see Fresno-Calleja 173; Douglas, “Provocative Readings”, “Christian citizens”, “Voyages”, “In the Event”; Choi and Jolly;

Jolly, “Christianity and Cloth” 452; see also Hess; Gilbert and Tompkins 11–13). The courage and space to tell narratives is necessary for collectively imagining a more inclusive and empowered future (see Green 489; Looser, *Remaking* 13, 18). As Reinelt (366) has observed, while “[t]heatre cannot change the world by itself, [...] it can contribute its unique form of embodied and imaged knowledge to express and sustain the social imagination.” By critically engaging with reality and interweaving it with fictional but relatable and community-based characters, Wan Smolbag creates the space for such reimaginings to occur.

Necessary for reimagining a more feminist and equal reality is the unlearning of existing lines of thought (see Wilson; Looser, *Remaking* 13–18). The members of Wan Smolbag practice unlearning and the collective re-imagining of beliefs, structures and practices through workshops, plays, discussions, and workbooks. Using fictional narratives that are based in reality, possibilities for change can be discussed in a way that is both familiar and relatable but also distant enough via the fictional characters to make a discussion possible. Starting off from a common ground of shared reality, and using the collective language of Bislama, narratives can take onlookers to travel to yet unvisited and experienced places, thoughts, emotions, ideas, perspectives and voices. The centrality of and ability to allow uncomfortable feelings to emerge in the shared safe space of the performance enables more direct and emotional responses to familiar characters (see Wan Smolbag, “Annual Report”; *Wan Smolbag The First Five Years*; *Solid Sistas Documentary*; see also Green). As many youth do not go to school and there are high unemployment numbers, it is all the more important to value whatever is learned and unlearned in community settings as equally worthy, thus decolonising understandings of knowledge (see Looser, *Remaking* 13–18; Taylor D. 1–52). Wan Smolbag's community theatre fosters this decolonising of knowledge in their performance practice by emphasising that a polyphony of knowledge already exists in the community.

To sum up, the space created in postcolonial theatre practice for a variety of voices, centrally including those of marginalised groups such as women, to be spoken and heard can assist in the wider decolonising and Oceanic feminist struggle to disentangle the patriarchal notions of the interwoven triplicity *kastom*, Christianity and colonialism in Vanuatu. Instead of the vague monophony that is proposed by those taking advantage of these structures at the cost of others, the polyphony of postcolonial community theatre as shown by Wan Smolbag offers an alternative inclusive space that critically plaits together different local and foreign traditions. By not offering any solutions to the confusion of many voices present in the space, they show that meaning is plentiful, never final and always an interpretative act that renders

decolonising and feminist change possible. In the following, the potential of polyphony as such a decolonising, egalitarian and feminist strategy will be discussed before showing that polyphony is already inherent in the Oceanic polyphonic practice and ideology of plaiting.

3. Theory

The use of western concepts when studying postcolonial literatures has often been criticised and questioned. Wilson (1–11) encourages to think of a productive, inclusive and anti-colonial way of dealing with this issue by wondering not how to exclude western theories from research on and in Oceania, but rather how to interweave local and foreign lines of thought in a meaningful, decolonised way. As already discussed in the previous chapters, Oceanic cultures have been and continue to plait together a variety of traditions, cultures, histories and temporalities—a practice that is also pursued by the Wan Smolbag theatre group who, instead of attempting to reach the impossibility of a puristic theatre practice, relies on the dialogic mixing of forms and contents, assumptions and voices. As the voices in the plays are not hierarchically ordered, polyphony seems a suitable concept to refer to, take certain aspects from to then interweave with the Oceanic ontological practices of plaiting and Oceanic feminism. Departing from Bakhtin's thoughts on polyphony, meaning and theatre, more recent work on this concept in relation to performances and feminism will be addressed, before then interweaving these findings with the practices of plaiting and Oceanic feminism in the two subsequent chapters, showing that polyphony is inherent in both.

3.1. Polyphony

Polyphony comes from music theory where it refers to the combination of equal sounds (see de Groot). In Bakhtin's understanding, polyphony is closely connected to dialog as voices do not exist in a vacuum but are part of fragile and open-ended dialogic interactions that are the essence of being (see Cooren and Sandler; see also Emerson, “Polyphony”; see also Morris). As such, polyphony is not only a feature of dialogic texts but a central aspect of everyday life. According to Booth (xx), it denotes “the essential, irreducible multi-centredness [...] of human life”—we are all polyphonous: “each of us is a “we,” not an “I” ” that we negotiate in dialogue with others (xxi). Through this dialogue “a unity of a higher order than in homophony” (Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky* 21) can be established, both in real life and in literary texts.

For Bakhtin, such a dialogic text is one in which “[a] *plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices [...]*” can exist (*Dostoevsky* 6, italics in original). While they remain “unmerged” (Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky* 6) in terms of independent from one authoritative author figure who inserts their own ideology into all characters—“[t]he character is treated as ideologically authoritative and independent [...]” (Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky* 5)—they are nonetheless and necessarily

“combine[d] [...] in the unity of the event” (Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky* 6), thus constituting a coherent literary text. This combining but unmerging of independent and authoritative voices is also central in plaiting and Oceanic feminism: while the individual strands of the plaited together Oceanic feminist movement are still visible, they nonetheless form a unified mat of differences. In Wan Smolbag's practice, the characters' explicit and implicit voices are combined to form an interrelated whole without ranking one voice within or beyond the play above others.

The polyphony of dialogic texts emphasises the infinite openness and dialogic quality of meaning. Meaning is never final but always embedded within previous utterances and anticipating future ones in its context-dependency (see Emerson, *Dostoevsky* xxxi–xxxiii). This provides a stark contrast to patriarchal colonial and Christian narratives which tend to construct the illusion of a stable monophony of meaning, regardless of context. Both the imperial and Christian mission have been about knowledge creation and dominance (see Marsh, “Migrating feminisms” 671–672; Taylor J., “Social Life”; Bolton, *Moon* 10–12), monophonically defining meaning. In the ongoing decolonising process these colonial and Christian doctrines have to be unlearned to realise how meaning constantly changes and is created through dialogue. In Vanuatu, the interweaving of certain Christian with *kastom* aspects illustrates that monophony is never feasible (see 2.1.). Rather, the flawed assumption of monophony already provides the first crack in the system as there always is dialogue and polyphony even if suppressed (see Williams qtd. in Nicole 267). Wan Smolbag contributes to establishing an open space of un- and relearning polyphonous knowledge and meaning in order to create a “counterdiscourses” (Nicole 267) of anti-colonial togetherness.

Even though polyphony was originally applied to the novel, some research has linked it to drama. Bakhtin, a lifelong devotee of theatre only ever used drama superficially as example to support his claims (see McCaw 28; Emerson, “Bakhtin and the actor”; Womack). While drama, involving many voices during the production and performance process, may seem obviously polyphonic, Bakhtin was sceptical of calling drama polyphonic. Even though Bakhtin (*Dostoevsky* 33) admits to finding some “embryonic rudiments, early buddings of polyphony” in Shakespeare, he argues that “drama is by its very nature alien to genuine polyphony” as only one world can ever be created in a play (34). Even though drama is made up of dialogue, “the narrative forms are always encased in a firm and stable monologic framework” (Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky* 17), which, according to him, is necessary for the drama to work as, “[a]ny weakening of this monolithic quality leads to a weakening of dramatic effect” (Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky* 17). Yet, in *The Dialogic Imagination* he does acknowledge in a

footnote that “[c]ontemporary realistic social drama may, of course, be heteroglot and multi-linguaged” (Bakhtin 405). In these terms Wan Smolbag's postcolonial community theatre is an example of a theatre where the monologic framework is non-existent. In fact, the absence of such a framework and the existence of a “heteroglot and multi-linguaged” (Bakhtin, *Dialogic* 405) space is essential for their practice. As postcolonial theatre, the idea of one compact world is impossible as the postcolonial situation itself always interweaves several temporalities and spatialities. By embedding themselves within these worlds and voicing them as a polyphonic multitude on stage, Wan Smolbag's plays are part of an inclusive plaiting project that leaves meanings open-ended.

Bakhtin's assumption of Shakespearean drama lacking polyphony and his scepticism of polyphonous drama has been countered by many scholars. Hannah Intezar wrote her PhD thesis about female voices in Shakespearean plays, noting the equality of male and female voices (226), “the characters' ability to have a dialogical relationship with one another [...]” and their “potential to transform each other through dialogue” (223). Peter Womack discusses in his chapter on “Dialogue in drama” Bakhtin's understanding of a “*pure* drama” and the problem he sees with Bakhtin's claim that drama lacks double-voicedness and that speech is used too directly (85, *italics in original*). Womack (85) notes: “Paradoxically, then, drama is monologic precisely because its verbal texture consists of nothing but dialogue.” Yet, by directly addressing the audience through a chorus (Womack 85)—which can have a very strong authorial quality to it, commenting and explaining the action—or by including songs and other elements in a dramatic performance, drama becomes more polyphonic than Bakhtin would have assumed. In addition, Womack argues that the role playing done by actors constitutes a form of double-voicedness: they are simultaneously “in role and [...] outside it” (106), in constant dialogue within each other.

The equality of voices in polyphony is similar to postcolonial situations where decolonisation in the form of finding and expressing voice, writing back and claiming space is an ongoing necessity, also in light of neocolonial pressures. Mukherjee and Rath use polyphony when discussing Salman Rushdie and Suketu Mehta's novels and how individual and collective voices interact in Bombay. In their analysis, the cosmopolitan space is a central enabler and harbourer of polyphony, not unlike the community theatre space created by Wan Smolbag. Uma Viswanathan's article similarly focuses on polyphony in *Midnight's Children* where “[t]here is no single dominant voice” (51). Instead, “the thoughts and consciousnesses of the different characters, the explicit or implicit voices of the author, and even the voice of the reader(s) [...] engage in a dialogue with the novel” (Viswanathan 51). This inclusion of

the reader as a central figure involved in the dialogue of meaning creation provides a bridge between the postcolonial novel and community theatre genre, where the communal audience is at the core of each performance.

In terms of polyphony and postcolonial theatre, Marc Maufort (20–21), drawing on postcolonial syncretic drama, draws parallels between Bhabha's hybridity and Bakhtin's dialogic text as both being about creating a space for “European and Native cultures as interactive voices” (21) to merge. It is about negotiating the relationship between coloniser and colonised. This is also observed by Mehmet Balkaya who argues that in Tom Stoppard's *Indian Ink* “the struggle and interaction of the characters through dialogues bring to light the cultural representation and diversity and establish a response to colonial discourse both in the past and present” (5723). With no final conclusion and contradictory dialogue, he resists monophony and creates a shared space of understanding and meaning (Balkaya, 5737). This shows that polyphony is inherent in postcolonial syncretic theatre and community theatre practices where the postcolonial interlacing of temporalities and spatialities subverts the idea of one world, language and meaning.

Feminism can be polyphonous but need not be, just as drama need not be polyphonic. Amber Kinser has written on the multi-voicedness of feminism, noting that the oppression of women and the increase of women's rights is central in all feminisms, regardless of the individual contexts and circumstances. The differences in feminisms that become apparent through dialogue are not divisive, but create a productive atmosphere of many different truths that create rather than hinder unity (Kinser). Fanny Söderbäck problematises the idea of speaking “*the voice of others*” (5, italics in the original) in feminist protest. She sees this as contradictory to the claiming, demanding and celebrating of plurality, while having to seem like a unified, monophonic voice to the outside. This “Problem of Speaking for Others” is central in Linda Alcoff's article of the same name where she notes that “[w]ho is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act, of political struggle” (293). Not only speaking and giving space to voice is a challenging task that is embedded in patriarchal power structures and hierarchies, but the listening thereof can seem even more daunting as it requires a certain mindset of *wanting* to listen. Being able to choose listening and speaking requires a safe space to practice in, as well as a simultaneous change in surrounding political and social structures. Such a polyphonous and dialogic safe space is created in the practice of plaiting that will be discussed in the following chapter.

3.2. Plaiting

Oceanic ontology has a theory of polyphony embodied in the practice and symbolism of plaiting. Plaiting is a cultural practice that is both unique in its local iterations yet common throughout Oceania. Similar to Oceanic theatre, plaiting practices have changed through movement and exchanges with other islanders, missionaries, colonists and, nowadays, tourism (see Bolton, *Moon* 166–168; see also Keller 2–3; Hazelgrove Panel 41–80). Women sell plaited products to tourists and mats are not as valuable for rank taking as they once were. Nonetheless, the use of mats in communal settings and the plaiting practice have remained. Mats are still used for keeping food, exchanging during marriage or death ceremonies, giving as presents, wearing as skirts, sleeping on, as house walls or a status marker (see Bolton, *Moon* 109–111). The great complexity and number of plaited textiles and their diverse and specific uses makes classifying them close to impossible (see Hazelgrove Panel 15). What unites all the textiles and varying practices across Oceania is the fact that plaiting is a cyclical practice that (re)connects place, community and temporalities.

Wivim (Bislama for “weaving”) practices within Vanuatu are as diverse as in all of Oceania where Māori *raranga*, Hawai’ian *ulana*, Tongan *lalanga* and Samoan *su’ifefiloi* are some of the most well-known plaiting practices.⁹ Similar to tattooing or carving, through repetitiveness and the linking of presents and pasts, people and places are in an ongoing and critical dialogue with each other. Within Vanuatu differences in the importance of plaiting were linked to existing social structures, with plaited textiles having had greater value in places where rank taking was achieved by exchanging items (see 2.1.). Whereas only male practices were considered *kastom* in the early years of independence, Bolton (*Moon*) has illustrated that plaiting is increasingly acknowledged as *kastom*, a claim also voiced by Jolly (“Women-Nation-State” 147) who mentions that the “the ground from which the man emerges” on Vanuatu’s national symbol is, in fact, made up of mats (see also Douglas, “Christian citizens” 19). This acknowledgement recognises women as central figures in the plaiting of the independent nation and encourages them to seize their righteous public place.

Plaiting is a practice and mindset that revolves around doing, communicating and connecting, instead of fixating on producing an object as one monologic meaning. Even when objects such as a mat or a basket have been produced, they are not fixed in their meaning but can be used for, and mean, different things depending on their context (see Hazelgrove Panel,

⁹ Forms of plaiting, such as *wivim* (weaving, Bislama), *su’ifefiloi* (combining and mixing leaves and flowers, or songs, to create a *ula* (necklace) in Samoa), *whatu* (twining)/*raranga* (plaiting)/*whiri* (braiding) (Maori), *ulana* (Hawai’i), *lalanga* (Tonga), *talitali* (Fiji) are common connective community practices in many Oceanic cultures.

45–52; Kelly 315–316; Bolton, *Moon* xx–xxi, 110ff). As Susanna Kelly (323) notes, “what mats are and do is not ahistorical; their meanings and effects are not stable and unchanging, but emerge relative to emphases placed on other objects and social forms”. Objects gain meaning through relationships which is why Lissant Bolton questions the importance of the meaning of mats (*Moon*, 128–129). Rather, just as we do not ask the meaning of people but what they are doing and who they are, she suggests we should look at plaitings in the same way, by focusing on their use (Bolton, *Moon* 129). The emphasis on practice instead of meaning decolonises seemingly fixed and monologic meanings in order to emphasise the rooted movement and dynamism of plaiting as an embodied and dialogic communal practice.

Every plaiting follows similar rules, structures and materials but is nonetheless a unique act each time, much like a play. As opposed to weaving where the loom remains fixed and only the shuttle is moved, in plaiting the pandanus leaves are all equally important, valued and active in the communicating and negotiating of meaning during the process of alternatively moving the dried and straightened leaves on top of each other (see Adovasio 99). After harvesting the pandanus leaves, they get soaked, dried, straightened and “stripped [...] into four equal sized elements of one-two millimetres in width” (Keller 7) before the plaiting itself begins. However, Lucie Hazelgrove Planel (80) clarifies that it is hard to say when plaiting begins and ends, calling “[p]andanus work [...] a holistic, embedded activity which has no clear start or end to the process [...] [as] what comes from the land is returned to the land.” As noted above, the relationship between the community and *ples* is a social and relational one (see Bolton, “Place” 45). Through plaiting the plaiters cyclically attach and detach from place (Kelly 318ff., 265ff.). Speaking for Tongoa, Kelly notes that “the mat is a material expression of the need on Tongoa to continually make and remake this relationship between people and place” (325). Wan Smolbag similarly works on (re)building emplaced communal ties through polyphonic dialogues.

The plaiting process is an ongoing act of temporal and spatial community building, “a physical manifestation of the social world” (Hazelgrove Planel 155) and “a multi-layered and multi-faceted activity through which we come to know the world around us” (242). Just as communal ties strengthen through dialogue, Wan Smolbag's theatre engages all members of the community, interweaving actors and audiences, thus disrupting divisions in a communicative way and strengthening belonging through this ongoing movement that is rooted in the communal plaiting itself. In plaiting, the longer the movements are repeated and the more secure a plaiter gets over time, the quicker a basket or mat reaches the strength to hold heavy fruits and books or resist months of sleeping on before getting worn down.

Plaiting and community theatre work requires continuous practice and rooted movement to find and maintain its strength, a cyclical practice that mirrors that of a community where the communicating with each other and ancestors continues.

Plaiting is emplaced communication that provides an important space for women to discuss their place and relationships in society. Bolton (*Moon*, 124) notes that through plaiting women “invest in relationships they have with one another [...]”. Most plaiting in Vanuatu is done by women (Bolton, *Moon* 109; Jolly, *Place* 81–83; see also Hazelgrove Planel), and, depending on the community and the occasion, in groups (Kelly 272; Bolton, *Moon* 121), or individually (Hazelgrove Planel 115; Keller). In places, such as Futuna, where plaiting is done individually, women will nonetheless support each other in the preparatory process (Hazelgrove Planel 115). Even when they are plaiting on their own, the act of it connects plaiters, the community and past and future community members. It is an intergenerational and embodied practice that children learn by watching their mothers, grandmothers or other women in the village before daring to imitate the movements themselves (see Bolton, *Moon* 116). The dialogue that occurs intergenerationally is interwoven with dialogue and discussions about present-day issues surrounding gender relations.

Plaiting simultaneously creates, maintains and embodies social relationships (see Bolton, *Moon* 124) and the complexity and diversity of plaiting techniques, practices and designs creates “a venue for ideas about people and relationships that are [...] explored through practice” (151). The gendered categorisation of the lower leaves as females and the upper ones as males (Kelly 260–262; Keller 7) lends itself to discussions and jokes about existing gender relations (Kelly 260ff.; Hazelgrove Planel 144–153), giving women a way “to voice ideas and experiences of relations between men and women (Hazelgrove Planel 144–153) The leaves continually have to be alternated between for a mat to emerge, thus subverting the idea that “women lie underneath men” (Hazelgrove Planel 148). The gendered naming of leaves is linked to their use, which is similar to the relational understanding of gender in Vanuatu and wider parts of Oceania (see Strathern). By this constant change of leaves, “[p]andanus plaiting [...] is able to simultaneously demonstrate one point of view whilst asserting the truth of the opposite point of view” (Hazelgrove Planel 160). As such, plaiting can be seen as a metaphor of a dialogic well-functioning and inclusive discussion space and a community where equal space and time is given to all voices.

Women plait together internal and external ideas of womanhood by using plaiting to provide for themselves and their families, reinterpreting what it means to be a woman and the often indigenised Victorian and Christian categories of public male breadwinner versus

domestic female homemaker (see Marsh, “Migrating feminisms” 671–672). It reinforces women’s relationships and empowers them economically and symbolically as integral and equal members of the place and community (see Bolton, *Moon*; Douglas, “Traditional Individuals”; Hazelgrove Planel; Kelly). By using mats and baskets as payment, women have successfully entered into the traditionally male domain of trade (see Bolton, *Moon* 52). Paying children's school fees with mats is an investment in relationships, future generations and the entire community (see Bolton, *Moon* 123; Hazelgrove Planel 226–227). Through plaiting “[w]omen are asserting their value in both tradition and modernity, past and present, and indeed are trying to dissolve these invidious dichotomies which still threaten to sunder their subjectivity as women” (Jolly, “Women-Nation-State” 160), negotiating their space in contemporary, postcolonial and polyphonic Vanuatu. Wan Smolbag's plays similarly blur boundaries and advocate for and practice feminist empowerment by plaiting together women's voices at all stages. The following chapter will illustrate how exactly Oceanic feminism is an example of the Pacific-wide plaiting practice that unites many voices while simultaneously respecting and encouraging their differences.

3.3. Oceanic Feminism

Oceanic feminism refers to the collective and shared goals across island cultures to dismantle existing patriarchal hierarchies. By using the term Oceanic instead of Pacific, I draw on Hau'ofa's emphasising the Ocean as uniting the many islands of Oceania, thus highlighting their shared histories of encounters, travels and exchanges. Similar to plaiting, the Ocean is constantly moving but also serving as a rooting and connecting body. Oceanic feminists also embody this rooted movement by believing in the need and strength of polyphonous voices to dismantle existing patriarchal structures that denote fixity. In the *Charter of Feminist Principles*, they write about their “common bonds of *wansolwara* (ocean), *vanua* (land) and *tua'a* (ancestors)” (1, italics in original). While *wansolwara* most prominently indicates movement, dynamism, flexibility and polyphony, *vanua* the rootedness and security of community, and *tua'a* the interweaving of people and temporalities, these three categories are not distinct from one another. Feminists from Oceania need to be dynamic and receptive of constantly changing contexts, issues, and voices by being rooted and in dialogue with their pasts, presents and futures. The plaiting together of voices within and through the ocean is also what unites feminists from Oceania with those from abroad, the ocean being a connective body of shared agendas.

The first recorded attempts at finding a common agenda by coming together and sharing experiences were made during the first Pacific Women's Conference in Fiji in 1975 and the "Women, Development and Empowerment" workshop in 1987 (see Marsh, "Migrating feminisms" 665). The Pacific Women's Conference in 1975 was the first time that women from Oceania met "to talk about *themselves* and look at the institutions which defined women: the family and traditional culture, religion, education, the media, the law, and politics" (Griffen, "The Pacific Islands" 660). It was the first time a feeling of local unity among difference emerged. During the 1987 workshop this united feeling was for the first time put down in writing. In a vision statement, the first ideas of empowering women in all domains of life were discussed (see Griffen with Yee qtd. in Marsh, "Migrating feminisms" 672).

After those first meetings it was only in 2016 that feminists from Oceania held the first Pacific feminist forum in Fiji, with a follow up forum in 2019. The 2016 forum with more than 100 women from 13 countries ushered in a new era of feminist collaboration in Oceania (see Naepi 19). In their *Charter of Feminist Principles for Pacific Feminists* (1) they emphasise and define their diversities when saying "women and girls" as including: "lesbians, bisexual, trans people, intersex people, fa'afafine, leiti, and other non-heteronormative Pacific identities, women with physical disabilities, women with psychosocial disabilities, sex workers, [women] living with HIV aids, women living in rural and remote places, young women, the girl child, older women, heterosexual women, women in sports and creative industries." In a similar fashion, when using the term "woman" in this thesis, it is meant to refer to the social category of marginalisation and discrimination that women of all varieties are faced with in diverse ways. It is not meant to homogenise experiences and identities but rather to broaden the meaning of "woman", understanding it as an open-ended and polyphonous category in itself.

Oceanic feminists emphasise their shared wish to uproot existing patriarchal structures by using the image of the "pandanus mats of our current struggles" (*Charter of Feminist Principles* 2). The mat highlights their connectivity and the practice of embodied and rooted movement in their fight against patriarchal structures. Central to feminists from Oceania is their "emphasis on the values of collectivity and on connecting women's movements to broader socio-political struggles for self-determination where the self is a collectivity rather than an individual" (Jolly, "Women's Rights" 183; see also Jolly, "Politics of difference"). Since mats are plaited by alternating between individual but equally relevant leaves, the mat symbolises both Oceanic feminists' solidarity and their diversity of different but shared

voices, approaches and experiences. By drawing on the practice of plaiting, feminists from Oceania also emphasise the continuity and interwovenness of past and present, tradition and modernity and the ongoing existence of collective but diverse feminisms in Oceania (see Jolly, “Women's Rights”, “Beyond the Horizon”; Griffen, “Local and Global”).

While the term 'feminism' is nowadays often used with a certain self-evidence by women in Oceania, remnants of doubt remain, also in Vanuatu. Initially, “Women's Liberation” was considered a “European disease to be cured by Europeans” (Molisa qtd. in Jolly, “Politics of difference” 52). In concordance with anti-colonial independence rhetoric, western feminism was deemed a homogenous entity against which to differentiate oneself. Still today, women from Oceania feel suspicious about feminism, despite working hard for the empowerment and equality of women (Marsh, “Migrating feminisms” 665, 677). Nonetheless, women in Oceania identifying as feminists is a further step in decolonising and subverting the “Western monopoly over feminist discourse, or more specifically, over the power to define its meaning [...]” (Marsh, “Migrating feminisms” 668; Naepi 14ff.). They choose to interweave themselves within the global women's movement, claim their space and voice within it and decolonise feminisms by polyphonising the meanings of feminism (see Griffen, “Local and Global”; Jolly, “When She Cries”; see also Hazelgrove Planel).

Part of the polyphonous practice of feminists from Oceania is their emphasis on the entanglement of local and foreign patriarchal structures. Jolly (“Politics of difference” 66) clarifies that “decolonisation and nationalist struggles, although they might have used women as personnel or as symbols of solidarity, were often masculinist projects” that were appropriated and continued by local men. Grace Mera Molisa (333) has summed up the feeling of being colonised by one's own kind in her poem “Colonised people”, where she writes: “Vanuatu / Womenfolk / half / the population / remain / colonised / by / the Free men / of Vanuatu” (see also Marsh, “Migrating feminisms” 676; “Ancient banyans”; Black Stone Poetry; Bolton, *Moon* 55ff.; Jolly, “Politics of difference”). Instead of idealising an indigenous past of harmonious gender equality, Molisa acknowledges that the current mistreatment of women is the result of “a compounding of Melanesian and European misogyny” (Jolly, “Politics of difference” 58). Because this compounding is complex, an equally complex and polyphonous response is necessary. Just as community theatre practices need to remain open to, reflect and incorporate changes that happen in communities, so too must Oceanic feminism remain dynamic, critical and flexible to persist.

In Vanuatu, the encounter between missionaries and islanders greatly influenced the existing gender structures in their attempt to 'liberate' ni-Vanuatu women from their men (see

Mars, “Migrating feminisms” 671–672; Douglas, “Christian citizens” 2–6; Jolly, “Women's Rights” 177; Bolton, *Moon* 55–56; see also Jolly, “Sacred spaces”, “Politics of difference”). However, ironically, their gendered division of space contributed to the diminishing of women's power (see Marsh, “Migrating feminisms” 671–672; Bolton, *Moon* 56). Drawing on Schoeffel-Meleisea, Marsh (“Migrating feminisms” 671) notes that “gender roles were drastically exacerbated and rigidly defined with Western contact”. Missionaries believed women were inferior to men for having to work outside the house (Jolly, “Save” 35) which eventually resulted in women becoming more dependent on men as Victorian and Christian ideals of domesticity and a male provider were propagated (Ralston in Marsh, “Migrating feminisms” 672, 675). Yet, Jolly (“Sacred spaces” 220; see also Jolly, “Christianity and Cloth” 430) warns against “a Eurocentric dichotomy of domestic and public life”, as this does not apply to the existing spatial gendered differences in Oceania. Taylor J. (*Other Side* 170) suggests thinking of gendered space as “fluid relationality and linked encompassment rather than rigid dichotomy and opposition” which is similar to the non-existence of binary gender categories in many parts of Oceania where “persons are considered in relational and multiple terms, as amorphously constituted through ongoing and contextual exchanges with significant others” (163; see also Strathern 8). The present-day focus on gendered flexibility and polyphony is thus a continuation of existing ontologies.

In the independent nation of Vanuatu, religion, *kastom* and gender are intertwined both to the disadvantage and advantage of women. Marsh (“Migrating feminisms” 672) notes that “the institutionalization of the church as both a patriarchal and colonial tool saw the ideological formalization of patriarchal hierarchies and practices.” The newly introduced Christian ideas were, over decades of dialogue and contact, woven together with existing gender hierarchies that, according to Jolly (“When She Cries” 360), resulted in “recalcitrant and militant forms of male domination which are staunchly defended as traditional” (see also Taylor J. “Social Life”). According to Forsyth (15), “men are using whatever justification they can find and are not listening too hard when the Church and chiefs try to tell them they have misinterpreted a teaching.” It is not necessarily religious texts and believes themselves that are patriarchal, but their interpretations that attempt to fix their meanings to perpetuate certain patriarchal ideals and structures. Gender relations differ not only within the many *kastom* systems, but also between the various church groups in Vanuatu (see Douglas, “Christian citizens” 19; Eriksen). The realisation that interpretations are man-made has led to women starting to make their own interpretations as well as reimagine Christian nuclear family idealisations.

Networks outside the immediate kin and nuclear family are of profound importance for women. Speaking for urban areas, Spark (127) notes that women's economic independence enables them “to negotiate intimate relationships based on respect and equality”. As a result, diverging ideas of what constitutes a “good woman” and “good man” are starting to collapse into a gender neutral “someone who supports their family and helps to steer those with limited education” (120). While Spark notes that “mutually respectful relationships [are prioritised] over church- or custom-defined ideas about what makes a 'good woman' [...]” (120) and alternative social networks for women in towns women are important arenas for women to speak their voice, *kastom* and church empowerment are not to be underestimated. As noted by Jolly (“Women's Rights” 183) “[n]i-Vanuatu feminists have [...] successfully negotiated those invidious oppositions which equate tradition with women's oppression and modernity with women's liberation by simultaneously claiming greater powers in both”—effectively plaiting them together. Oceanic feminists' postcolonial plaiting practice subverts the reproduction of such binaries.

Feminists from Oceania not only strive to extend limiting definitions of *kastom* but also those of feminism as something done for and by women. In their *Charter of Feminist Principles*, they counter gender binaries not only in their inclusive and polyphonous use of “women and girls” (1), but also by actively and straightforwardly stating that they see “men and boys as participants and allies in our work” (3). This inclusion of men has been necessary throughout the feminist movement in Oceania for it to gain the strength it has today (see Grimshaw and Loney 173; Marsh, “Ancient banyans” 116). The plethora of pressing issues requires “a holistic approach that views oppression as multi-faceted, and, as such, demands multi-faceted approaches defined and executed by the commitment of men *and* women” (Marsh, “Ancient banyans” 116). This is an inclusive development from Molisa's claim that ni-Vanuatu men continue to colonise ni-Vanuatu women and the idea that “the empowerment of women in Vanuatu is [...] a form of ‘Violence Against Men’ [...]” (Taylor J., “Social Life” 167). The inclusion of all genders in the fight against inequalities also acknowledges that everyone is suffering from the interweaving of imposed and indigenous gender hierarchies. By not simply labelling and categorising men as those who are inflicting pain, Oceanic feminists are engaging in dialogue with them; instead of inverting monophonic patriarchal voices with equally monophonic and exclusionary feminist ones, they acknowledge and highlight that women's and men's issues reciprocally influence each other.

4. Analysis

Just as each mat and Oceanic feminist voice is different, so does the polyphony in the plays *It's Cold* (1998), *Solid Sistas* (2004), *Heart Problem* (2018) and *Twist mo Spin* (2019) deceive any premature assumptions of simplicity and patriarchal colonial monophony. To argue for this claim I will comparatively analyse and discuss explicit, implicit and absorbed voices in the plays in terms of women's emplaced polyphony, paravoices and monophonic violences. In the case of women's emplaced polyphony (4.1.), patriarchal voices attempting to dominate and exert their monophonic masculine and misogynist meaning onto places, such as the road, kava bars, the church or island, are subverted by sidelined characters, mostly women, confidently speaking from these places, thus highlighting the ubiquitous existence of polyphony (see Booth xx–xxi) and subverting the monophonic and exclusionary meaning men try to fix to places. Wan Smolbag's reimagining of these places as inclusive and dynamic meeting grounds, reflects Oceanic feminist practice that advocates for a unified solidarity in difference.

Similarly, the paravoices in the plays, such as absent characters, songs, and chorus contribute to a dialogic engagement both with the other characters and the audience on a subtler but equally powerful level. As will be argued in greater detail below (4.2.), paravoices are an equally polyphonic Oceanic feminist approach that is interwoven with the direct voices and absorbed voices to further encourage dialogue with the audience. My focus on paravoices seeks to contribute to the decolonising of monophonic structures by showing how such implied voices in the plays both illustrate deeply ingrained and complex monophonic power dynamics, as well as offering feminist and polyphonic paravocal subversions by confronting entangled patriarchal structures with equally complex counter-narratives.

Lastly, the chapter on monophonic violences (4.3.) most straightforwardly unveils the subversion of both physical and verbal acts of violence in the plays that are the result of “a compounding of Melanesian and European misogyny [...]” (Jolly, “Politics of difference” 58) by polyphonising them. The plays illustrate that the absorption of misogynist voices leads to various forms of (auto)aggressive behaviour, while simultaneously showing that empowered polyphonous voices have the power to subvert them. Gender-based and other violences are central concerns of Oceanic feminists' “pandanus mats of our current struggles” (*Charter of Feminist Principles* 2). Each of the following three chapters illustrates a different but related level of how the plaiting together of thematic and formal polyphony anticipates and encourages dialogic conflict towards more inclusive communal togetherness. Looking at the explicit, implicit and absorbed voices in the chapters on women's emplaced voices (4.1.),

paravoices (4.2.) and monophonic violences (4.3) through the lenses of polyphony, plaiting and Oceanic feminism seeks to unveil Wan Smolbag's complex, subversive and inclusive mat of polyphonic voices in dialogue as part of their feminist postcolonial community theatre practice that is dialogically engaging with the community it stems from and returns to.

The three analytical foci are all examples of Wan Smolbag's syncretic postcolonial community theatre practice that plaits together local and foreign gendered, temporal, historical, geographical, formal, thematic and aesthetic binaries. The thematic and formal plaiting on stage includes the audience that is explicitly or implicitly addressed through dialogue, song, the chorus, body movement or direct questions in the shared negotiating and reimagining of existing communal knowledges and meanings. Wan Smolbag's decolonising and feminist strategy of showing how a diversity of voices unmask and counters existing real and fictive patriarchal monophony is deeply rooted in communal voices and stories. While the characters and storylines performed on stage are fictional, they stem from existing issues in the community and closely reflect the audience's and actors' reality (see *Solid Sistas Documentary*). By comparing the plays thematically and formally by drawing on polyphony, Oceanic feminism and plaiting within and as community theatre, I will illustrate that Wan Smolbag's weaving together of explicit, implicit and absorbed polyphonic voices in and beyond *It's Cold*, *Solid Sistas*, *Heart Problem* and *Twist mo Spin* decolonises patriarchal monophonic structures to reflect and encourage a collaborative reimagining of life in postcolonial Vanuatu.¹⁰

4.1. Women's direct expressions of emplaced polyphony

Wan Smolbag interrogates the gendered understandings of belonging to place and emplaced voices by subverting patriarchal attempts at (re)creating male monophony and showing that women's voices equally belong. Places such as churches, kava bars and big shops have become characteristic of ni-Vanuatu life and important, but highly gendered meeting places (see Taylor J., "Troubled histories"; Jolly, "Save"; see also Douglas, "Christian citizens"). Men's colonising attempts of places have direct consequences for the voices present and spoken there. The polyphony of places portrayed in the plays is already inherent in the ni-Vanuatu understanding of *ples* that refers to the entwinement and belonging to the community across pasts, presents and futures. *Ples* is community and community is always diverse and polyphonous. The interweaving of subversive women's voices into male-dominated places highlights this understanding of place as a meeting space for the diverse and conflicting

¹⁰ All translations from Bislama below are my own. The original text will be provided in the footnotes.

voices of the community. Similar to Bakhtin's understanding of polyphony as independent voices meeting and engaging with each other in the novel (see 3.1.), and Oceanic feminists meeting in a shared place of diverse but uniting issues and histories (see 3.3.), Wan Smolbag's plays bring voices together both in the fictional places of the plays and the theatre space. The focus on places as polyphonous illustrates the dynamism of places that nonetheless remain rooted in the community that creates and constitutes them.

Within the four plays characters frequently move between different fictional places. In *It's Cold*, Sonia at first speaks from an undefined place after having come back from the road before she is at her parents' house for the larger part of the story. Both in *It's Cold* and *Solid Sistas* the place of the church and the strong Christian sentiments stemming from and expressed within it comprise a monophonic voice that is subverted and questioned by the characters in the plays. After having gotten pregnant with an unwanted child, Sonia leaves it at the communal rubbish place, conflating her parents' and Christian preachings on women and dirt with literal dirt to confront the community's shaming culture that has its roots in structural misogyny. The road is an important dialogic meeting place for the characters in all of the plays. In *Solid Sistas*, central scenes are acted out in the concert venue next to the road where the play both begins and ends, as well as the kava bar where Lizzie meets the boys, Donal and the chief. A similar gender imbalance is also acted out in *Heart Problem* where Laura is the sole female employee who nonetheless comes along to the post-work kava bar gathering. While the characters in *Solid Sistas* and *Twist mo Spin* move widely and regularly, neither Sonia in *It's Cold*, nor Laura in *Heart Problem* physically move far. For Laura, the store is a place where she is acutely confronted with the sexist monophonic dominance of her boss, Thomas. In addition to these specific places of the urban plays selected for this thesis, the island is only referred to as an idealised paradisaal idyll in *Solid Sistas* while it is lived on in *Twist mo Spin*.

After this selective overview of the most important places in the plays, I will first focus on women emplacing their voices in the road in order to subvert patriarchal understandings, which link road to prostitution, fallen women and literal and symbolical 'dirt' (4.1.1.). The meeting place of the road is what unites the “common bonds of *wansolwara* (ocean), *vanua* (land) and *tua'a* (ancestors)” (*Charter of Feminist Principles* 1, italics in original) in rooted movement that plaits together people, places, temporalities and histories much like Wan Smolbag's community theatre does. Secondly (4.1.2.), I will discuss how women similarly take their rightful place through voice in the traditionally male-dominated spaces of the church, kava bars and concert venues. Not only the road, but virtually all places

outside of the home tend to be defined by male exclusivity which is not tolerated by the women in the plays. They not only physically enter them but speak from them their diverse and subversive voices. Their polyphony not only questions these places as exclusively male, but also the patriarchal monophony that these places represent. This polyphony of women's emplaced voices is also taken to the metaphorical and literal place of the island (4.1.3.). Most often defined in romantic male terms, the characters in the plays critically investigate this idealised and misogynist image by embedding and rooting their voices in the island, thus complicating and polyphonising existing images and emphasising their belonging to it.

4.1.1. Emplaced women's voices of the road

Place and road, rootedness and movement not only depend on each other for their existence but are closely entangled with each other. While the image of moving women tends to evoke negative associations of a lack of rootedness and belonging to the home and family, male movement tends to be positively connoted with trade and socialising (see Bolton, *Moon*; Jolly, “Another Time”; see also Huffman). However, Jolly (“Another Time”) emphasises that such gendered differentiations between female rootedness and male movement are necessarily flawed. The female characters analysed below highlight this flaw by rooting themselves in the road. Whereas men try to define and limit women to a monophonic understanding of female place as being rooted in the house: “Girls nowadays should be in the house ... [and] not walk around everywhere!” (*Solid Sistas* 28),¹¹ the overt voices of Lizzie, Merial, Miriam, Lynne and Sonia analysed below subvert and polyphonise this entrapped definition of gendered places. They resist patriarchal hierarchisations of women as linked to certain understandings of emplacement by speaking their diverse and polyphonous voices that are rooted in the road, providing context for their movements and defining their own belonging and self as linked to a shared solidary feminist consciousness.

Women find their rootedness in movement, thus defying the monophonic structures and voices that had both forced them to leave and are now judging them for being on the road. Lizzie's (*Solid Sistas*) and Sonia's parents' (*It's Cold*) monophony forces them to become exactly what their parents already fear they are: *women blong rod*. Lizzie's parents threw her out of the house after she was raped and had gotten pregnant with Merial. By telling the story of how she was forced to leave her parent's house, Lizzie speaks up for herself and contextualises the life she is leading (*Solid Sistas* 50). The actor playing Lizzie endorses that the audience gets to see the reasons for sex work through her character, clarifying: “She

¹¹ Ol gel nao oli blong stap long haos.. i no wokabaot olabaot!

doesn't like what she is doing, but she has to do it because she has a kid to feed. And that's what's happening with a lot of women here" (*Solid Sistas Documentary* 21:21–21:30). Throughout the play Lizzie criticises and retaliates whenever she is made fun of and looked down on for being a "woman blong rod" (46) by the boys, clarifying that they are no better than her: "You are talking about respect! You are drinking like crazy and stealing everywhere in this place!" (*Solid Sistas* 14).¹² This is an example of Wan Smolbag's community theatre reflecting all members of the community and encouraging especially marginalised voices to take centre stage. As the *Charter of Feminist Principles* (1) underlines by explicitly mentioning "sex workers", the movement of feminists in Oceania is an inclusive one that includes all kinds of women and girls. Finally, Lizzie's friends and the boys stand in solidarity with her, having realised that her voice from the road belongs as much to the community as any other one.

Similarly to Lizzie, Sonia in *It's Cold* speaks from the road to subvert existing monophonic understandings of teen mothers. Just like Lizzie's parents, Sonia's parents see the blame with the girls, saying "[t]hese girls don't care! They bring shame on their families" (8). To them unmarried girls getting pregnant at a young age are part of "this dirty world" which they try to keep their children from (2). Sonia is faced with society's and her parents' hypocrisy of not teaching sex education while blaming young women for getting pregnant. Eventually, she speaks from her literal and metaphorical "dirty" place, having left her newborn at the communal rubbish place, and sets her choice to do so in context by recounting her story, just as Lizzie did. By explicitly emplacing herself and her baby in between the rubbish bins, she subverts the idea of girls as silenced, objectified human dirt. She does not hide her baby, but puts it centrally into the community, between their literal dirt nonetheless, to clarify that teenage pregnancy is a communal problem. The immense power of her voice also becomes apparent when Mark "*heaves a sigh of relief*" as she steps off the stage (1, italics in original). Her vocal dominance over her own story and her speaking up for herself is physically burdening him, who is not used to marginalised voices getting so confidently uttered. Sonia is not only speaking for herself but also giving voice to the many other teen mothers who remain unable to do so. As a community theatre strategy, Sonia's explicitly speaking about her experiences removes the taboos around this subject and stimulates the reimagining of common monophonic voices equalling her and her child to dirt. Her talking directly to the audience from her marginalised position on the road creates a bond of responsibility between herself and the audience to take vocal action against unjust

12 Yu stap tokabaot respekt! Yufala nao yu stap dring kranke mo stihl olabaot long ples ya!!

monophonies.

Women who move and speak freely are often seen as dangerous, regardless of whether or not their movement is connected to sex work. In *Heart Problem* Miriam is continuously criticised and made fun of for being a “kastom woman” (39). She comes to her sister's home early in the play and is seemingly not rooted to any community per se, but all of them at once, creating a polyphonic first impression of her. Upon arriving from the road, she says: “Morning.. all friends! Auntie! Uncle over there! Morning!” to which the chorus only replies: “half mad is back again!” (9).¹³ The chorus makes the community's opinion of her clear, further emphasising this by describing their reactions: “No one is talking to her / No one looks at her!” (9).¹⁴ When Annie finally reacts to her sister's arrival, she says: “Ahh! What are you doing here?!” and calls her “Half mad!” (9).¹⁵ However, while she is perceived as an outsider, Miriam is deeply rooted in her movement, feeling a close connection and emplaced with the communal environment. She expresses this rootedness in movement by speaking to her dead grandparent and making leaf medicine for the community, thus plaiting past and present voices together in her dynamic position. Miriam appropriates the marginalised fluid, outcast position she finds herself in by expressing her belonging to it and caring for the community. She knows Edward, Annie's landlord, is sick already before he admits it himself. Miriam notes: “They call me crazy head! Half mad.. but my eye sees what other men are not looking at!” (39).¹⁶ Resisting monophonic classifications, she interweaves the colonial differentiation between rootedness and movement by being rooted in the movement of the road.

The girls in *Solid Sistas* explicitly and vocally make the road their meeting place as they lack a feeling of belonging to the enclosed places of the church, nakamal or the concert house. Even though this develops in the course of the play (see 4.1.2.), they frequently plait a communal and solidary web of polyphonous voices when on the road. Their emplacement in the road is most clearly expressed by their singing for the first time on the road about their independence and strength: “You [the boys] don't keep me / from going / I will follow a new road!” (19).¹⁷ While they were still hesitantly talking about their dreams when meeting on the road at the beginning of the play, their spending more time on it and talking to each other has strengthened their confidence and belonging to the road. They do not hide their voices but speak them in the arguably most public of places. The way they use the road as a meeting place of their unique and varied voices to come together in literal and metaphorical harmony

13 Moning.. ol fren! Auntie! Unkel longwe! Moning!; Kas haf mad ia bakegen!

14 No toktok long hem/ No sakem ae!

15 Ahh! Yu stap mekem wanem long ples ia?!; Haf mad!

16 Oli singoatem mi krangkehed! Haf mad.. be ae blong mi I stap lukim ol samting we naraman ino stap luk!

17 Yu no blokem mi / Blong wokabaot i go / Bae mi folem niufala rod!

is strongly contrasted with the boys' getting drunk and making the road an unsafe place. By singing on and from the road they do not allow the boys to dominate and define what the road often stands for—namely boys loitering around, harassing girls and making it a dangerous place—but reimagine it as a free and feminist meeting place of polyphonous voices united through song.

In a similar fashion, in *Twist mo Spin* Lynne gains confidence by speaking to Nora when they are out fishing without Lynne's family-in-law or other monophonic voices from the community disturbing their freedom of speech. Lynne and Nora, similar to the Solid Sistas, meet and bond when out on the road. In a hypocritical castigation of women for taking on 'male' roles as family provider, as is also the case for Lizzie in *Solid Sistas*, Lynne and Nora are blamed for overfishing the shore. The men and Lynne's mother-in-law condemn them for daring to move freely from their homes to do something that supports their families. Lynne counters this by telling the boys at the meeting that she saw a man fishing at night. From all the characters in the play, she is most actively engaging with the environment and its inhabitants. Already when travelling to her husband's home island for the first time, she says “Alright, bye! I'll see you again! One day..” to the dolphins she has just touched (3).¹⁸ While Jason laughingly replies: “Wow... you can talk to all the fish here?” (3),¹⁹ Lizzie greets them again when at the shore with Nora for the first time (9). By resisting the monophonic maintenance of simplistic and absolute opposites between humans-animals and the community-environment, Lynne not only speaks up for herself and her movement, but also the silenced inhabitants of the sea, firmly embedding herself in the place of which she is deemed an outsider to. Nora and Lynne's rootedness within their friendship that emerged and deepened in the course of their travels to the shore is an alternative, empowering and solidary social network that unsettles the monophonic structures of the male-dominated community elite (see Spark). Nora and Lynne's symbolically and literally voicing their solidarity with the environment reimagines communal belonging. They prefer polyphonic dialogue with each other and the fish, rather than trying to fit the monophonic structures of outdated male-dominated assemblies.

As the above examples have shown, the women's sense of self and belonging that is expressed through their embedded voices in the road polyphonises existing male-defined images and narratives thereof. Their experiences are as polyphonous as their voices and the roads they find themselves on. Through confidently inserting themselves within the road, they

18 Ale bae! Lukim yu bakegen! Wan dei..

19 Kas.. yu stap toktok wetem ol fis ia?

reappropriate misogynist understandings of rootedness and movement and clarify that the road is a polyphonous and dynamic meeting place for all members of the community, which also corresponds to Wan Smolbag Theatre being a rooted but dynamic meeting place for the ni-Vanuatu community.

4.1.2. Subverting emplaced belonging

Women's subversion of monophonic male dominances is not limited to polyphonising and embedding themselves as rooted voices of the road but expands to other male-dominated places. In this section, I will discuss how women's embedding themselves and expressing their sense of belonging to enclosed male-dominated places of the church, kava bars and concert venues is a way of illustrating the gendered polyphony each place holds. Again, the women do not seek to dominate or invert male-dominated places, making them women-dominated ones, but to create inclusive Oceanic feminist spaces where their voices equally belong to the community. Wan Smolbag as community theatre illustrates that women's voices are communal voices (see Green 477; see also Looser, *Remaking*). In addition to illustrating how women interweave themselves in male-dominated spaces, I will also juxtapose the women's active and dialogic expressions of voice with the boys' inability to do so. Shaped by monophonic older male role models, the boys forfeit their chance of developing their polyphonic voices, ultimately remaining lost and powerless while the women plait together their voices in dialogic polyphony.

The traditionally male-centred and hierarchically gendered place of the church is critically infused with women's voices in *Solid Sistas*. The church is an important community space in contemporary Vanuatu that well illustrates the legacies of colonialism on *kastom* and gender relations that the modern postcolonial nation must grapple with. Even though men assume clerical superiority, they are conspicuously absent from church in the play: "It's only women... with the pastor!" (26).²⁰ Ironically, it is mostly women who are present when the pastor fills the space with his monophonic misogyny: "She broke God's taboo! She went to her man Adam and she forced Adam to eat!", clarifying that "You women! You carry the mark of Eve! All women are the reason for everything bad that is happening in this world!" (25).²¹ Lizzie responds to these allegations through song, reminding everyone of Jesus saying that "You who throws the first stone / You must not have sin" and asking the pastor to "tell the truth / Have you not got sin? / Have you never done anything you feel ashamed of?"

20 Ol woman nomo.. wetem pastor!

21 Hem i brekem tabu we Papa God i bin puttum! Hem i ron i go long man blong hem Adam, mo hem i forsem Adam blong kakae!; Yufala ol woman! Yu karem mak blong woman ya Eve! Ol woman nao oli stampa blong ol nogud samting w i stap happen long wol ya!

(*Solid Sistas* 26).²² By referring directly to the bible and Jesus' word, Lizzie polyphonises her voice to more forcefully subvert the pastor's monophony. Lizzie's outspokenness in church is new to the place. Auntie admits: "I've never heard this kind of song at church... It challenged me a bit" (29).²³ She encourages the girls to continue with their band and confidently emplacing their critical voices in church. Auntie's support of the song illustrates the need and wish for united feminist polyphony across generations that reimagine monophonic teachings of the bible in church.

Lizzie (*Solid Sistas*) and Laura (*Heart Problem*) also redefine kava bars as inclusive places by embedding their voices within them. Lizzie is confidently emplacing herself within it and speaking back to the boys who are insulting her, saying "Go hang your neck!" (*Solid Sistas* 41).²⁴ When the boys take the insults too far, calling her sister/daughter Merial "a girl like that" (41), meaning sex worker, Lizzie pulls Jimmy's shirt and asks him what he means by this, promising "I know I can break your head!" (41) if they do not stop talking about Merial like that.²⁵ The kava bar owner and Donal end up telling Lizzie "[y]ou cannot talk as strongly in this place.." (41), trying to silence her.²⁶ When Donal tells her she will have to leave if she does not keep her voice down, she asks him: "What about the boys?" (41).²⁷ Lizzie requests equal treatment and responsibility of all genders as emphasised in the *Charter of Feminist Principles*. While the boys can seemingly say whatever they want, Lizzie gets ostracised, which does not keep her from speaking up, a situation similar to Laura in *Heart Problem*. While initially having fun with Eric, her co-worker, talking about gender expectations and relationships (18), the atmosphere changes as soon as her boss, Thomas steps into the room. Thomas immediately dominates the place and Laura, already having been inappropriately advanced by him, "tries to hide behind Eric" (19) before leaving the place altogether after Thomas has again made sexually harassing advances towards her.²⁸ These examples of Lizzie and Laura show the male-dominance and misogyny present due to the surplus of monophonic male voices in these places, but also the subversive potential the kava bar can have, as a casual, 'normal' meeting place for Laura and Eric. By not only stepping into kava bars, but speaking from them, Lizzie and Laura subvert male expectations of place. Their emplacing themselves in the kava bar is a first step at dismantling existing monophonies

22 Yu we i sakem firs ston / Yu no mas gat sin; Pastor talem tru / Yu nao yu no gat sin? / Yu neva bin mekem samting we yu stap sem long hem?

23 Mi neva harem kaen singsing olsem long jioj.... [...] Hem i challengim mifala lelebet.

24 Yu go hangem nek!

25 Mi no kar nating long wan gel olsem tul; Mi save se bae mi brekem hed blong yu!

26 Yu no toktok strong olsem long ples ya..

27 Olsem wanem long ol beo ya?

28 Laura hemi traem haed biae long Eric [...].

to make kava bars more inclusive and polyphonous places for all members of the community.

The Solid Sistas band subvert the male-dominated concert venue and rehearsal space by emplacing their polyphonous voices within it. While the girls are in the audience of the boy band Ironman's concert in the first scene, they take centre stage at the end of the play. By singing about finding their voice (*Solid Sistas* 11–12), the unfair treatment of men and women, the lack of female representation in politics (11) and “following a new road” (19) without men keeping them down, their polyphony covers a large variety of voices, while Ironman merely sing about “Kastom and culture / giv[ing] power to us”, “I cannot find the way” and “need[ing] kava and cigarettes” (3).²⁹ Ironman's monophony is subverted by the Solid Sistas' polyphonous songs that plait together a variety of issues with their dialogues and individual voices by singing songs individually and collectively in order to emphasise that they can be united in their specificity. Aside from the songs, Lizzie emplaces herself into the misogynist and male-dominated space of the concert venue in the final scene, attacking Donal by saying “He is pretending like he is a good man! A bigman of the community! You know what he did?”, resisting shouts to be quiet by declaring: “Be quiet? I will no longer be quiet!” (52).³⁰ Contrary to the boys, the Solid Sistas band do not assume or propose that monophony is necessary for their group identity. Instead, they fight and disagree, thus always remaining in dialogue with each other. After falling out they find their way back together as their rootedness lies within their dynamism which is not based on the illusion of fixed meanings and understandings but their respecting differences (see *Charter of Feminist Principles* 1; see also Griffen, “Local and Global”; Marsh, “Migrating feminisms”; Jolly, “Beyond the Horizon”). In terms of emplacement, the girl band redefines the monophonic concert venue through their polyphonic voices, suggesting that community is not restricted to any particular place but can be made anew through dialogue.

4.1.3. Polyphonic island voices

In an archipelago such as Vanuatu, 'the' island as counterpoint to urban areas is, similar to road and church, a polyphonous place that is in constant movement of people coming-and-going from the mainland. This rooted movement evokes Hau'ofa's theorising of the ocean as a uniting conduit that is also applied by Oceanic feminists when speaking of the “common bonds of *wansolwara* (ocean), *vanua* (land) and *tua'a* (ancestors)” to express the dynamic connectivity across Oceania in their *Charter of Feminist Principles* (1, italics in original).

29 Bae mi folem niufala rod!; Kastom mo kalja / i givim paoa long yumi; Mi no save faenem wei; Mi nidim kava mo cigarette [...].

30 Hem i mekem olsem we hem i wan gudfala man! Wan bigman long komuniti ya! Yufala i save wanem we hem i bin mekem?; Stap kwaet? Mi nomo save stap kwaet!

This rooted but dynamic image clearly rejects the colonial and missionary land-centric idea of a hierarchy between urban and rural areas that has resulted in frequent conflations of the island as a category with romantic ideas of pure *kastom* life (Forsyth 9; see also Jolly, *Place* 252–253). As extensively emphasised throughout this thesis, such puristic understandings are always necessarily flawed. The juxtaposition of island as rural, community-centred and *kastom*-based versus towns as cosmopolitan, individualistic and modern is not clear-cut and monophonic but polyphonous, diverse and constantly moving both through the literal movement of people and products, and the metaphorical changing of what 'the' island stands for. The plays under analysis here are set in urban and rural areas and each of them shows the interweaving of *kastom* and modern understandings of life in relation to gendered and generational conflicts, and the polyphony of voices within both settings. As will be argued below, this serves to illustrate that the category of island is, in fact, a multivoiced, diverse and dynamic meeting place.

The dialogic connection between humans and animals on the island is both questioned and acknowledged in *Twist mo Spin*. While Jason and the other men choose short-sighted profit over maintaining stock of fish for future generations, Lynne resists this by speaking up for and with the environment and its inhabitants. The men's greed shows that the values of the money economy and capitalist exploitation are not limited to towns but have found their way to islands and villages. On the other hand, Lynne, even though she comes from another place, is more attune to and rooted within the local environment. Already on the way to her new home, she does not feel afraid when the waves are high and strong. Upon seeing dolphins, she feels a strong connection to them and sad when they have gone. The chorus notes: “You really wanted to see the dolphins / They make your heart glad. / You bang the side of the boat and call out to them / But there are none anymore” (13).³¹ She is continuously compared to the dolphins both in positive terms when Jason gifts her earrings and he says: “[f]or all dolphins of the sea” (14),³² and in negative terms when the dolphins, similar to Lynne, are accused of having caught all the small fish in the sea (17). In the play, the men's exploitation of the sea subverts the simplistic conflation of island life equalling environmental awareness and belonging. It is Lynne who, having come from another place many years ago and still being treated like an outsider, illustrates that dialogue with nature is essential for the continuation of the reciprocal relationship that exists between humans and place. In order for the community to be able to remain living on the island it is necessary to respectfully engage with, listen to

31 Yu wantem tumas blong lukim ol dolphin / Bae oli mekem hat blong yu I glad. / Yu bangem saed long bot blong singaotem ol / Be ino gat nomo.

32 Blong ol dolphin long solwora!

and speak up for it. The character of Lynne thus helps demonstrate the polyphony of dynamic but rooted island life that encompasses both human and non-human dialogue.

In the case of *Twist mo Spin*, the importance of Wan Smolbag's inclusive Oceanic feminist approach becomes obvious in how they plait together and discuss the issue of overfishing and women. Instead of leaving it to fisheries experts to lead the post-play discussions, they are merely present in order to ensure that technical terminology is adequately used (see Gibbons). Wan Smolbag does not didactically transmit information on overfishing and how to avoid it, but chooses to focus on all the issues within which it is interwoven to illustrate the complexity of the topic and the many voices involved. Before writing the play, they travelled to communities and talked to people affected by overfishing in order to gain an understanding of the difficult reality they are living in and to avoid imposing overfishing as a topic when travelling to the communities and performing the final play to them (see Gibbons). In their community-based and dialogic approach they also centralise women's voices that are normally excluded and marginalised in official fisheries meetings to accurately and equally reflect polyphonic communal voices (see Griffen, "Local and Global" 110; see also Gibbons 45–46).

Lynne's emplacing herself on the island subverts existing idealisations about the purity of islands in public discourse that are reflected in the plays. When Lynne travels to Jason's home island he tells her that "[m]y home [place] has got everything.. You will be eating fish two times a day! You will eat pineapple, pamplemousse.. orange, mango..until you're tired!" (*Twist* 1).³³ Yet, Lynne's disillusion sets in the very same day when she gets cabbage and rice to eat instead of fish (4–5). Life on the island quickly turns to a sad routine for Lynne, as summed up in the chorus: "When you come back to the house you're tired/ daddy is drinking kava/ but you must feed the kids / there's manioc / cabbage / and tinned fish" (18).³⁴ The sad irony here is that Lynne was looking so much forward to eating fresh fish as that is hard to come by in towns. The hope for a variety of locally grown food stems from untenable island idealisations. Life on rural islands has also been affected by external forces, such as commercial fisheries, that have exploited the sea, resulting in a disbanding of formerly close dialogic human–animal and human–environment ties. Surprised at the existing monophony and lack of dialogue between humans and nature, Lynne seeks to re-establish it by engaging with dolphins and going out to the shore to fish herself. By acknowledging the existing

33 Ples blong mi I gat evri samting.. Bae yu kakae fis 2 taem long wan dei! Bae yu kakae pinapol, pamplemus.. oranis, mango.. go go yu taed!

34 Taem yu kasem bak haos yu tu yu taed / Dadi I stap dring kava / Be yu mas fidim ol pikinini / I gat manioc / Kabij/ Mo tin fis.

polyphony inherent in the island through the inhabitants of the sea and actively engaging with them in a respectful way, she reimagines her life on the island in a more inclusive and polyphonic way.

Similar to Lynne, the girl band in *Solid Sistas* subverts impossible male romanticisations of island life by reimagining their urban lives in the form of the sisterly community of the girl band. For the boys the home island is presented as a safe haven: when Fred tells the chief that they walk around all the time because “[t]here is nothing to do”, the chief notes: “Everyone has got ground on the island! You can make a garden!” (40).³⁵ Like most youth living in Port Vila today, the boys are born and bred in Port Vila, and have never visited their ‘home’ islands and cannot afford the trip (40). At the same time, there is culturally no such thing as a “*man Vila*” as everyone in Port Vila identifies with the village their parents come from (Forsyth 6, italics in original). As a result, these island identities increasingly resemble empty categories of identification similar to the national *kastom* category. The chief’s advice to return to the island is similarly far-fetched and unrealistic, unveiling the paucity of both his leadership skills and his care for the boys’ well-being. The chief’s suggestion that the boys go to the island illustrates his own hopelessness. Instead of enquiring into their idleness, talking to them about their substance abuse, loitering and violence, he merely suggests this move whereby he, in effect, palms off his responsibility. The Solid Sistas band members, on the other hand, also struggle with life in town but actively and collectively confront oppressive monophonic structures through song and dialogue. Instead of dreaming about finding happiness in distant islands, they work hard at their polyphonous and conflict-laden friendship to feel rooted within themselves.

This chapter has shown that Wan Smolbag as postcolonial and Oceanic feminist community theatre deconstructs simplistic monophonic understandings of place by illustrating the polyphony inherent in communal meeting places. Interweaving marginalised voices into places and demonstrating that they have a right to exist subverts monophonic and limiting understandings that link place to certain male-defined meanings. The polyphony of places emphasised through the inclusion of otherwise marginalised people illustrates the open-endedness of meaning (see Emerson, *Dostoevsky* xxxi–xxxiii) that is continually negotiated as a form of Oceanic feminist empowerment. As meeting points, places are constantly redefined and reimagined by the voices they are exposed to. The plaiting together of voices in the places portrayed in the plays also shows that the road, churches, kava bars and islands do not exist distinctly from each other but form a polyphonous web that represents contemporary ni-

35 No gat samting blong mekem jif.; Yufala evriwan i gat graon long aelan! Yu save mekem karen!

Vanuatu life which is full of discrepancies and contradictions. Capturing and plaiting together these discrepancies and contradictions through polyphonous voices in the community theatre space acknowledges and nurtures dialogue between them towards a more inclusive understanding of places as ples.

4.2. Paravoices

After having discussed overt polyphonous emplaced subversions of male defined and -dominated places, the following chapter will revolve around what I refer to as paravoices in order to grasp the many layers of polyphony that are used as Oceanic feminist strategy in Wan Smolbag's postcolonial community theatre. I understand paravoices to be implicit voices that are tightly woven into our auditory field exactly because they are seemingly *besides*. As “para-” is often used in words that refer to some sort of irregularity, the term 'paravoice' can similarly be understood as referring to voices that cause and stem from irregularity. The otherwise seemingly fluent dialogue is intercepted and disrupted by such voices, often in order to highlight the already existing complexity of polyphony in what seems to be homogenously flowing dialogue at first glance. Plaiting paravoices, such as 'past' voices, chorus, song and embodied voices, together with the dialogue of the plays is a decolonising strategy as it polyphonises western understanding of theatre as well as respecting and reflecting the diversity of the community within which the plays are based. The strategy of using a variety of paravoices is an inclusive community-centred approach that seeks to include the audience and engage them in the story. The paravoices in the plays reveal both the myriad and inconspicuous but highly powerful ways in which they can be used to manipulate explicit voices and beliefs, as well as offering polyphonous counter-strategies that subvert explicit monophonies and reflect the postcoloniality of voices as existing “*after [...], around, through, out of, alongside, and against*” (Wendt, *nuanua* 3, italics in original) everyone.

The paravoices discussed in this chapter include 'past' voices which characters refer to through stories or mention as a side in family conversations, repetitive voices which are most prominently portrayed through chorus and song, as well as embodied voices such as clothing or body movement. The focus on 'past' voices (4.2.1.) emphasises the plaiting together of temporalities that is typical of postcolonial community theatre (see Balme; Gilbert and Tompkins 137–144; see also Looser, “A Piece”, *Remaking*), as it highlights the non-linearity and immense impact alleged 'past' voices have on the present, thus subverting any temporal binaries. It is also a way to illustrate the Oceanic feminist focus on *wansolwara*, *vanua* and *tua'a* as concepts that simultaneously emphasise difference and unity (*Charter of Feminist*

Principles). The second subchapter (4.2.2.) focuses on the repetition of certain messages through song and chorus that creates a deeper, more personal level of engaging with the audience. As noted by Balme (150), music can “create a special level of emotional intensity unattainable by other means.” The chorus has a variety of functions and can frequently change its function in the course of the plays. While it most often comments on the actions as a narrator-like instance that bridges any potential differences between the community members of the audience, actors and characters, it can also express characters' thoughts to which the audience otherwise would not have access, as well as quite harshly reflect misogynist and other stigmatising norms. The final subchapter on embodied voices (4.2.3.) highlights the embodiment of voices and their potential for subverting patriarchal monophony. By grouping 'past', repetitive and embodied voices under the category of paravoices, I wish to emphasise their similarity in terms of being equal to, yet slightly set aside from other voices, reflecting Oceanic feminist unity in difference.

4.2.1. 'Past' voices

One kind of paravoice that can be found in all plays are 'past' voices. By putting 'past' under parentheses I wish to emphasise the impossibility of past as a category that can be clearly marked off from the present. The voices are most often drawn into the present by characters' mentioning 'past' family members or stories, implicitly indicating their relevance for the present-day. The pulling of 'past' voices into the present can sometimes almost go unnoticed as it is so faintly done. Today, in modern-day Vanuatu, temporalities are not as easily and naturally plaited together as in traditional society. The plays, by creating a dialogue between present and past voices, recall these practices by interweaving temporalities through voices.

In *Heart Problem* Miriam's listening to her *abu's* (Bislama for “grandparent”) paravoice in a dream has immediate consequences for her life as it encourages her to start making leaf medicine. This choice, while it connects her closer to the land and her ancestors, and empowers her to take her economic situation into her own hands, causes a further rift in the relationship with her sister, Annie. The community in which Annie is living is no longer as connected to the place as Miriam is. They are oriented towards listening to individualist capitalist voices, as is most dominantly represented in the ruthless store owner Thomas. He has adopted colonial land ideologies and sees land as a monetary value that lacks greater spiritual meaning. Miriam, on the other hand, is in dialogue with both the land and the 'past' by plucking leaves from it as a response to what *abu's* voice from beyond has told her. She actively engages in cross-temporal vocal plaiting by replying, “Abu! Look what you did!

Everyone is feeling well from the secret you told me! Thank you Abu!” (*Heart* 25).³⁶ This dialogue across time plaits together colonial binaries of land–community, past–present, man–woman, modernity–tradition and direct–indirect voices. Her dialogic interaction with her *abu* illustrates the vitality of ancestral voices in the land. By engaging with them and emphasising the positive consequences of doing so through the healing powers of the leaf medicine, Miriam encourages others to listen and respond to the polyphony of present ‘past’ voices in an inclusive cross-temporal dialogue.

In *It's Cold*, Sonia's absent sister is similarly present as a paravoice that creates suspense by emphasising the family's strictness. Sonia's father threw out Sonia's sister Laura after she had fallen in love with someone they disagreed with (3). Sonia's father, Aaron, attempts to monophonise family history by silencing mentions of his older daughter. He does not want to recognise the strong impact Laura's ‘past’ voice has on the present. Sonia's mother tries to acknowledge the presence of Laura's implied voice and polyphonise Aaron's monophony by saying: “You are a bit hard on the girls”, to which he harshly replies: “She’s not coming back! She’s made her choice. I don’t want to see her in this house again” (3). His strictness and resistance against Laura's paravoice emphasises both his monophonic understanding of family as well as Sonia's entrapment. The omnipresence of Laura's absent voice creates additional fear for Sonia when she falls in love with Mark and gets unintentionally pregnant because she knows, as much as the audience, that her father does not tolerate any form of defiance. Through the interweaving of Sonia's initial monologue after already having had her baby and Laura's paravoice that follows soon after, it is clear for the audience that Sonia and Laura share many similarities. With the knowledge of the rejected sister, Sonia's slowly unfolding story gains further tension. The clearer it becomes that Sonia is unable to talk to her parents, the more her sister is missing as the only one who would understand her situation. Yet, the knowledge about Laura gives the audience the possibility to take up her role as the knowledgeable and supportive outsider sister, forging a bond with Sonia that is lacking between her and her parents. Sonia's speaking up to the audience at the end further clarifies her close connection to the audience as a substitute to her sister. Carrying the knowledge of her sister's absent, implied voice within her, she speaks for them both and other outcast women and girls like them, to encourage other members of the community to decolonise monophonic family structures.

36 Abu! Lukim wanem we yu bin mekem! Bae ol man I harem gud from secret ia we yu bin talemaot long mi! Tangkiu Abu blong mi!

In *Solid Sistas*, mystical 'past' voices of girls with wings are interwoven with Merial's life story, thus embedding the awfulness of her situation within the wider mat of ongoing Oceanic feminist struggles. As postcolonial community theatre, these interweavings of 'past' voices disrupt the simplistic distinction between past–present and mystical–real stories and characters. Merial tells the *kastom* story to Jimmy after having been sexually assaulted by Donal, explaining to him that “[t]his woman here can fly” (37) before a man steals her wings.³⁷ She directly compares the mystical woman's 'past' entrapment with her own by answering Jimmy's question “[w]hy did the man hide her wings?”, with “[h]e wanted to spoil her! Just like all men do!” (7).³⁸ By plaiting her situation together with the voices of the girl with wings and her experiences of harassment, she polyphonises and strengthens her own voice. Merial draws on the story of girls with wings because she is unable to express the horror she has experienced in her own voice. At the same time, the story of the girl with wings and her eventual escape from the man who had captured her also provides a hopeful comfort that she will also be able to flee her present situation. By interweaving the voices of the girl with wings with her life, she plaits a complex mat that interlinks previous and present injustices and freedoms, showing the gruesome cyclicity of mistreatment with which women are faced, but also the strength and power they have had and can work towards achieving again. Indeed, the play here replicates the integration in modern-day Vanuatu culture of traditional sayings, myths, fables and stories that illuminate and inform the everyday.

The plaiting of the story of the girl with wings within the play is an example of ongoing and inclusive Oceanic feminist empowerment by learning from each other's pasts and presents and identifying differences and similarities in order to oppose present-day discriminations. The insertion of this *kastom* story within the community theatre play is also an example of the syncreticism of postcolonial community theatre performances. While scripts are written for these productions, much like the *kastom* story in the play the text is merely a reference point that is set in relation to the community members's real life experiences (see *Solid Sistas Documentary*). Merial's explaining the story of the girl with wings to Jimmy, who cannot read, continues past oral storytelling traditions in the present. At the same time, the insertion of this *kastom* story encourages the audience's engagement with Merial's story in the play. While Jimmy does not realise what Merial is trying to tell him with this story, that she is using it to talk about her own experiences, the audience already knows

37 Woman ya hem i save flae.

38 From wanem man ya hem i haedem wing blong hem.; Hem i wantem spolem hem! Olsem ol man nomo!

that Donal had sexually harassed her. By “quot[ing]” local traditions, Wan Smolbag is respectfully and critically engaging with them and leaving it up to the audience to interpret them (see DeBlock 551–552). Similar to Oceanic feminism, their postcolonial community theatre plaits together past and present, tradition and modernity, plaiter/actor and product/play with the community audience to holistically engage with the complexity of issues women face.

The *kastom* story is also what connects Merial with Lizzie who, upon finding Merial dead, repeats this story of girls with wings, more overtly linking Merial's fate to that of women both in the past and future. Lizzie says: “There was a time / When all women could fly / In the wind that crosses the sky / All rubbish / Could never reach them / But the times are gone / In the past” (*Solid Sistas* 50).³⁹ The *kastom* story of the girls with wings is a feminist reclaiming of voice, offering a more positive and emplaced alternative to the misogynist interpretations of Eve and the consequences thereof for women in Christian societies today. Lizzie's reiterating of the story is a call to action which the Solid Sistas band in the final scene, and with the help of Jimmy, respond to by stepping on stage and performing their inclusive song. Men (and women) still continue to hide women's wings, but they need to stand united in order to reattach those wings and collectively fly off into the sky. The strength in interweaving these mystical ancestral voices into the present-day both motivates to move towards this female strength while remaining rooted in their community and *ples* from which this story stems.

In *Twist mo Spin* Nora tells Lynne a different story about girls with wings that is used to thematise and symbolise ideas of outside women coming to ‘steal’ from the reef and Lynne's subversion thereof. When they go to the shore for the first time, Nora explains that there used to be many clams and shells but suddenly they were gone. She tells the story of a boy watching a group of Tongan girls flying to the shore to collect the shells (*Twist* 8). When the boy catches a girl who had taken off her wings, he imprisons her (8). When she finally manages to flee to the reef, he hits her with an arrow causing her to turn into the stone Nora and Lynne are standing in front of (8). After hearing the story Lynne says: “I feel sorry for her...” (8), showing Oceanic feminist solidarity across present–past and real–mystical voices.⁴⁰ The story of the girl with wings adds another layer to Lynne's outsider status and is an example of community theatre opening up the space to discuss difficult and deeply engrained issues through explicit and implicit polyphonic voices. Comparing Lynne's

39 I bin gat wan taem / We ol gel i save flae / Long ol wind we i stap krosem skae / Ol rabis samting / I neva bin save / kasem ol / Be taem olsem i finis / Long taem we i pas [...].

40 Sori long hem...

situation with the one the girl with wings faced is an entry point to decolonising ni-Vanuatu's strong identification with their home islands that has its roots in colonial structures (see Jolly, *Place* 253). Lynne, by speaking up for herself and against her mother-in-law's monophonic claim that "Lynne took the kids to the reef...they ruined it" (*Twist* 16),⁴¹ subverts the hold such misogynist monophonic voices of the 'past' have on the present. This shows that existing categorisations, definitions and claims are not universal or 'natural', but stem from stories, ideas, and judgements that can and should be reimagined by unveiling these links and emphasising the polyphony and many possible interpretations of stories there are. By doing this, Lynne also gives voice to other women who, metaphorically speaking, are still being turned to stone.

A different technique of paravoice is created through the many time jumps in *It's Cold*, as well as the shifts in direct audience address that highlight community theatre's spatial and temporal fragility. Present-day Mark and Sonia are very explicit 'past' voices to themselves that show how impossible a division of past and present is. Neither Mark nor Sonia can perform the unfolding of their lives without feeling compelled to comment from their current selves' perspectives. By asking questions directly to the audience during the play, they subvert any temporal and spatial divisions that are often characteristic of western drama. Story and discourse time get closely interwoven with each other, confusing any distance and clear categorisation between the audience and actors. In the end, the audience is taken back to the beginning: nothing is resolved, the great social issue of teenage pregnancy and society's double standards of judging but not listening are issues that cannot be fixed in the course of a play. Instead, the cyclicity and interweaving of paravoices emphasises the repetitiveness of these issues to encourage the audience to take a stance and break this vicious cycle.

4.2.2. Repetition

The following subchapter on repetitive paravoices revolves around voices present within the plays that are then explicitly or implicitly repeated at a later stage. These repetitions can clarify what has been said before and often help to highlight certain aspects while adding a new angle in the different contexts that emphasises the open-endedness of meaning and polyphony of voices. The repetitions, while able to guide the audience to certain messages, require the audience's active involvement with the play in order to notice the implications of the repetitions in the varying forms and contexts in which they occur. Often, voices from characters get repeated through chorus or song, adding a unique layer to the uttered voice. In

41 Lynne I karem ol pikinini I go long rif .. oli rekem gud ia.

chorus or song voices literally are polyphonised by being repeated by several actors on stage. In addition, the musical, rhythmic and lyrical packaging opens up a different, more embodied channel of interaction with the audience. Music and chorus encourage strong bodily reactions and the movement, rhythm and melodies can make listening to difficult issues easier than they often are in dialogue.

The repetitive and derogatory mentions of different cases of teenage pregnancy by Sonia's parents in *It's Cold* highlights the structural problem of the lack of sex education for both children and their parents. While Sonia's parents only feel pity for the parents of teenage mothers (8), Sonia expresses her Oceanic feminist empathy: "I wonder what will happen to her [Lisa, a teenage mother]?" (8). By adding this alternative voice to the existing discussion between her parents, she is also speaking up for the girl in a show of female solidarity. In a following story of teenage pregnancy, her parents tell the story of a girl who dropped her baby in the toilet, causing Sonia's mother to wonder "what kind of girl leaves her baby in a toilet to die?" (8). This thematic repetition is followed by a formal one when Sonia repeats her mother's question (8). Sonia's repetition sets the question in an entirely different context. While her mother asks from the position of a married Christian woman who believes sex before marriage is against god's word (11), Sonia asks herself, and the audience, the question as a young single woman who is newly in love and faced with a similar fate. The polyphony created through this repetition shows the question's complexity and difficulty of answering it. Her repetition polyphonises and subverts her parents' monophonic understandings of teenage mothers and by repeating the question turned to the audience, Sonia also clarifies that the question cannot be answered in the course of the play but needs to be taken beyond the performance space.

In *Solid Sistas* Mary's auto-misogynist repetition of her husband's patriarchal monophony leads to an Oceanic feminist intervention by her friends that restores Mary's polyphonous voice. Mary repeats what Malcolm has said when talking to the girls. He told her "You are wasting your time with your friends" (11) which Mary restates when meeting her friends, saying "Malcolm said that I am wasting my time with you!" (13).⁴² At this stage in the play she does not question Malcolm's words and how she is in the spell of his patriarchal monophonic violence expressed through voice. Her friends, however, are alerted by this reiteration as it shows how deeply Malcolm's voice is already ingrained in Mary's mind, causing her own voice to be silenced and suppressed. Malcolm's speaking so negatively of

⁴² Yu stap westem taem blong yu wetem ol fren.; Malcolm hem I talem se mi stap westem tumas taem wetem yufala!

Mary's friends also shows that he knows how important and empowering such alternative social networks are (see Spark). Mary's friends challenge her monophony by approaching her with a polpyhony of critical voices when she arrives bruised: "I have told you he will beat you up really badly" (*Solid Sistas* 10), "You have to report him, Mary!" (10) and "Watch out, Mary. One day he will kill you" (11).⁴³ They force Mary to question Malcolm's monophony and urge her to reclaim her own voice. As polyphonous community theatre, many different viewpoints are shared for Mary and the audience to make up their own minds (see Gaskell and Taylor; see also Woodward; Looser, *Remaking* 38). Through the continuing support of her friends and Jimmy, Mary eventually manages to break free from Malcolm's dominant voice and step on stage with her friends in the final scene to speak her own voice again.

The most prominent way in which repetitions occur in all of the plays is either through chorus or song in order to "reveal rather than state emotions and actions" (Scheub qtd. in Balme 149). The frequent use of chorus and song in Wan Smolbag's community theatre plays draws on local performance traditions that do not have a strict divide between theatre and music. In *It's Cold*, Mark asks Sonia "why did you have to go and get pregnant!" (9) which the chorus repeats verbatim: "Why did you have to go and get pregnant? Why did you do it?" (9) to highlight the injustice of Mark's accusation. As the chorus reminds the audience and Sonia it was, after all, Mark who told her that she would not get pregnant the first time: "[h]e said he'd look after you. / Don't worry, it can't happen the first time" (9). This repetition unveils Mark's hypocrisy and encourages Oceanic feminist solidarity by indirectly taking Sonia's side. It also shows Mark's attempt at monophonising Sonia's experience with him which the chorus literally polyphonises by their critical and many voices. This strategy of repeating what was said sheds light on Mark's lies and encourages the audience to critically question what he, and others like him, are saying.

Next to the chorus, song is another often repetitive and important feature of all of Wan Smolbag's plays within which voices that otherwise remain ignored or unheard find their space to get uttered in a polyphonic way. In *Twist mo Spin*, for instance, the dolphins get a voice through the 'dolphin song': "All kings and queens of the sea / They are not afraid of men or shark or big fish / They jump up! / Twist and spin! / Twist and spin! / They are free to follow the tide / to reach any place they want to go to!" (16).⁴⁴ As postcolonial community theatre, Wan Smolbag's focus on providing space for marginalised, such as animal, voices

43 Mi bin save se bae hem i kilim nogud yu.; Yu mas riportim hem Mary!; Yu lukaot Mary. Wan de bae hem i kilim ded yu ya.

44 Ol king mo kwin blong solwora / Oli no fraet long man o sak o bigfala fis / Oli jiang I go antap! / Twist mo spin! / Twist mo spin! / Oli fri blong folem ol taed ia / Kasem eni ples oli wantem go long hem!

subverts the colonial binary hierarchy between humans and animals, evoking more holistic and reciprocal dialogic structures that are similar to plaiting as they connect and reestablish existing communal and emplaced knowledges. The repetition of this song in the course of the play interweaves different situations and reflects the corresponding melting of human-animal binaries as most significantly done by Lynne (see 4.1.3.). The many repetitions of the dolphin song emphasise the importance of listening to these voices, as well as the fact that animals are closely plaited together with the community. Ending the play with the song and the focus on animals that had almost been chased away permanently as a consequence of overfishing further highlights the importance and urgency of listening to non-human voices, leaving it to the audience to respond to the song in post-play discussions. By acknowledging the polyphony that exists between everyone on earth and actively engaging in dialogue with them, the negative consequences of being stuck in patriarchal colonial monophony in the form of overfishing, drought, famine, flooding and everything that is connected to the human-made climate crisis can be reimagined and opposed.

Similarly, song is an important medium for the girls in *Solid Sistas* to express their polyphonic thoughts, questions, expectations and criticism. In the play, music is a safe space that makes the expression of empowered voices easier than it is in everyday dialogue. The freedom in terms of melody, images and sentence structure are in itself polyphonous strategies that emphasise the openness of meaning. After the chief had decided that girls who wear pants would get fined and Malcolm had told Mary not to talk to her friends, Jennie sings her frustration at the unfair treatment of women in Vanuatu: “That's how it is now! / The man is the boss and the woman exists / to give birth to babies and do all the work!”, which prompts her to despairingly ask “Will it never change? / Will it never change?” (11).⁴⁵ These questions are directly asked to the audience, encouraging them to think about answers themselves. The rhythm, repetition and potential dance movements also make them more sensual and memorable. Accompanying material, such as the *Music Resource Workbook*, further encourages the community's engagement with the topics of the play by unpicking them into individual but related questions, such as “Do men also have to do work in the house or not? Why?” or “Malcolm has been hitting Mary. Do you think Mary should report him or not?” (14).⁴⁶ Especially the second question illustrates that Jennie's song is tightly plaited together with previous events and themes in the play, emphasising that her concerns are part of the

45 Hem i olsem nao! / Hem i olsem nao! / Man hem i boss mo woman hem i stap / Blong bonem pikinini mo mekem ol wok! / Bae i neva jenis? / Bae i neva jenis?

46 Ol man tu i mas mekem ol wok long haos o no? From wanem?; Malcolm i bin kilim Mary. Yu ting se Mary i sud ripotim hem o no?

polyphonous “mats of our current struggles” (*Charter of Feminist Principles* 2) which the play addresses.

During Jennie and Tony's duet in *Solid Sistas* Jennie subverts his monophonous view on life by asking him many questions and presenting various points of view that are interwoven with other issues addressed in the play and Vanuatuan society as a whole, effectively singing the Oceanic feminist “mats of our current struggles” (*Charter of Feminist Principles* 2). Tony sings: “She is the dream of all the girls / The boy gives [his] heart to her / You will put on a white dress / And I will put a ring on your hand” (*Solid Sistas* 44).⁴⁷ Instead of simply agreeing to this indirect marriage proposal, Jennie replies by asking “If you want something that I do / not agree with / Will you beat me up because of it? / Tell me!” (44).⁴⁸ As a response, Tony does not tell Jennie what he would do but simply repeats the same lines again. However, Jennie does not give up but continues to try to engage Tony in dialogue by asking: “Do you think women / have to be in the house / to cook and look after the children?” (44) and Tony once more replies by singing the same verses.⁴⁹ His repeating the same lines illustrates his helplessness while Jennie's persistence shows her Oceanic feminist awareness of women's realities which she gives voice to in her polyphonous song. While Tony expresses an abstract and idealised view of romantic love that is about falling in love and getting married, Jennie counters the superficiality of this monophony by wanting to know how he will, in real, polyphonous life, react to issues that many women in Vanuatu already have to face.

Another form of polyphonous paravoice are Wan Smolbag's post-play discussions where the actors, together with the audience, diversely plait together and, so to say, 'repeat' what has been said and done in the plays. They interweave the audience's ever-present paravoices, such as thoughts, ideas and reactions, with those of the characters and the wider community from whom the topics of the plays stem and for whom they are performed. The audience is often divided into groups of men and women in order to determine similarities and differences in opinions before then consciously plaiting their voices together (see *Wan Smolbag: Youth Documentary and Interviews*; see also *Wan Smolbag: The First Five Years; Another Week, Another Workshop*). This emphasises the impossibility of ever actually dividing voices in terms of gender as they are always necessarily dependent upon and interwoven with each other. As women's voices are often sidelined in contemporary and

47 Hem i drim blong ol gel / Boe i givim hat blong hem / Bae yu putum wit dress / Bae mi putum ring long han blong yu.

48 Sapos yu wantem wan samting we mi no / agri long hem / Bae yu kilim nogud mi from? / Talem!

49 Yu tink se woman / i mas stap long haos / Kuk mo lukaotem pikinini?

kastom discussions, this division can also create a safe space for women to first talk among themselves before speaking in a greater forum. The practice of post-play discussions is a reinterpretation of the chiefly-led *kastom* meetings aimed at re-establishing communal well-being and tapping into and representing existing polyphonic communal knowledge in dialogue. The focus on gender inclusivity differentiates Wan Smolbag's practice from most traditional gatherings while simultaneously drawing a continuous line to existing dialogic community practices in order to emphasise their embodied rootedness within the community.

4.2.3. Embodied voices

Another important form of paravoice in the plays are embodied voices. Similar to the above discussed 'past' and repetitive voices, embodied voices are situated on an in-between level in the plays where they evoke responses by the characters but are not necessarily consciously perceived. Like 'past' and repetitive voices, embodied voices challenge the simplistic binary structure of form and content by contributing to the polyphony in the plays. In the following section, embodied voices are understood as non-vocal voices expressed through body movements or clothing. The choice to group embodied voices under the category of paravoices emphasises that polyphony is not only limited to implicit or explicit verbal voices but encompasses many different but interconnected voices. Balme (146–166), Gilbert and Tompkins (203–255), Looser (*Remaking* 15) and Taylor D. (1–52) emphasise that embodiment is a central voice in (postcolonial) performances. As such, the embodied voices discussed below continue the Oceanic practice of non-verbal dialogic communicating as is also the case for plaiting, which subverts the vocal-centric understandings of voice in order to emphasise the extensive polyphony of a variety of voices in the plays.

Clothing is a dynamic voice that constitutes a dialogic bridge between ourselves and the outside world. What we wear is one of the first attributes we notice about each other and depending on the context, experiences and personal preferences, everyone interprets clothing differently and deduces varying meanings from other people's clothing. It is a good example of the open-endedness of meaning as clothing, their wearers, contexts and our opinions about them as well as connected voices, such as body movement or tone, constantly change and reciprocally influence each other, much like local and foreign forms and themes that are plaited together in postcolonial community theatre. In *Solid Sistas* one of the first things the audience learns about Lizzie when she steps on stage is that she is wearing “flas” clothing (*Solid Sistas* 1). *Flas* means “showing off” (Cummings 44) and Lizzie's clothes are immediately commented on by Mary who says “... your clothes are... now you are just a flash

woman” (1).⁵⁰ Lizzie's clothing is the first voice we hear from her and Mary's observation contextualises the significance of her clothing choices for how the other characters and the audience may interpret her. Similarly, Laura in *Heart Problem* is introduced as “really flash” (1) when entering the stage.⁵¹ The critical comments by the chorus: “Where does she take the money from? / She does not work!” (1) illustrates the impact of her clothing voices on how she is perceived by others.⁵² The immediate reactions which clothing choices evoke emphasise that what the characters wear adds to the web of voices they communicate throughout the play, making simple and quick interpretations of their characters impossible. This community theatre strategy broadens minds and perceptions and requires the audience to closely listen to and observe the polyphonic voices performed on stage.

The significance of clothing as a marker of identity and independence is negatively illustrated in *Solid Sistas* where the men attempt to dictate and monophonise women's clothing choices. At the meeting the chief had called to discuss the fact that “[a]ll boys were drunk again last night!” (*Solid Sistas* 9), everyone agrees at first that “[t]he behaviour of youths in this place has to change!” (9).⁵³ This decision is, however, immediately followed by the chief's claim that the only way boys will start to respect the girls and not treat them badly is by monophonically defining how the girls have to dress: “Starting today there will be a fine if girls put on trousers outside of their houses!” (9).⁵⁴ He not only lays the blame for men and boys' disrespectful and sexually aggressive behaviour on women and girls, but more specifically their way of dress. The chief sees an inordinate amount of power in the girls' way of dress, while disregarding the deeply ingrained patriarchal *kastom*, church and state structures that devalue women and girls and that he perpetuates with his fine and the focus on how women should change instead of focusing on boys and men's potential to change.

The fine imposed forces girls to wear so-called *aelan dresses* (Bislama for “island dress”). While such dresses were originally seen as a self-conscious and empowered interweaving of *kastom* and Christianity (see Jolly, “Christianity and Cloth”), today many girls see them as representing obsolete and oppressive values of motherhood (see Jolly, “Christianity and Cloth” 452) as well as potentially more dangerous than trousers. The wide shape of the dresses makes running from potential predators difficult and walks during windy conditions an uncomfortable and dangerous experience (Cummings 42–43). The chief's fine on wearing trousers, ultimately forcing girls to wear dresses they do not want to wear, is a

50 [...] ...ol klus ya we... naoia yufala ol flas woman nomo nao!

51 Hemi flas we!

52 Hemi karem mane weh? / Hemi no wok!

53 Ol boe nao oli drong nogud bakegen las naet!; Fasin blong ol yangfala long ples ya i mas jenis!

54 Stat long tede bae i gat fin sapos we gel i putum traoses aotsaed long haos blong hem!

form of patriarchal and monophonic oppression (see Jolly, “Christianity and Cloth” 450–451). The girls continue to wear what they want, which also includes Flora continuing to wear her long skirts which illustrates the Solid Sistas' inclusive polyphony that allows space for differences in opinion and ways of dress. The Solid Sistas continue to speak the voices they choose to speak with the clothings they wear, reimagining postcolonial Vanuatu society as a place that plaits together both dresses and shorts in an Oceanic feminist solidarity in differences.

Similarly, while Miriam in *Heart Problem* is negatively defined through her clothing she maintains the same style of clothing throughout the play, not surrendering to discriminatory monophony but preserving her polyphony. Miriam is described as “wearing weird clothes. A big coat with many pockets and a dress with trousers underneath it” (9).⁵⁵ While the *flas* clothes caused jealousy in the case of Lizzie and Laura, these “weird” clothes cause contempt and marginalise Miriam. Both the voices of “flas” and “weird” clothes evoke extreme reactions as they do not fit with monophonic and simplistic categories and expectations. This is reflected and further illustrated through Lizzie and Miriam's jobs as sex worker and leaf medicine producer, neither of which are deemed socially acceptable or enviable by their friends, family or community. The “flas” and “weird” clothing they are wearing illustrate their in-between position of being both outsiders but still members of the community—a fact for which the community expresses outrage by voicing their discontent with their clothing choices. The critique against Lizzie's and Miriam's clothing that extends to their character are examples of patriarchal monophony that have been deeply ingrained in the minds of the members of the community. By not listening to these critical, monophonic voices but remaining true to their clothing styles, Lizzie and Merial subvert them and remain polyphonous.

Aside from clothing, the movement of bodies are important paravoices in Wan Smolbag's plays that contribute to the existing polyphony and encourage the audience to be actively involved in interpreting such gestures as dynamic, dialogic voices that polyphonise meaning. In *It's Cold*, Mark speaks very much and confusingly with his body. When Sonia does not want Mark to touch her in public he draws back entirely, even shaking her off when she tries to touch him again (7). His body's jumping from one extreme to the other reflects his inner confusion and inability to navigate the polyphony of his life. He is married with three children and falling in love with Sonia. His physical attempt to act like lovers in public illustrates his wish to monophonically define what they are. Sonia's reaction demonstrates that

55 Hemi stap werem ol weird klos. Wan bigfala kot wetem fulap poket mo dres wetem traosa unda long hem.

this is happening too soon for her. However, by reaching out to Mark when he turns away she clarifies that she still wants to keep the dialogue going and not immediately end their relationship. Despite that, Mark's embodied voice indicates that he is not interested in dialogue but merely wants his voice to dominate. By frequently taking and dropping her hand, he repeatedly includes and excludes his body from the dialogue (*It's Cold* 8). The imbalance between Mark's and Sonia's bodily voices becomes most apparent when Sonia tells him about her pregnancy. The secondary text describes that she comes up to him, whispers the news in his ear which leads him to “shake[...] her off” (7). When she extends her hand out to him in an attempt to recreate the dialogic connection they once had he simply leaves as she drops to the ground (7). Sonia's persistence in expressing her embodied voices and sharing them with the audience illustrates that she will not succumb to Mark's attempts at monophonising their relationship but maintain and express the existing polyphony.

As opposed to Sonia seeking dialogue with Mark through her embodied voices, in *Heart Problem* Laura's body seeks to inhibit any closer relation to her boss, Thomas. When confronted with his sexual harassment, her body expresses the negative and uncomfortable feelings she is yet unable to express vocally. When Thomas comes to her house after she stole the perfume bottle at his store, he stares at her and makes her feel so uncomfortable that she does not want to take the bottle from his hand (*Heart* 12). The chorus observes: “Laura's just quiet now / like she is afraid of touching the big man's hand” (12).⁵⁶ While the chorus notices this, her mother Annie does not understand Laura's body language and tells her to take the bottle of perfume and “say thank you” (12).⁵⁷ Thomas' encroaching on Laura and exerting dominance over her through use of his body culminates when she works at the store and is ordered to clean his room. Laura's fear of Thomas manifests itself in the rapidity with which she tries to do her job (16). When Thomas comes in, she is stuck and the chorus describes that Thomas is coming closer and that Laura “tries to leave, but Thomas blocks her way” (16).⁵⁸ This dominating posturing, which the audience can interpret as presaging a rape scene, is only defused by the supervisor's entering the room. While Laura's extreme bodily voices highlight her fear and allow her to voice what she is otherwise unable to express, the supervisor's body highlights the positive power of bodies to avert violent situations by their mere presence.

Similarly, in *Solid Sistas*, Mary's body speaks of past violences about which she does not want to talk, plaiting them into the various situations in which she finds herself. When she appears with a towel wrapped around her head that hides bruises Mary lies to her friends,

⁵⁶ Laura hemi stap kwaet nomo nao / Olsem we hemi fraet blong tajem han blong bigman ia..

⁵⁷ Talem tangkiu!

⁵⁸ Hemi traem wokabaot I go, be Thomas hemi blokem rod blong hem.

saying she has tooth ache (*Solid Sistas* 10). A few scenes later she has a broken arm which makes her unable to play in the band. Instead of admitting that her husband has inflicted this injury on her, she protects him by claiming she fell down. Yet, as the girls have witnessed Malcolm's aggressive behaviour in the first scene and know he had bruised her only a few days before, they believe her body's voice instead of her verbal attempts at protecting Malcolm. Mary's effort to hide her injuries exemplifies the strong internalisation of patriarchal structures that push the blame on women. Unable to express her voice vocally at first, she eventually rediscovers her it and plaits it together with her body by saying “[y]ou can't stop me anymore, Malcolm!” (*Solid Sistas* 53) and stepping on stage to join the Solid Sistas.⁵⁹

4.3. Monophonic violences

Thus far the focus has been on the plays' subversion of misogynist monophonies that are expressed through explicit or implicit voices. Misogynist monophonies are often most explicitly expressed in the form of violence, which is why this chapter will focus on the plays' polyphonic destabilisation thereof. I have coined and will use the term 'monophonic violences' to refer to a variety of existing patriarchal and sexist structures as they manifest themselves in the form of absorbed voices in everyday life. In the first subchapter (4.3.1.), the focus will be on 'not listening', which is a form of an often oblique, absorbed violence that is particularly evident in postcolonial cultures with histories of colonial violences that are deeply entrenched and entangled with local structures to maintain male dominance (see 2.1. and 3.3.). In the second subchapter (4.3.2.), physical violence, one of the most visual, yet often dangerously normalised violences, will be addressed. The ever-presence of especially gender-based violence in Vanuatu illustrates the deep roots of misogyny that have been manifested in the interlinkings of certain patriarchal *kastom* with colonial and Christian structures (see 2.1.). Wan Smolbag offers polyphonic counter-narratives by collectively plaiting a “critical mirror” (Looser, *Remaking* 34) to the many forms of violence in present-day Vanuatu.

4.3.1. Not listening

Not listening is a monophonic violence that, though it can take as many diverse forms as there are voices in the four plays, always reflects the maintenance or assumption of power in a gendered hierarchy. As the examples below will show, 'not listening' is not only used by men in power over younger boys or women to express their superiority, but also by older female characters towards younger women, illustrating that the absorption of violent monophonic

59 Yu no save blokem mi nao ya Malcolm!

structures is not gender-specific. They use generational differences and age as the basis on which they recreate existing patriarchal hierarchies of knowledge and power, thus severing communal bonds of solidarity. Women taking on harmful and unsolidary monophony as self-protection or search for power and dominance illustrates the Oceanic feminist urgency of closely analysing these absorbed voices and the need for counter-strategies as portrayed in and encouraged through the plays. Wan Smolbag's diverse approaches to representing and countering the diverse web of monophonic violences reflects the community's polyphonous voices.

In *It's Cold* Sonia's mother's not listening results in Sonia not telling her mother about the unwanted pregnancy which leaves Sonia alone and stranded on the literal and symbolical road. While Sonia's mother declares: "I try to talk to my daughter. To help her. [...] I think if you try and talk to your children, that is the way to help them" (6), she fails to do so when Sonia approaches her later in the play. Sonia's attempt to open up to her mother: "One of the boys at school, he kept saying things to me...", is not met with listening, but an immediate truncation of the not-yet-begun dialogue: "A boy? Sonia, I hope you haven't done anything? What would your father say? You must be careful Sonia!" (11). This monophonic example illustrates Sonia's mother's absorption of her husband's monophonic voice that superficially expresses concern, but in actuality constrains the dialogue between mother and daughter. Sonia's mother's mimicking and reproducing her husband's patriarchal and monophonic violences makes her unable to listen to Sonia, severing the generational ties of female community that had been an essential safe space within which to express concerns, fears and knowledges about motherhood, sex, relationships, childbirth, and the like. Sonia's mother's not listening leads to a more comprehensive blindness that makes her not see her daughter's pregnancy symptoms. When Sonia feels bad and looks sick, her mother only tells her "You look terrible, Sonia! You must try and lie down" (12) before leaving her be. Sonia, abandoned by her mother's not listening, turns to the audience to create the safe space which she is missing in her relationship with her mother. By sharing her worries, fears and experiences with the larger community she reveals the audience's communal responsibility and her confidence in their ability to listen.

In *Twist mo Spin*, Lynne's mother-in-law similarly restricts her daughter-in-law's voice as a form of self-protection against the perceived threat Lynne poses to her vocal monophonic power within the family. While Lynne's mother-in-law constantly tells her to fulfil the image of an ideal, silent woman, declaring: "I never talk back to dadi [her husband]! He is the boss in this house...!" (*Twist* 7), her husband actually does not get the chance to speak as noted in

the secondary text: “She does not give dadi a chance to talk” (7).⁶⁰ This illustrates her use of male superiority as an excuse for her own pursuit of dominance. Ironically, she subverts and illustrates the fragility of the misogynist and monophonic ideal of the silent, docile woman herself by continuously speaking up while her husband stays silent. Lynne's mother-in-law's constant attempt to silence Lynne illustrates the deep entrenchment of gendered colonial hierarchies that severely threaten inclusive and respectful communal bonds. Lynne subverts these absorbed monophonic structures by speaking up at meetings. When one of the men accuses her and other women of “using the small hooks here! We need to stop!” Lynne clarifies: “You are using net with small holes!” (19).⁶¹ The fisheries officer's explaining how all the animals of the ocean work together (19) demonstrates that the community's blaming Lynne for the lack of fish is unfounded and that Lynne's voice is one to be trusted and listened to.

Contrary to the married women in the two examples above, the single mother Annie in *Heart Problem* adopts a monophonic violent approach that alienates her daughter and causes her own loss of voice in a failed attempt to inhabit the role of the male provider of the family. Plagued by a lack of money and unable to work herself, she ignores Laura's objections against working for Thomas as she only sees this as an opportunity for Laura to fulfil the role of monetary provider she herself is unable to take. Similar to Lizzie's not listening to Merial in *Solid Sistas* discussed below, Annie's not listening facilitates Thomas sexually abusing Laura. Both Annie and Lizzie try to enter the male-dominated world of money making and, as a result, lose their 'female' sensitivity and solidarity. However, the younger generation consisting of Laura and her love interest Eric subvert this gendered binary by finding sensitive solidarity in each other. When Laura speaks up for herself at the end of the play: “You have spoiled me! I did not want to go with you [Thomas]! You forced me to come to this place at night..!” (*Heart* 47),⁶² Eric listens to and supports her, countering the chorus telling him to punish Laura by responding: “You don't want to know what you're seeing! This man acted in a rubbish way! It's not her!” (48).⁶³ Thomas' supervisor also listens to her, telling Thomas: “It's not straight, Thomas. You broke the store's rules! You are not supposed to do something like that to the staff.. it's like... you are stealing!” (48)⁶⁴. The men's listening to Laura subverts

60 Mi mi neva tokbak long dadi! Hemi bos blong haos ia..!; Dadi hemi traem toktok bakegen.

61 Ol stap yusum ol smolsmol huk ia! Bae yumi stopem!; Yufala I stap yusum ol net wetem ol smolsmol hol olsem!

62 Yu bin spolem mi! Mi no bin wantem go wetem yu nating! Yu bin fosem mi blong kam long ples ia long naet..!

63 Yufala ino wantem luk save nating! Man ia nao I mekem rabis fasin! Ino hem!

64 Ino stret Thomas. Yu stap brekem ol rul blong stoa ia! Yu no sapos blong mekem olsem long ol staf! Ino gud nomo.. hemi olsem we.. ... yu stap stihl!

and polyphonises Annie's patriarchal not listening, clarifying that gendered understandings of sensitivity and solidarity are misplaced.

The strong generational biases of not listening that these fraught mother–daughter relationships have shown is further exacerbated in Donal's sexually abusive relationship with the teenaged Merial in *Solid Sistas*. Donal ignores Merial's saying “I don't...”, “Let go!”, “No..”, “I don't want...” (*Solid Sistas* 34–35).⁶⁵ His advances and disregard of her voice is worsened by Merial's unsuccessful attempts to reach out to her mother/sister Lizzie (31). Lizzie's wish to improve her life by establishing the girl band in order to finally escape sex work for Merial's wellbeing results in her ignoring Merial's despair. Caught up in disputes with her girl band members, she is unable to hear Merial (33–34). The repeated not listening Merial experiences both by Donal and Lizzie results in her retreating further into herself and trying to speak less and less the further the play progresses—she literally loses her voice in the course of the play. After Donal has been harassing Merial for some time, Lizzie notices that Merial is acting strangely, saying “Merial! You will be late for school!”, “You have not got fever..”, “Get up and go to school now”, “Are you lazy?! You are making me cross Merial!” (45).⁶⁶ Merial replies to none of these utterances. Finally, her death leaves a piercing and ongoing scream that reunites the *Solid Sistas* band to resist the structural monophonic violence of not listening.

Jimmy in *Solid Sistas* resists the boys' monophonic mimicry of not listening by speaking up for Merial. The boys' inability to listen to Jimmy is a futile attempt to defend their masculinity in front of not listening older men that illustrates the boys' helplessness. The boys do not want Jimmy to be with them, asking him: “What are you following us for?” and telling him “You are too young! Go back to the house!” (13).⁶⁷ Instead of engaging in dialogue with him and putting in a minimal effort of listening, they make fun of him and his friendship with the girls and Merial: “Your girlfriend, ah Jimmy!”, “We caught you straight!” (15).⁶⁸ They seek to keep a non-existent superiority in-tact by calling him a “homosexual” (24) and “half half” (20) for spending time with the girls.⁶⁹ The polyphonising of gender boundaries Jimmy practices challenges the boys' monophonic understandings of masculinity. Nonetheless, fed up with being made fun of and wanting to belong to the boys, Jimmy begins to not listen as well. When Merial tells him about the girl with wings, he does not understand

65 Mi no...; Lego!; Mi no wantem...

66 Merial! Bae yu let long skul!; Yu no gat feva...; Gerrup mo go long skul nao ya!; Yu les?! No mekem mi mi kros Merial!

67 Yu stap folem mifala from?; Yu yangfala tumas! Go long haos!

68 Gel fren blong yu ah Jimmy!; Mifala i kasem yutufala stret!

69 Smol pufta ya [...]; Fo gel mo wan haf haf!

what she is trying to tell him, leaving Merial frustrated with the situation (37). Finally, however, after his and other's not listening has led to Merial's death, Jimmy makes everyone listen at the final concert, telling Jennie: "You must sing Jennie... For her. You must sing!" (53).⁷⁰ He is the central bridging plaiter figure in the play, reflecting the Oceanic feminist emphasis on including "men and boys as participants and allies in our work" (*Charter of Feminist Principles* 3). Jimmy chose to listen and, as a result, opens the possibility for the Solid Sistas band to speak up on stage, explicitly inviting both boys and girls to come along and join the polyphonic and dialogic plaiting of the pandanus mat of change (*Solid Sistas* 53).

4.3.2. Physical violence

As mentioned in chapter 2.1., violence is a pressing issue in Vanuatu. Entangled patriarchal colonial and *kastom* structures endorse physical acts of violence that attempt to maintain oppressive monophony. The examples of physical violence addressed below illustrate the danger of omnipresent misogynist monophony that leads to involuntary and inevitable absorptions thereof, perpetuating the existing vicious cycle. Wan Smolbag's plays address this issue by setting these monophonic acts of violence in context and polyphonising them in order to illustrate that monophony is untenable. By providing a number of views and interwoven issues in the plays, instead of monophonically offering a simplistic view on the matter, they encourage all members of the community to involve themselves in the necessary but highly sensitive discussions about violence. Since "the roots of violence are cultural" (Tahi qtd. in Jolly, "Women's Rights" 182–183), Wan Smolbag seeks to offer cultural responses that, as community theatre, provide both enough distance and similarity for a change in thinking and acting to occur. Just as plaiting is holistic communal practice where patterns, colours and techniques have changed and developed through dialogue with others, so too can and must attitudes and monophonic patriarchal societal structures surrounding and encouraging violence improve over time.

Malcom's physical violence against his wife Mary in *Solid Sistas* exemplifies the structural crisis of masculinity in present-day Vanuatu as well as illustrating the girls' communal and polyphonic counter-strategies against it. The direct and indirect support he receives for his violence by other characters, especially the boys, shows not only the monophonic patriarchal consensus about the acceptability of gender-based violence existing in Vanuatu, but also indicates the boys' desperate attempts to belong to the seemingly more powerful older group of married men to which they may never belong. They tell him: "It's

⁷⁰ Yu mas sing Jennie... Blong hem. Yu mas sing!

good you are blocking her Malcolm!” (28).⁷¹ The negative example of Mary's violent marriage also acts as a deterrent. Until the last scene of the play, when the boys realise how violently Donal had treated Merial, the boys retain their support of Malcolm's violence and only Mary's girlfriends try to help her. Jennie asks Tony to “[s]top him [Malcolm]..” because “[h]e will beat Mary up. Tony..” (*Solid Sistas* 5), to which he merely replies: “[h]e is too drunk Jennie. Let it be” (5).⁷² Tony is trapped within monophonic understandings of masculinity that support such acts of gender-based violence while Jennie and the girls refuse to accept this. By responding in different but solidary voices in support of Mary, they represent examples of Spark's Oceanic feminist networks that give women the confidence to withstand violence.

Even though physical violence is often associated with men hitting women, the plays subvert this stereotype with the characters of Lizzie (*Solid Sistas*) and Annie (*Heart Problem*) to show how the monophonic gender-based violence soaks through female bonds. This opening up of the understanding of physical violence to include a variety of gendered relationships is also part of polyphonising the characters and reflecting ni-Vanuatu reality in the plays as a “critical mirror” (Looser, *Remaking* 34). Highlighting the diversity and intricate plaiting together of physical violence with such issues is part of Wan Smolbag's community theatre practice as it shows how individual acts of violence are encouraged by surrounding monophonic structures. As physical violence is a pressing everyday issue in Vanuatu which many ni-Vanuatu experience (see “Vanuatu National Survey on Women's Lives and Family Relationships”; Biersack; Jolly, “When She Cries”; Forsyth), it needs to be handled with extreme care and sensitivity in the plays. In the case of Mary and Malcolm in *Solid Sistas*, for instance, the violence is never actually acted out on stage, but only ever referred to and identifiable on Mary's bruised face. This strategy of not showing a physically violent act on stage is both a sensitive choice as well as a dramatic one. Without the act of violence being shown, the polyphony of violent experiences is not monophonised. By not showing but merely implying an act of violence, the variety of experiences of the audience are evoked as well as protected.

The omnipresence of monophonic violent structures in Vanuatu leads to women in *Solid Sistas* absorbing them unconsciously and resorting to physical violence in moments of presumed helplessness. Lizzie, upon seeing Merial out at night, slaps her. She is scared for Merial, afraid of what people will say and of what will happen to her out alone at night. Lizzie

71 I gud yu blokem hem Malcolm!; Malcolm i bin mek save hem ya!

72 Stopem hem..; Bae hem i kilim nogud Mary. Tony..; Hem I drong tumas Jennie. Lego.

clarifies at the beginning of the play: “All boys are running around drunk in this place! You cannot be on your own! They will rape you!” (*Solid Sistas* 7), telling her to “not let any man touch you...” (8).⁷³ Lizzie's slapping Merial before talking to her also indicates the great level of absorbed violence Lizzie carries within her. Doubtlessly, she does not want to harm but only to protect her daughter/sister, which remains masked under this layer of violence. Even though she acts violently to protect Merial, such acts of physical aggression do more harm than good as monophonic violence in any form diminishes the possibility of dialogue. It is exactly the openness and security to feel able to approach others in dialogue that is necessary for preventing violence. By addressing difficult and taboo topics in their plays, Wan Smolbag opens up such an inclusive space where collective talking is encouraged (see Wan Smolbag, “Annual Report”; Taylor and Gaskell 15; *Solid Sistas Documentary*; *Another Week, Another Workshop*; see also Gibbons; Looser, *Remaking* 38). Not resolving this strained relationship within the play once again illustrates Wan Smolbag's strategic community theatricality that involves the audience in collectively reimagining present-day structures in polyphonic, inclusive and non-violent ways.

Similar to Lizzie, Annie in *Heart Problem* is physically violent towards her daughter Laura and sister Miriam because she lacks dialogic means of approaching and engaging with them, which further illustrates the persistence of violent patriarchal monophonies in society and families. When Laura drops a piece of bread, Annie shouts: “The good food!” and slaps her (8).⁷⁴ Surprised, Laura says: “She slapped me!” to which the chorus supportingly replies: “That's good! / Listen to what your mother is saying!” (8).⁷⁵ The chorus' support of violence illustrates the community's violent parenting expectations. At the same time, Laura's surprised reaction clarifies that she is not used to such violence, which opens up the potential for dialogue with the community about respectful parent-child relationships. Shortly after this scene, Annie again reacts violently after hearing about Laura's stealing attempt, declaring “I will teach her!” (12).⁷⁶ While Laura pleads: “No mami!”, the chorus takes Annie's side again: “Whip her! / To make her see! / Show the big man [Thomas] that / We know how to teach the kids!” (12).⁷⁷ The explicit reference to Thomas and the absence of Laura's father illustrates that Annie's physical violence is an attempt to show 'male' strength in the form of physical

73 Ol boe oli drong i stap raon long ples ya! Yu no save stap yu wan! Bae oli rapem yu!; Yu lukaot long ol man.. Yu no mas letem eni man i tajem yu...”

74 Gudfala kakae!

75 Hemi slapem mi!; I gud ia! / Lisen long toktok blong mami!

76 Bae mi tijim hem we!

77 Wipim hem! / Blong mekem hemi luk save! / Soemaot long bigman ia se / Yumi save hao blong tijim ol pikinini!

violence which, similar to her pushing Laura to work at the store (see 4.3.1.), alienates them each other. Annie's expressing her anger through violence leaves no room for Laura to respond. Finally, Annie's physical and mental stress of vainly trying to inhabit the male provider role leaves her voiceless after suffering a stroke. After having chosen physical violence above dialogue, she is now unable to speak at all. The positive outcome of this tragic development is that Laura speaks up for herself. Laura, with the support of Eric and the supervisor, represents a polyphonous and non-violent alternative to the pressures of monophonic violences.

Annie also inflicts physical violence towards her sister, Miriam, in an attempt to silence Miriam's outspoken rootedness in traditional communal values. These values are contrary to Annie's main goal of economic success. Annie only gains interest in Miriam's leaf medicine once she realises that money can be made with it. However, when the sale goes awry, she slaps Miriam, again with the support of the chorus: "Go Annie!" (*Heart* 25), illustrating the social acceptability of violence as a response to failure. Annie already hit Miriam with a broom after she had forced Laura to drink from the leaf medicine (10). The chorus' reaction "[t]here is no peace! Try to be quiet!" (10) shows the banality with which violence is often treated in Vanuatu.⁷⁸ The chorus' encouragement of Annie's violence against Miriam also underlines the fact that they believe she does not belong, since she is "a poison woman" (10).⁷⁹ The monophonic violence she experiences is a direct response to her polyphonous existence. Miriam merges the binaries of modernity and tradition, rootedness and movement and past and present by respecting and maintaining *kastom* practices and values in the present-day. Finally, while Annie is eventually forced to silence, Miriam's rootedness in non-violent polyphony remains.

Eric's resistance to act violently illustrates that while monophonic physical violences stem from patriarchal structures, they are not by any means characterizable as typically 'male'. When he asks Laura where she has been after she has been sexually violated by Thomas in exchange for desperately needed money, Eric assumes that she has cheated on him. He gets supported in this by the chorus who encourages Eric to "Hit her!" because "We men have to teach them / Tear her face / She will not be able to run after another man again!" (*Heart* 42).⁸⁰ However, Eric does fulfil the societal expectations of violence that are represented by the chorus. Nonetheless, even though Eric does not resort to physical monophonic violence, he is

78 Ino gat pis nating! Traem stap kwaet!

79 Wan posen woman!

80 Kilim hem!; Yumi ol man I mas tijim ol / Terem fes blong hem / Bae hemi no save aftarem naraman bakegen!

verbally violent towards Laura, saying: “Get lost! You're a whore.. a woman of the road! Ahhh! Dirty bitch!” (42) before finally realising his mistake and taking Laura's side to confront monophonic patriarchal social structures.⁸¹ He clarifies: “The man here [Thomas] acted badly! Not her! Alright Laura. Do not worry about this bastard here...” (48).⁸² Eric subverts the conflation of physical violence and masculinity by reimagining sensitivity as a desirable masculine character trait.

This chapter's focus on absorbed voices after explicit and implicit voices in the previous two chapters illustrated the many layers and interweavings of dynamic and dialogic polyphonic voices in Vanuatu. These three different forms of voices in the plays reflect the multi-voiced everyday reality of ni-Vanuatu and the different layers of patriarchal monophonic structures that the characters and feminists from Oceanic have to confront in order to reimagine society in more inclusive terms. Wan Smolbag as community theatre deconstructs monophonic violences by portraying how the characters' plaiting together of polyphonous voices works against them by finding and nurturing dialogic belonging in the community within and beyond the plays. The instances of absorbed monophonic violences discussed in this chapter emphasised both the dangers and deep entrenchment of existing patriarchal monophonies as well as the need for holistic Oceanic feminist subversions that seek to include everyone in polyphony.

81 Go lus! Yu wan solmit.. wan woman blong rod! Ahhh! Doti bij!

82 Man ia nao I mekem rabis fasin! Ino hem!

5. Conclusion

The great diversity of voices present in Vanuatu is not only reflected but actively engaged with in Wan Smolbag's postcolonial community plays. Both in the production process, during performances and in post-performance settings they encourage dialogue and the dismantling of monophonic and patriarchal meaning constructs. Even before production they talk to the community to filter out pressing issues and stories, trying to maintain the complex interwovenness thereof when working on plays with the actors. During performances the chorus, song and other paravoices directly and indirectly engage with the community in and beyond the play. Additionally, the relatability of issues and characters emphasises the similarities between the community members on and off the stage that, nonetheless, maintains and respects their diversity and differences. By plaiting together voices in polyphony in and beyond their plays, Wan Smolbag continually recreates a collaborative space within which to reimagine communal life as dialogic and inclusive, thus subverting oppressive entwined colonial, *kastom* and church monophonies.

Similar but different voices are plaited together in the four plays analysed above, which shows Wan Smolbag's consistency in decolonising minds and rethinking existing oppressive monophonic structures. In *It's Cold* (1998), *Solid Sistas* (2004), *Heart Problem* (2018) and *Twist mo Spin* (2019) various strategies of highlighting polyphony and resisting monophonic, fixed and masculine power structures inherited from colonial patriarchal and gendered social structures are used. In each of them the various forms of patriarchal monophony are exposed as hypocritical and subverted by polyphonous voices, along with the encouragement to critically think about societal structures and events, while simultaneously working at establishing alternative, communal and dialogic social networks. They disrupt inherited colonial and Christian binaries that seek to divide the past from present, implicit from explicit voices and actors from the audience. Wan Smolbag's plays illustrate that gendered, temporal, spatial, modern, traditional, colonial, Christian and many more voices are always tightly interwoven and cyclically plaited together in the community. The variety of voices expressed in myriad forms and the continual changing and rethinking of their meanings helps to set present-day postcolonial situations into perspective as well as to emphasise the polyphonic diversity of communal life and the need to be in open dialogue with and listening to each other.

Wan Smolbag plaits together voices to create an empowering space of respectful togetherness within which social relationships can be discussed and reimaged. The polyphony of the four plays does not merely move beyond and subvert binaries but negates

their existence by plaiting together different but equally valid voices. There is no clear starting point to plaiting, just as the community dialogue is one that, ideally, never ceases but continues in its rooted movement. Wan Smolbag's addressing prevailing issues through new stories and points of view, while plaiting them together with changing topics and voices illustrates Wan Smolbag's rooted but moving embeddedness in the ever-changing community. As an empowering practice that has many different forms in Oceania that nonetheless share the continual creation and embodiment of a space within which to discuss gender relations, plaiting mirrors the diverse but united Oceanic feminist movement. Oceanic feminist voices are plaited together in their collective aim for more gender equality that is embedded in the diversity of their histories, cultures, languages and (post- and neo-)colonial realities. Oceanic feminism is a solidary polyphonic practice that is both rooted in its individual voices, realities and experiences, while moving with changes to accommodate the open-endedness of meanings in order to continuously resist patriarchal rule of various forms and guises. In Wan Smolbag's plays they continue this practice of working towards mutual and collective dialogue and equality by plaiting together similar voices in different contexts, stories and characters to show that their practice is a diverse plaiting that remains open for all members of the community to feel encouraged to join in on creating a more inclusive communal mat.

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7. Appendix

Abstract

It's Cold (1998), *Solid Sistas* (2004), *Heart Problem* (2018) and *Twist mo Spin* (2019) are plays by the Vanuatu NGO and theatre group Wan Smolbag that dialogically reimagine the existing patriarchal monophony that stems from entangled colonial, Christian and *kastom* traditions. This thesis shows that the urban postcolonial community theatre plays subvert existing binary hierarchies of foreign–indigenous, man–woman, modernity–tradition and colonial–postcolonial by showing, seeking and encouraging the plaiting together of voices in and through their play productions. It will be argued that Wan Smolbag's practice is not only decolonising but also Oceanic feminist by giving equal voice to women while actively involving all genders in dialogue. By analysing the explicit and implicit voices in the four plays through the concepts of polyphony, Oceanic feminism and plaiting, this thesis illustrates that the metaphorical pandanus leaves of critical, diverse and dialogic voices are harvested directly from the community, begun to be plaited during production and on stage by actors from these communities, only to be handed to the community to continue plaiting the mat of a more inclusive, equal and dialogic Vanuatu society.

Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Masterarbeit befasst sich mit den expliziten und impliziten Stimmen in den vier „community theatre“ Theaterstücken *It's Cold* (1998), *Solid Sistas* (2004), *Heart Problem* (2018) und *Twist mo Spin* (2019) der NGO und Theatergruppe Wan Smolbag aus der ozeanischen Inselgruppe Vanuatu. In diesen Stücken werden durch die dialogischen Verflechtungen von polyphonen Stimmen die aus komplexen kolonialen, christlichen und *kastom* Traditionen bestehenden patriarchalen Monophonien zerrüttet und das gemeinschaftliche Zusammenleben inklusiv neu interpretiert. Die urbanen postkolonialen „community theatre“-Texte untergraben existierende binäre Vorstellungen von Hierarchien, wie fremd–einheimisch, männlich–weiblich, modern–traditionell und kolonial–postkolonial, indem sie die Verflechtungen von Stimmen in und über ihre Aufführungen hinaus zeigen, anstreben und ermutigen. In der Arbeit wird erläutert, dass Wan Smolbags inklusive Theaterpraxis nicht nur dekolonisierend, sondern durch die gleichwertige und aktive dialogische Involvierung aller Geschlechter auch ozeanisch feministisch ist. Die Analyse expliziter und impliziter Stimmen in den vier Theaterstücken anhand der Konzepte Polyphonie, Ozeanischer Feminismus und Flechten verdeutlicht, dass die metaphorischen Schraubenbaumblätter der kritischen, diversen und dialogischen Stimmen direkt von der Gemeinschaft stammen. Im Rahmen von Theaterproduktionen werden diese geflochten und letztendlich wieder an die Mitglieder der Gemeinschaft zurückgereicht, um das inklusive, gleichberechtigte und dialogische Flechten der postkolonialen Gesellschaft Vanuatus gemeinsam fortzuführen.